

# Unburdened by History: Understanding Russia's Growing Influence in Haiti

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Over the last several years, the Republic of Haiti has increasingly been featured in news reports and sadly for the people of Haiti, the reasons for this have not been positive. Natural disasters, disease, and political turmoil are usually what puts Haiti on the pages of American media outlets, and all three of these have been a recurring theme over the last two years. Hopes for greater stability in Haiti as the global pandemic waned were dashed, as the already building political controversy of Jovenel Moïse's presidency culminated in his assassination on 7 July 2021. Since that time, Haiti has experienced yet another earthquake, hurricanes, and a deepening political crisis in which Haitian political authority has been usurped by an ever-growing number of street gangs exercising greater control over the capital than the Haitian government.

While scenes of Haitians protesting the lack of fuel, food, and other staples have become commonplace of late, a new icon has been featured at these protests over the last few months that deserves greater attention. The appearance and display of Russian flags by Haitian protestors has increased in recent months, prompting at least one news article in the Haitian publication, *AyiboPost*, as recently as 18 October 2022, to explore why. The brief exploration of the reasoning behind this new trend presents the conclusion that Russia represents a kind of foil for Haitians against the perceived imperialist forces of the United States and the United Nations.<sup>1</sup> However, this conclusion provides little in the way of an explanation as to why Haitian protestors have this perception and what caused it to recently emerge as part of the protestors' narrative. This article aims to provide a thorough analysis of how pro-Russian sentiment became a part of Haitian protests by answering the following questions: How did the ideology of Haitian protests shift to an anti-US/United Nations (UN) sentiment? How did that ideological sentiment shift to being pro-Russian? How did Moscow cultivate those sentiments? and what does that mean for the US? The answers to these questions lie in the shared history of the US and Haiti, and how Russia has managed to leverage the burden of that history to its advantage.

In the *AyiboPost* article referenced above, the author, Boaz Anglade, asserts that an undercurrent of pro-Russian sentiment in Haiti already existed prior the current crises, but that recent events have made it far more widespread than previously. Anglade states that there has always been a fringe segment of Haitian society that has idolized leaders and nations who they perceive as defying US imperialism, but that this fringe had previously been limited to self-described socialists and socially-conscious university students.<sup>2</sup> That has changed in recent months as large groups of protestors have taken to the streets waving Russian flags, carrying portraits of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and even writing pleas for Russian military assistance on cardboard signs.<sup>3</sup> Anglade, however, concludes that the growing pro-Russian sentiment witnessed among the crowds of Haitian protestors is based more on a growing generic anti-Western sentiment than on specific sympathies toward Russia. Doubting that most Haitians possess much knowledge or understanding about Russia, let alone genuinely want Russian troops to arrive in Port-au-Prince, Anglade believes it has more to do with Russia symbolizing a defiant power that can and, by its invasion of Ukraine, has challenged the current world order.<sup>4</sup>

The important question that must be addressed is why Russia's challenges against the established international order is finding support among Haitians. Anglade's article is brief, and therefore only scratches the surface by stating that Haitians are fueled by growing frustration with the US for its history of unequal trade policies, political interference, and military interventions in Haiti.<sup>5</sup> The article does not elaborate on this any further but, in order for us to understand how Russia is gaining influence in Haiti and how that impacts the US, we must examine the history of US-Haitian relations in much greater detail. While most Americans probably know very little about the last hundred years of US relations with Haiti, the Haitian public tends to be much more conscious of that history, which they view as a long history of interference and intervention. Based on its recent actions and policy towards Haiti, it appears that Moscow is conscious of that history as well and is effectively weaponizing history to its advantage. Therefore, this article will proceed by exploring some of the history of US policy towards Haiti between the early twentieth century to the present, it will then demonstrate how Moscow has utilized this to gain greater influence in Haiti while diminishing that of the US and the UN, and finally draw conclusions on what this means for the US in the Caribbean and Latin American region.

