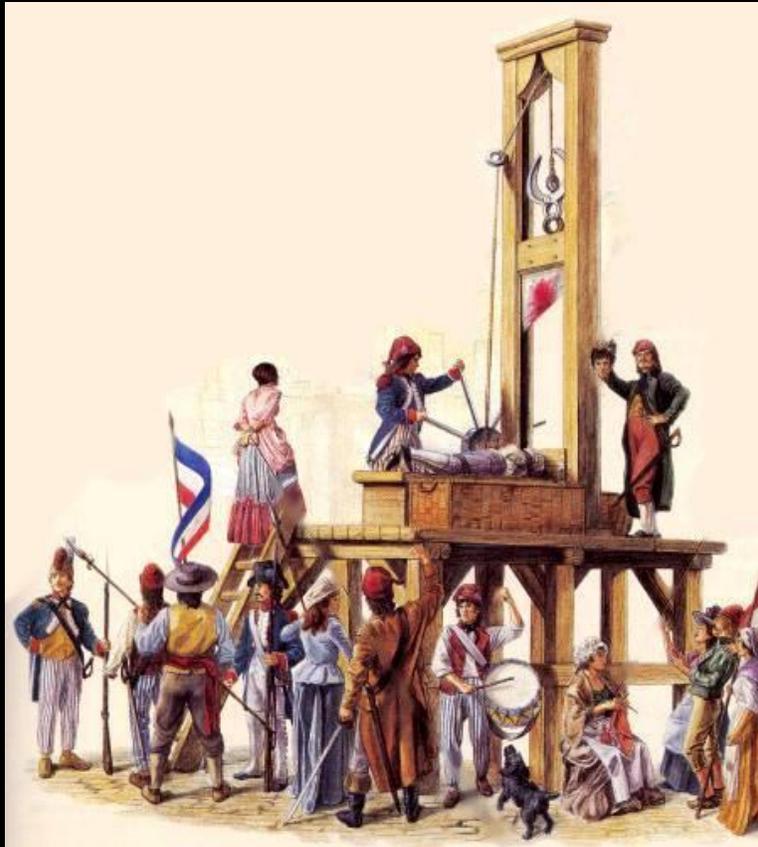


THE ROSEAU CATHEDRAL and a time of terror

part II

by Bernard Lauwyck



The guillotine

Every independent country needs a historical narrative of its own.

Every people has to develop a written or oral history of its own, that teaches them where they came from, who they are, how they see themselves. A classic example of such a defining narrative is the first 5 books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These writings made the Jews strong and united as a people to face the trials and tribulations of centuries.

For countries, such as Dominica and Belgium, that are only independent since a short time and were occupied by many different foreign powers, it is imperative that this narrative is developed based on the history they shared with the occupiers and its impact on the local society. It is the task for writers like me to mine the huge historical narratives and archives of other nations for small nuggets of local history. For Dominica it seems that French history was more influential than any other. It has been stated that “Dominica is British, but the manners, customs, language and religion of its population are almost entirely those of France...” We might wonder why.

In part I of this article, I described the arrival and fate of the french refugees from Martinique. They arrived in “*Roseau about the 10th of June 1793.... The number of people, who arrived here in the course of three days to avoid the cruelty and persecution of their countrymen, was estimated between 3000 and 4000. These people were brought over in small vessels exposed to the weather and in want of almost every necessity of life. They were not sick on their arrival as this fever had not made its appearance in Martinique when they left.*” (See Dr. William Clarke MD in his “*history of the yellow fever in the island of Dominica*” in “**The Monthly Epitome, Volume 1**” published 1797).

A year later, in 1794, another wave of French refugees arrived in Roseau: refugees from Guadeloupe this time. I presume that other parts of Dominica such as Portsmouth, Anse de Mai also received some refugees but Dr. Clarke was in Roseau at the time and described what he saw: “*After the 10th October 1794, when Berville Camp in Guadeloupe surrendered, the emigration from that island commenced and in a few weeks the town of Roseau was nearly as much crowded as it had been in June 1793.*”

