

A New Chapter in the Haitian Nightmare



by Theodore Dalrymple

Anyone who has been to Haiti does not forget the experience. It is a beautiful, fascinating, tragic, and horrible place. The American writer, Herbert Gold, who lived there for part of his life, wrote a marvelous [memoir](#), calling Haiti “the best nightmare on earth.” Haiti is the only country I have been to where starveling children have tried to snatch food from my plate, insinuating their stick-thin wrists through the grille that supposedly protected the restaurant’s customers.

And that was in the good old days, before the armed gangs took over Port-au-Prince, as [they have now done](#). The city was always a deteriorating mess, with noisome slums and blackening garbage rotting uncollected (except by the vultures) in the middle of the streets. You thought it couldn’t get worse, but if Haitian history proves one thing, it is that things can

always get worse and probably will. It is as if the Haitians were determined to show Gerard Manley Hopkins was right when he wrote, "No worst, there is none."

Astonishing though it may seem, I remember the days when it was perfectly safe to change money in the streets of Port-au-Prince with open air money-changers. They gave you wads of notes in front of passersby, but you were not in danger of robbery. Back then, I went through the Cité Soleil, probably the worst slum in the Western hemisphere, without feeling endangered (a journey brilliantly captured by the Haitian writer, Gary Victor). Now it would be suicidal to undertake such a trip. Thanks to the takeover of the city by competing gangs, people do not go outside except under the direst necessity. It is said that 15,000 people have fled their homes in the last week.

It isn't only Port-au-Prince that is affected. One of the most clearly demarcated borders in the world, that between the Dominican Republic and Haiti (green on one side and brown on the other), is under siege from fleeing Haitians numbering (so it is estimated) 200,000. There is no love lost between the two nations, and reports have surfaced of fleeing Haitians getting beaten back with cruelty and ferocity by the Dominican forces. This will raise the specter of the massacre in 1937, when the Dominican army, under the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo, killed some 15,000–30,000 Haitians living near the border on the Dominican side of the Dejabón River, known to Haitians as the *Rivière du Massacre*. With so much going on to distract the world's attention, another massacre might be under preparation.

The downward spiral in Haiti toward a Hobbesian war of all against all seems endless. So terrible is the situation that even the days of Papa Doc, once the byword for bizarre tropical dictatorship, now seem almost halcyon by comparison. The history of no country on earth is more tragic than that of Haiti. One of the gang leaders, former policeman Jimmy

Chérizier, has promised “genocide” if the notional and illegitimate prime minister, Ariel Henry—who cannot even land in his own country after having left it to seek military assistance from Kenya—does not resign. Who is to be genocided, exactly? Or was Cherizier merely misusing the word to mean general slaughter?

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