### **US-Haitian Relations, 1911-Present**

It could certainly be argued that the history of the complicated relationship between the US and Haiti deserves an earlier start date than 1911 to understand

how the current and growing Haitian view of the US came into being. However, the entirety of that history is more deserving of a full-length monograph to give its rich complexity real justice. For the purposes of this article, the choice of 1911 as a start point is based on the beginning of the direct actions the US has pursued towards Haiti since then, which appear to be the core of the grievances of Haitian protestors. This stands in contrast to the history of US-Haitian relations during the nineteenth century, which was characterized by diplomatic isolation between the nations following Haiti's independence in 1804. The most important aspect of early US-Haitian relations to remember, as it pertains to this analysis, is that Haiti's independence from France marked the first and only example in history of a nation being formed via a slave uprising. This monumental achievement serves as a cornerstone of Haitian national identity embodying resistance against foreign control. The fact that this occurred at a time when the institution of racially based slavery was still intact in the US, and the Atlantic World as a whole, is what put the new nation at odds with its neighbors, who feared something similar could happen in their countries.<sup>6</sup> The independence of Haiti to the outside world became a symbol in the abolition debates of the following decades, while to Haitians their isolation created a justifiable belief that it was them against the world.

Following this isolation, 1911 marks the beginning of a four-year period in which the Republic of Haiti endured among the greatest amount of political tumult in its history. Between 1911 and the US occupation of Haiti beginning in July 1915, no fewer than seven Haitian presidents had either been deposed or assassinated while in office in a successive series of revolutions.<sup>7</sup> After the Wilson Administration ordered the invasion and military occupation of Haiti in an early nation-building attempt by the US, the US maintained direct control of the Haitian government for nineteen years. Unfortunately, these attempts to stabilize Haiti through direct US control were subject to missteps in the administration of the occupation, which failed to consider Haitian historical memory and national identity. For a people whose national identity is grounded in their overthrow of French colonial rule, and the defeat of Napoleon's expeditionary force sent to reimpose slavery upon them, the invasion and occupation of Haiti by the US a little over a century later inadvertently played into Haitian fears that history was repeating itself.

The most significant missteps by the US, which fostered increased resistance and animosity to its presence in Haiti, occurred along political and administrative lines in the early stage of the occupation. President Wilson, while remembered for pressing for an international order based on liberalism and democracy, pursued a very different approach when it came to restoring order in occupied Haiti.<sup>8</sup> Before the 1915 Treaty Between the United States and Haiti Concerning the Finances,

Economic Development and Tranquility of Haiti was even finalized, the Wilson Administration had pressured the Haitian legislature to elect the pro-US Phillippe Sudre Dartiguenave as President.<sup>9</sup>

This led to the First Caco Revolt in 1915, a reactionary and unsurprising response to the US occupation by insurgents largely loyal to Rosalvo Bobo, a populist Haitian politician.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on the Haitian revolutionary tradition of would-be rulers acquiring fighters from the mountainous northern region (known as Cacos), Bobo had led the coup that triggered the US intervention, but now found his victory taken from him by the US and their choice for president.<sup>11</sup> Outgunned, out trained, and enjoying little support from the conflict-weary Haitian public, the Cacos were quickly defeated by the US Marines.

In 1917, President Wilson, in hopes of giving US business interests a freer hand, pressed the Haitian legislature for a new constitution to remove existing language that forbade foreigners from owning property in Haiti. Since this language was viewed as a traditional protective measure against foreign control, the Haitian legislature responded by rejecting Wilson's version and opting for an even less favorable one for US interests, which in turn prompted President Dartiguenave, under US direction, to dissolve the legislature.<sup>12</sup> The removal of Haitian political opposition to the US administration made it simpler to carry out actions favoring US interests. However, these actions further compounded criticisms that the US was eroding Haitian political sovereignty,<sup>13</sup> and substantially undercut Wilson and the occupation's original mission statement of attempting to bring order and liberal democracy to Haiti. With a US hand-picked president, and the complete removal of the legislature, Haitians viewed their nation as having become far less democratic, and more authoritarian, after less than two years of US rule.