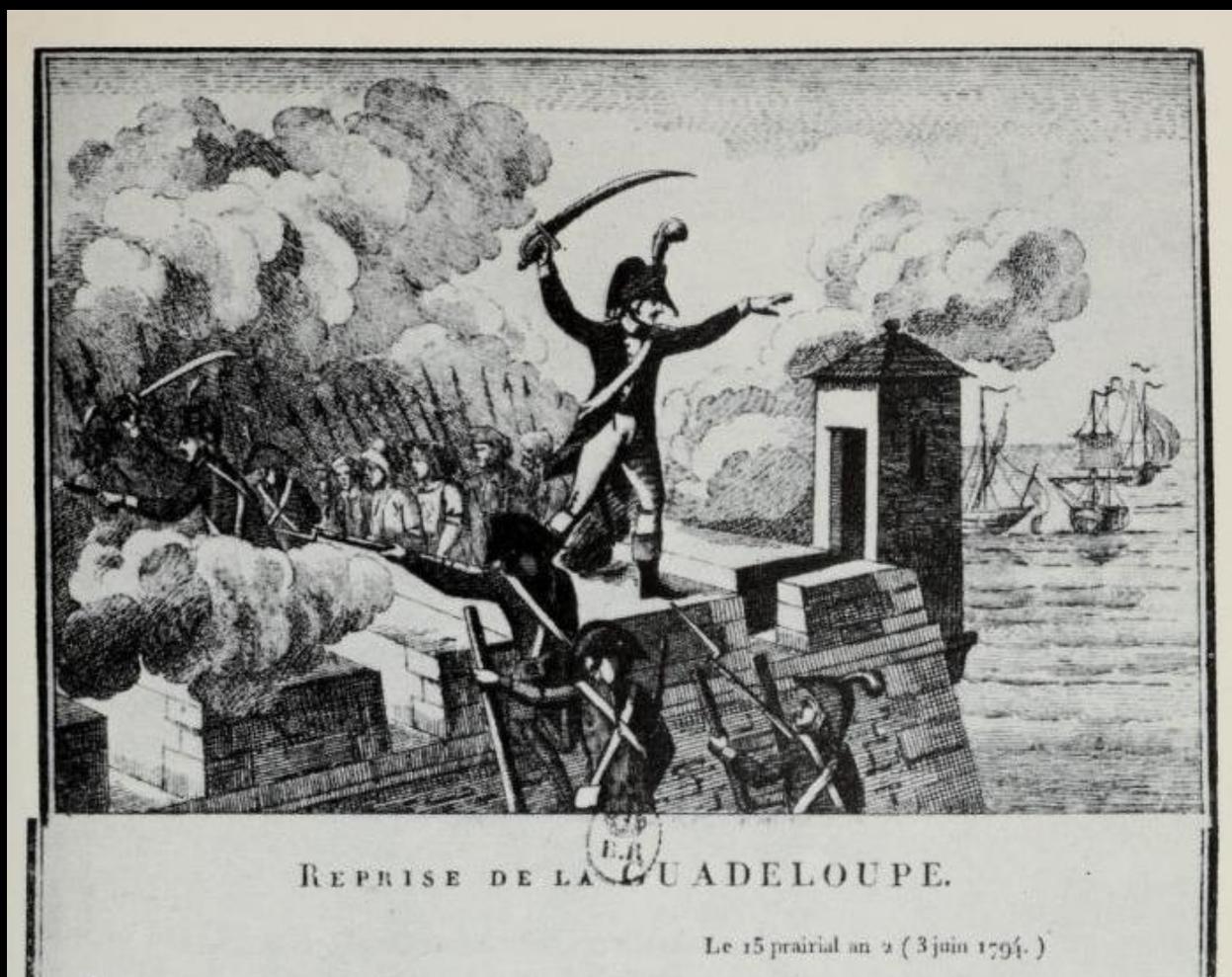
Dr. Clarke made a specific reference to the surrender of Berville Camp in Guadeloupe and to explain this I need to provide you again with some French history. As you read before in part I, the aristocrats, the royalists, the land holders of white origin, planters and slaveholders in Martinique and Guadeloupe set up a counter revolution for King, Church and slavery as I would put it in my own words.

They went as far as to ask the enemy of France, the English, to assist them.

On February 19, 1794, the leaders of the counter revolutionary colonists from Saint-Domingue (= present Haiti), Martinique and Guadeloupe signed the WHITEHALL ACCORD in London, in which they promised financial compensation for the protection of the British armed forces. Subsequently, Britain invaded and took possession of Martinique in February 1794 and Guadeloupe in April 1794.

Victor Hugues, arrived in Guadeloupe from French St. Lucia with a small force of 1150 men on 21 May 1794. In six months he reconquered Guadeloupe for the French (see Wikipedia). He immediately declared an end to slavery (as was promulgated by Paris on February 4, 1794 and so enlisted more than 3000 freed slaves and “gens de couleur” to his small army.

They were called “les Sans-Culottes Noirs”.



Hugues was able to retake the whole island by October 6, 1794, when he forced the English to surrender their last stronghold at Berville. 800 French counter-revolutionaries and 900 royalist soldiers of African descent were part of this English force and were executed as traitors by Hugues on the spot.

We read more in « Les Guadeloupéens réfugiés en Martinique pendant la période révolutionnaire (1794-1796) » G.H.C. Sept.1993 by Guy Stéhlé:

“In the months that it took Victor Hugues to re-conquer Guadeloupe, a real diaspora of refugees spread over the islands: Dominica alone received 2000 refugees. The majority was of white descent, some of very important families of Guadeloupe.” Guy Stéhlé wrote in his article that many of these refugees were free or freed women, which I want you to remember for one of my future articles.

“This time the yellow fever did not appear among these people until the 10th of November and although many of them died it was by no means as fatal as before nor did it last more than two months. From the middle of January till July 1795 it disappeared and even during this autumn only a few sailors from irregularity of living were attacked and two cases only occurred in November since which time to June 1796 when I left the island not a single case of this disease had occurred.

“See Dr. William Clarke MD in his “history of the yellow fever in the island of Dominica ” in “The Monthly Epitome, Volume 1” published 1797).

So things did not turn out too bad in Dominica, but not so in Guadeloupe. Victor Hugues, the hero and liberator, turned, as we see so often, into a dictator.

He brought the revolutionary instrument of terror to Guadeloupe: a guillotine, the most efficient killing machine of those times. It was movable so the executions moved from village to village. Many royalists lost their head under this falling knife. This terror lasted for 4 years, from 1794 to 1798 till Hugues was recalled to Paris.

Victor Hugues also tried to export the ideas of the French revolution to neighbouring islands such as St. Vincent, Grenada and Dominica. Especially in Colihaut he found some collaborators but that is a story for later.

The French freed slaves and colored, who put their fate in Hugues' hands, were rapidly aware that they had been used. They might have remembered Psalm 146: "Do not put your trust in princes"

In 1802, Napoleon Bonaparte reintroduced slavery in the "liberated" French territories.

A more cruel fate could not be imagined.

bernardlauw@yahoo.com PO Box 317 Roseau Dominica