
Rumors of Slavery: Defending Emancipation in a Hostile Caribbean

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IN 1863, TWO YEARS INTO SPAIN'S renewed occupation of the former Dominican Republic, Rafael Leandro García, a farmer living near the northern Atlantic coast, confronted a Spanish military tribunal as fighting raged all around the proceedings. Residents across the territory had joined a massive resistance, engaging in trench fighting and guerrilla warfare against the Spanish administration. Trying to explain the prodigious insurrection, García and his brother described the pernicious, detailed, and urgent warnings that had electrified peasants and townspeople alike: that the Spanish intended to reestablish slavery, more than forty years after Haitian authorities had brought abolition to Dominican soil. García described to the Spanish officials who were detaining him the very specific threats that nearby resistance fighters had recounted, detailing neck shackles, work lamps, and Spanish prison ships standing at the ready off of the northern coast, ready to sail for Havana. Even amnesty offers were a trap, the local rebels were warning each other, predicting that Spanish troops intended to capture and enslave Dominicans, one by one.¹ These re-enslavement discussions galvanized the core of the Dominican resistance as they faced off against better-armed forces. The guerrillas burned key towns, took refuge in makeshift camps and highlands, and mounted relentless campaigns against the Spanish for months on end. The fighting was the largest mobilization in the region since the Haitian Revolution.

Four decades earlier, slavery in Dominican territory had ended peacefully, and emancipation, across the deeply rural expanses of the east of the island, garnered very little outside attention. In contrast to the brutal sugar complexes of neighboring Saint-Domingue or other Caribbean neighbors, slavery had not dominated the Dominican landscape for some time. Plantation cultivation in the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo had declined in the late sixteenth century; revivals had occurred,

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¹ Declaración de D. Rafael Leandro García, Proceso contra varios individuos de complicidad en la sublevación que tubo lugar en Puerto Plata en 27 de Agosto ultimo, 1863, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid [hereafter AHN], Ultramar 881A, 1ª Pieza, 89.