Combined with the erosion of Haitian sovereignty, 1917 also marks another, even greater, misstep by the US, in terms of fostering Haitian animosity, that challenged Haitians' historical memory and national identity. In an attempt to streamline the progress of US infrastructure projects, such as the construction of roads connecting the capital of Port-au-Prince to other cities in the north, the US resurrected a defunct Haitian law known as the *corvée*. Under this law, previous Haitian rulers were able to compel Haitians to involuntarily labor on public works projects. While this law had precedent in Haitian history, it had never been popular, as a policy of coerced, unpaid labor bore too much resemblance to the slavery from which they had previously fought against.<sup>14</sup> Even though this rule was applied by their own Haitian leaders, rather than French soldiers from across the sea, it did little to quell resentment and resistance to the practice. However, the erosion of Haitian sovereignty, and the institution of the *corvee*, turned Haitian public opinion of the US occupation from neutral, if begrudging, to hostile, as US

administrators pursued policies that fed into Haitians' worst historically based fears of foreign military forces trying to dominate and re-enslave them. What US forces in 1917 inadvertently did, by reviving this practice, was stoke Haitian fears that a foreign military force had once again come to put the Haitian people in bondage, which resulted in the Second Caco Revolt of 1918.<sup>15</sup>

Even though the corvee was abolished by 1918, and most of the abuses associated with it were attributed more to the Haitian *gendarmes* (police) than the US Marines in charge of oversight, the damage had been done. Though the Second Caco Revolt was also quelled by the Marines, the conflict lasted longer than the first one, and resulted in whatever public goodwill the US had enjoyed upon its arrival in Haiti, to be gone.

Although the US occupation of Haiti ended in 1934, this would not be the last instance in which US involvement in Haitian affairs produced animosity from the Haitian public. The Duvalier regime, first under Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier and then under Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, maintained dictatorial rule over Haiti from 1957 to 1986 at least in part by its ability to manipulate the Cold War fears of the US. In order to maintain power, and needing foreign capital to do so, Francois Duvalier provided American and Western European countries the ability to do business in Haiti through tax exemptions, cheap labor, and labor peace due to his tight suppression of labor organizations; in exchange, those countries (especially the US) provided him economic and military support.<sup>16</sup> While the preferential treatment of US business interests in Haiti helped Duvalier gain American support, what really solidified his ability to gain and maintain American support was his anti-communism stance in a region where the US had recently taken some heavy Cold War blows. After the Cuban Revolution and the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion, Duvalier was able to use Haiti's proximity to Cuba to portray himself as a necessary bastion against the further spread of communism in the Caribbean.<sup>17</sup> While this served US interests at the time, the Haitian people would have to endure Duvalier's tyrannical rule for decades, and it was not lost on them which nation had enabled him to remain in power for so long.

A more recent example of US involvement in Haitian affairs that has fed into the anti-American narrative among Haitian protestors is the controversial presidency of Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Elected on a populist wave in the years following the Duvalier period, Aristide assumed power in February 1991 on a platform of job creation, better working conditions, higher minimum wage, education reform, and anticorruption in public administration, but was only in office seven months before being overthrown by the threatened political elites and the Haitian military.<sup>18</sup> He returned to power with support from President Clinton's administration, but the Aristide that returned to Port-au-Prince was a different

leader than the one who was forced to leave. When Aristide returned in 1994, with 20,000 US troops to ensure that he finished the remainder of his five-year term, his political goals were less focused on his earlier political promises and more on monopolizing power for himself and his Lavalas Family party.<sup>19</sup> This shift, and his consolidation of power over the next few years, turned the US and the international community against him. As corruption, crime, and the use of gangs became the modus operandi of the Lavalas party under Aristide, the US, France, and Canada aligned with the remaining opposition of Haitian bourgeoisie to remove Aristide from power in 2004.<sup>20</sup>

Although Aristide had his opponents during both his terms as President of Haiti, he also had staunch supporters as well. The sharp divisions in Haitian society over the Aristide presidency meant that US intervention was vehemently condemned each time by at least one section of Haitian society: one side who resented his return to power in 1994 with the aid of US troops, and one side who resented his removal by the US in 2004. Further controversy surrounds the removal of Aristide in 2004 by rumors that the US had effectively kidnapped Aristide and forced him into exile at the behest of the Haitian elites wanting political power for themselves. The validity of such rumors is a matter of debate, but in the case of the Haitian public's view of the US, whether true or not, it may not really matter. What does matter is that enough Haitians believe the story because it fits into a preexisting narrative of the protestors that Haiti has repeatedly suffered from US military intervention. There are certainly many issues internal to Haiti that can be blamed for crises past and present, and each of the examples of US intervention mentioned so far have a greater amount of complexity than can be adequately described here. However, what this synopsis demonstrates is how US intervention is remembered by many of the Haitian protestors filling the streets over the last few months. With a national identity based on resisting foreign domination, and a historical memory of the US often interfering in Haitian affairs, the combination of the two fuels the anti-American sentiment growing among Haitian protestors.

