

Proclamation of Louis Delgrès on 10 May 1802

To the whole universe

The last cry of innocence and despair

It was in the best days of a century forever celebrated by the triumph of enlightenment and philosophy that a class that a class of unfortunate people, who are to be annihilated voice to posterity, to make known to it, when it has disappeared its innocence and its misfortunes.

The victim of a few bloodthirsty individuals who dared to deceive the French government, a crowd of citizens, always loyal to their country, find themselves enveloped in a proscription meditated by the author of all their misfortunes. General Richepance, whose powers we do not know, since he announces himself only as an army general, has not yet made his arrival known to us except by a proclamation whose expressions are so well measured that, even if he promises protection, he could give us death without deviating from the terms he uses. In this style, we recognised the influence of Rear Admiral Lacrosse, who has sworn eternal hatred for us... Yes, we like to think that General Richepance, too, was deceived by this perfidious man, who knows how to use daggers and slander equally well.

What are the authoritarian blows they are threatening us with? Do they want to use the bayonets of those brave soldiers against us, whose arrival we liked to calculate, and who formerly used them only against the enemies of the Republic? Ah, rather, if we are to believe the blows of authority already struck at the Port-de-la-Liberté, the system of a slow death in the dungeons continues to be followed. Well then! We choose to die more quickly.

Dare we say it, the most atrocious maxims of tyranny have been surpassed today. Our ancient tyrants allowed a master to free his slave, and everything tells us that, in the century of philosophy, there are men who are unfortunately too powerful because of their distance from the authority from which they emanate, and who only want to see black men, or men whose origin is this colour, in the fetters of slavery.

And you, First Consul of the Republic, you warrior philosopher from whom we expected the justice that was due to us, why should we have to deplore our distance from the home from which sprang the sublime conceptions that you so often made us admire! Ah! no doubt one day you will know our innocence, but that time will have passed and the perverse will already have taken advantage of the calumnies they have lavished on us to consume our ruin.

Citizens of Guadeloupe, you whose different skin colour is reason enough not to fear the vengeance threatened against us, - unless you want to be punished for not having turned your weapons against us, - you have heard the reasons that have aroused our indignation. Resistance to oppression is a natural right. The very divinity cannot be offended that we are defending our cause; it is the cause of justice and humanity: we will not sully it with the very shadow of crime. Yes, we are resolved to take a just defensive stance, but we will never become the aggressors. As for you, stay in your homes; fear nothing from us. We solemnly swear to respect your wives, your children and your property, and to do everything in our power to ensure that they are respected by all. And you, posterity! shed a tear for our misfortunes and we will die satisfied.

The Command of Basse-Terre Louis DELGRÈS