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The Germans in Haiti

by
Brenda Plummer

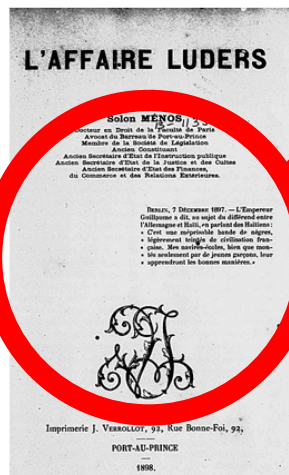


Plummer is Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She is the author of *Haiti and the Great Powers, 1902-1915* (1988) and *The Psychological Moment: Haiti and the United States* (1992).

Germany, a rising power in the late nineteenth century began a small but aggressive commerce in the Caribbean republics. Banking was an important adjunct to this business and four firms represented German trade in Haiti. In 1897 one Emil Luders, a businessman with a German father and a Haitian mother, was arrested following an altercation with Port-au-Prince police. Weeks after Luders' release and departure for Germany, the German navy sent warships to Port-au-Prince and threatened to bombard the port unless all charges against Luders were dropped and restitution made to him.

This example of gunboat diplomacy was encouraged by the United States, whose minister-resident pressured the Haitian government to give in to German demands. Over the course of the next twenty years, however, the Americans increasingly saw Germany as a commercial and political rival in Haiti, and fear of German influence served as a major justification for the U.S. occupation of 1915-1934.

As for Luders, his reliance on German protection was not atypical of wealthy Haitians of the period, many of whom sought and received foreign citizenship or pursued marriage with aliens in order to evade taxation, conscription, or other strictures imposed by Haitian authorities. The early 1900s witnessed the rapid expansion of the German merchant marine and navy as the Hamburg American Line increased its Caribbean operations and the navy by 1907 outstripped that of the United States in the battleship and cruiser categories. German merchant firms enjoyed subvention from Berlin and were able to supply Haitian consumers with expensive knockoffs of popular European products.



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