### **Russia's Changing Relationship with Haiti**

While the four-year period between 1911 and 1915 was arguably the most politically tumultuous of Haiti's history, the period between 2019 and 2023 is another in which Haiti has experienced a level of upheaval that has presented the possibility of another US military intervention. While there has only been one presidential assassination compared to the seven successive overthrows in the early twentieth century, natural disasters have sadly coordinated with political ones to worsen the situation for the Haitian people. Much of the origins of the current crisis can be traced back to the 2019 suspension of the PetroCaribe pro-

gram, which began in 2005 as a way for Venezuela to extend its influence in the Caribbean. At the time, Venezuela, under President Hugo Chavez, loaned oil to participating countries at a low interest rate and deferred payment on 40 percent of the oil purchased for up to 25 years, which then allowed those nations to sell the oil elsewhere using the proceeds for development and social programs.<sup>21</sup> While this program began at a time of peak global oil prices, the drop in the price of oil in the years that followed caused the collapse of the Venezuelan economy and the suspension of the program. What made this especially problematic for Haiti was that, once the program ended, it became obvious that years of participation in this program had yielded little to no tangible results in Haitian development. A 2017-2019 investigation by a five-member committee of the Haitian Senate uncovered that, despite having received \$4 billion between 2008 and 2016 for around 400 infrastructure and health-care programs, the Haitian government had misreported the amount of funds in the government's coffers by adjusting exchange rates and had issued more than half of the contracts to companies that had not gone through the official bidding process.<sup>22</sup>

Worse still were the implications that Haitian President, Jovenel Moïse, had been involved in the PetroCaribe scandal. The fuel shortages and economic fallout that followed led to riots against Moïse because of his alleged mismanagement of PetroCaribe funds, and was further compounded by a constitutional crisis concerning his presidency. Even though the Haitian constitution states that presidential terms are for five years, which in the case of Jovenel Moïse had ended in February 2021, Moïse refused to step down on the grounds that an interim government had been in power during the first year of his presidency.<sup>23</sup> His refusal to relinquish his power, the allegations of his involvement in the PetroCaribe scandal, and his increasing tendency to rule by decree only strengthened the public and political opposition he faced. These tensions came to a head on 7 July 2021 when masked gunmen assassinated him at his home in the middle of the night. The already contentious political situation in Haiti only worsened in the wake of Moïse's assassination, as previous decrees and decisions on his part eliminated a clear path of succession. Under normal circumstances, Haitian law states that the Supreme Court president would succeed the President or, if that were not an option, then the Prime Minister could be appointed by the Haitian Parliament.<sup>24</sup> However, these were not normal circumstances, as the Supreme Court president had died from COVID-19 a week earlier, and Moïse had effectively dissolved the Haitian legislature the previous year.<sup>25</sup>

Since then, Prime Minister Ariel Henry has been serving in the capacity as President, but with no official means to formalize the position, has continued with his predecessor's tendencies to rule by decree, and thus far has failed to live up to

