



THE MARCH OF 23 MAY 1998, PARIS, FRANCE

Simon Férelloc

The memory of slavery in France has long been focused on a purely French perspective that highlights the political decisions implemented by mainland France, without really taking an interest in the specific experience and history of the enslaved peoples in the former colonies. In this regard, the march that took place on 23 May 1998 embodied a new memorial dynamic, in direct relation with France's overseas territories and the diaspora of descendants of slaves. Since this event, the 23 May 1998 March Committee (CM98), created in late 1999, has been working to increase interest in this legacy and to gain official recognition for it.

The birth of another memorial perspective

1998 marked the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery and witnessed a significant change in French ways of thinking about and remembering the country's slave-trading past and colonial slavery. This anniversary provided an unprecedented opportunity to promote a new memory and discourse on slavery in the public, media, and political space. In January 1998, the "Committee to Create a Combined Commemoration for the 150th Anniversary of the Abolition of the Enslavement of Negroes in the French Colonies", a collective "bringing together" three hundred associations, organized a "silent march in Paris on 23 May 1998". While the movement fully recognized the legitimacy of commemorating the decree of the abolition of slavery, as well as the heroic figure of Schœlcher, another discourse focusing on the victims of slavery was also highlighted. The identity of "the descendants of slaves," which was once a shameful taboo, was now clearly assumed.

The choice of the date chosen for this founding action was also significant. While 23 May is not the actual date when slavery was officially abolished in France and neither does it correspond to the institutional chronology of mainland France, this date is when the abolition of 1848 first came into effect in one of the French overseas territories, in this instance, Martinique. This island was therefore chosen to organize the 1998 March so that the "descendants of slaves" could at last honour their history.

This silent march in Paris, which attracted between 20,000 and 40,000 people, called for the recognition of slavery as a crime against humanity, as well as the erection of a memorial on the



Place des Antilles. On banners, slogans like “All born in 1848 = revisionism” and “We are the daughters and sons of slaves” could be seen.

The creation of the ‘98 March Committee (CM98)

Encouraged by the momentum of this march, the coordinators of the organizing committee decided to found a permanent structure in June 1999, known as “Le Comité marche ‘98” (The March ‘98 Committee).

This association was initially chaired by Serge Romana, a geneticist and leading activist for the recognition of the history of Guadeloupean slavery. A first step in the achievement of the committee’s objectives came with the Taubira Law of 10 May 2001. This law recognizes slavery as a crime against humanity. A second crucial step was taken with the adoption of the Overseas Real Equality Act of 14 February 2017, which established 23 May as the commemorative date for the victims of colonial slavery. The association continues to promote annual commemorations known as “Feasts of Brotherhood and Reconciliation” or “Limié Ba Yo” (which translates as “Let’s put them in the spotlight”) every year on 23 May. It is also behind the project for a large national memorial, featuring the list of names of the 200,000 slaves freed by the French abolition of 1848, which would be erected in the Tuileries Gardens in Paris.

Translated by Emma Longwood

About the author



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Simon Férelloc is a doctoral research student in history at Nantes University. He is currently researching the consequences of French colonial policies and revolutionary movements on the French West Indies.

Further reading

Angélique Le Bouter, Anchoukaj : comment retrouver un aïeul esclave dans les colonies ?, 1ère, le Portail des Outre-mer, 2019. Read online :

<https://la1ere.francetvinfo.fr/anchoukaj-comment-retrouver-aieul-esclave-colonies-714057.html>

The genealogy database developed by CM98 :

<http://www.anchoukaj.org/resultats.php?nom=spartacus&button=rechercher>

Bibliography

Claudia Soto Mansilla, 23 mai, Journée nationale d'hommage aux victimes de l'esclavage, Archives d'Outre-mer, 2021. Read online :

<https://la1ere.francetvinfo.fr/archives-d-outre-mer-23-mai-journee-nationale-d-hommage-aux-victimes-de-l-esclavage-1012747.html>

Johann Michel, Devenir descendant d'esclave. Enquête sur les régimes mémoriels, Rennes, PUR, 2015. Consultable en ligne : <https://books.openedition.org/pur/72881>.

Illustrations



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March of 23 May 2018 in Paris to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the first march, photo archives François Guillot /AFP.



Poster presenting the Anchoukaj genealogy database, CM98, Paris.



March of 23 May 1998 in Paris, © Alfred Jocksan / AFP.