promises of holding formal presidential elections, which has fostered further public resentment against him. Additionally, another major earthquake hit just outside the capital in August 2021, comparable to the 2010 earthquake that decimated Port-au-Prince. Since the assassination of Moïse in July and the earthquake in August of 2021, the exponential growth and number of gangs operating in and around Port-au-Prince has only added further chaos to the situation, as the gangs debatably hold more authority in the capital than the Haitian government. This has led Henry to call for outside assistance in recent months to restore order to Haiti. In October 2022, Henry and 18 top-ranking officials submitted a request for international military assistance to stop the “criminal actions of armed gangs,” which the Haitian government blames for paralyzing the country’s supplies of water, food, and fuel.<sup>26</sup> In response, the gangs have been blocking roads and surrounding fuel terminals, and refuse to allow goods and fuel to flow until Henry steps down.<sup>27</sup> This has left both the US and the UN with a difficult decision as to if or how it should respond. For the US, the prospect of once again propping up an increasingly unpopular Haitian leader by force is an unappealing one, even as it is weighed against the prospect of allowing the situation to further deteriorate, and thereby allowing the continued suffering of the Haitian people. The UN also has bad history with Haiti, particularly in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, as its peacekeeping mission resulted in multiple allegations of sexual assault against Haitian citizens by their troops, and for sparking the cholera epidemic that killed nearly 10,000 people.<sup>28</sup> Based on recent and past history with both American and UN interventions in Haiti, many Haitians are skeptical at best that further intervention from either would be to Haiti’s benefit.

While all this may explain the growing anti-US/UN sentiment among the crowds of Haitian protesters, the question still remains: what is driving the increase in pro-Russian sentiment? Based on several positions that Moscow has taken on the ongoing turmoil in Haiti, it is apparent that Russian policymakers are not only aware of the history between the US and Haiti but are weaponizing it to their advantage. Over the last year, Russia’s official position on Haiti has been one of repeated and vocal opposition to US policy there, portraying itself as a foil against US interference in Haitian affairs. That being the case, the argument presented here is that the recent growing pro-Russian sentiment among Haitians is not merely an anti-American reaction as implied by the earlier referenced article. Rather it is something that Moscow has deliberately cultivated.

In an examination of news media articles and social media, Russia’s increasing interest in the current ongoing Haitian political crisis can be seen at least as far back as March 2021. As protests against Moïse and the fuel shortages continued to grow in early 2021, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova,



tweeted on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Russian Federation feed that Haiti had “entered a new period of political instability and the largest ever social and economic crisis,” and followed with the offer that “Russia is ready to help Haitians restore political stability, maintain internal security and train personnel.”<sup>29</sup> This offer by a Russian Foreign Ministry official for a greater level of assistance represented an already increasing interest in Haitian affairs by the Russian government prior to Moïse’s assassination. Russia’s interest in Haiti was highlighted again in the aftermath of that assassination when Minister Zakharova voiced Russia’s concerns about the circumstances of the event. The Russian Foreign Ministry’s condemnation of the assassination included an accusation: “During the investigation of this crime, the Haitian police detained more than two dozen suspects, most of whom turned out to be Colombian citizens. At least two of the attackers have US citizenship. This information causes serious concerns, it shows that once again external forces are trying to use a purely internal conflict in their interests.”<sup>30</sup>

The implication by a Russian official that the US had at least some level of involvement in the assassination was well worded, as it plays into many Haitians’ suspicions of US interference based on their historical narrative, without directly making an accusation against the US. Not only is this good diplomacy, but it is a clever use of the history between the US and Haiti to sow tension between the two nations. While it is difficult to gauge with any certainty her level of familiarity with the specific history of US-Haitian relations, Zakharova’s credentials, which include a degree of Candidate of Historical Sciences (the Russian equivalent of a Ph.D.), reveals that she certainly possesses the background to analyze and utilize that history to Moscow’s advantage.<sup>31</sup> As Haitian protestors have continually pointed to the history of US involvement in Haiti in their rhetoric during the ongoing crisis, Russia has no doubt taken notice of this as they pursue their own relations with Haiti. The decaying relationship between many Haitian citizens and the US/UN has presented an opportunity for Russia to improve their standing as an alternative great power partner, and they appear to be taking it.

Another important development to take note is that it is not only Russia that is extending a hand. In June 2022, dozens of grassroots Haitian organizations signed into open letters to both Russia and China requesting both countries’ representatives to vote against renewing the UN mandate in Haiti.<sup>32</sup> As permanent members of the UN Security Council, both nations are in positions to challenge the continued presence of UN security forces in Haiti. While they did not block the one-year renewal this time as requested by these Haitian groups, Russia’s UN representative, Dimitry Polyanskiy, did make the statement that “international actors must respect Haiti’s sovereignty as a baseline to helping Haiti out of its crisis,” and China delayed the vote for two days to pursue closed-door negotia-

tions to address the ineffectiveness of the mandate thus far.<sup>33</sup> Representative Polyanskiy has used language similar to that of Minister Zakharova in recent months about external forces having played a role in Haiti's continued crisis. Addressing the UN Security Council briefing on Haiti on 26 September 2022, Rep. Polyanskiy stated, "What is particularly disappointing is the fact that external players who can have real leverage on Port-au-Prince take no practical steps for crisis resolution in Haiti while holding aloof from the current developments. We all know Haiti's complicated history and understand whom it is all about."<sup>34</sup> Again, without naming either the US or the UN directly, this statement on behalf of the Russian government very cleverly both asserts blame on one, the other, or both for their present inaction on the Haitian crisis as well as implying how their historical actions led to the current crisis. Given the timing of this statement to the UN in late September, the appearance of Russian flags in news photographs of Haitian protests beginning in October 2022 may point to this as the culmination of Russia's successful attempt to cultivate a stronger relationship with Haiti at the expense of the US and the UN.

## Conclusions

One final piece of evidence that Russia is utilizing history to strengthen its position in Haiti against the US, is that Russia has and continues to use a similar approach in Africa. One of the strongest examples of this is Russia's relationship with South Africa, as reminders of the Soviet Union's anti-apartheid stance still holds sway. Lindiwe Zulu, South Africa's Minister of Social Development, who studied in Moscow during the apartheid years recently stated in an interview that, "Russia is our friend through and through."<sup>35</sup> This statement in Russia's defense was made shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, and South Africa is by no means alone in its support of Russia. With many African countries having a longstanding affinity with Russia dating back to the Cold War, some current political and military leaders having studied in Russia, and increasing trade links especially for Russian weapons, South Africa was just one of 24 African nations that declined to join the UN vote denouncing the invasion of Ukraine.<sup>36</sup> Having successfully used their historical relationship with African nations to further develop those relationships, all while utilizing the negative aspects of the West's history with those nations, Russia appears to be beginning to apply this method to the current crisis in Haiti.

This brings us to the final question of what this means for the US. In short, a realignment of Haiti with either Russia and or China would result in a tangible loss of influence in the Caribbean region. As Russia seeks to reestablish its sphere

of influence in the former Soviet territories and challenge the post-WWII international order, the crisis in Haiti presents the potential for Russia to exert greater influence and potentially even a military presence in the Western Hemisphere, if calls for such by Haitian protestors continue to grow and taken more seriously by both sides. Based on the reasons already discussed, a military intervention by the US, even at the request of the Haitian government, is an unappealing prospect that could potentially do more harm than good to an already tense relationship. However, doing nothing and continuing to let the crisis in Haiti spin further out of control is not an attractive option either. The continued chaos, if left to escalate, has the potential to leave Haiti as a central point in the region for illicit items such as drugs, weapons, or human trafficking to spread more and more easily, and the longer the crisis continues the greater the possibility that calls for intervention from either Russia or China could at some point become less far-fetched. All this in addition to a horrible humanitarian crisis that will only continue to balloon. As the US and UN mull over how they might respond to a military assistance request, it is perhaps somewhere in our history of humanitarian assistance to Haiti that we may draw positive examples going forward.

Both Operation Unified Response in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, and the relief efforts by Joint Task Force – Haiti after the 2021 earthquake, are examples of US military interventions in Haiti that were both successful and were generally well-received by the Haitian public. The US can build on this to repair its relationship with Haiti. Furthermore, US’s history whether we are talking about the military occupation between 1915 and 1934, or the massive whole-of-government humanitarian response in 2010, must be analyzed, evaluated, and considered in any future decision. Whether it is Haitian history or US-Haitian history, history matters and is not something the US can afford to either ignore or forget. Otherwise, any decision the US or UN makes on the current crisis runs the risk of repeating the same mistake of not taking Haitian historical memory and national identity into account. Worse still, Moscow is apparently taking these factors into account even if we are not. ◻

#### **Notes**

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36. Walsh and Eligon, "Shunned by Others."



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