

The instrumentalization of Spartacus from the 19th century

Introduction

The image of Spartacus has been reinvented over and over since the 19th century. He has been instrumentalised as a political tool by revolutionaries, Marxists and Communists, anti-slavery movements, and many more. My aim is to show the use of Spartacus in modern media in a chronological perspective.

19th Century

In the 19th century, Spartacus was used by revolutionary (anti-establishment and anti-slavery) movements.

Toussaint Louverture (Figure 1) was an ex-slave himself, born in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) where he led the Haitian Revolution in 1791 - 1804, that resulted in the abolition of slavery, racism and colonialism: "I am Toussaint Louverture... I want liberty and equality to reign throughout St. Domingue (Popkin, 2010, p. 275). The Haitian Revolution was so successful that his image can still be seen on Haiti's money today (Figure 2).

Another example in which Spartacus' image has been used as a symbol for revolution is in France, 1871-1872 (Figure 3) in which the people of lower classes rebelled against the aristocracy in an attempt to be free from aristocratic oppression, and like Toussaint, gain freedom and equality.

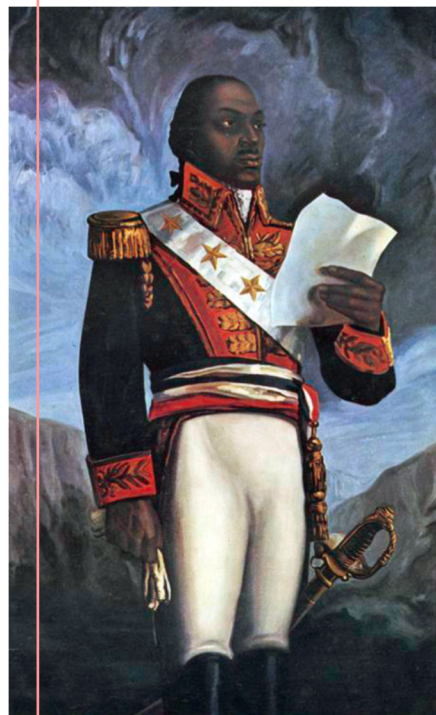


Figure 1: Toussaint Louverture, Haitian Revolution 1791-1804.



Figure 3: Oath of Spartacus by Louis-Ernest Barrias, 1871, Tuileries.



Figure 2: Toussaint Louverture, pictured here on a Haitian banknote

20th Century

In the 20th century, Spartacus is used in an almost identical manner as the 19th century by being used as the figurehead of revolutions, such as the German Revolution (J. Llewellyn et al, 2018) however, unlike Toussaint and much like Spartacus, the German Revolution was initially successful but eventually ended in failure.

In 1919:

"The left wing Spartacus group instigates a revolt in Berlin demanding a socialist republic in Germany and calling for election boycotts. The uprising is crushed and leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht are killed."

- Edmonton Journal, 1994

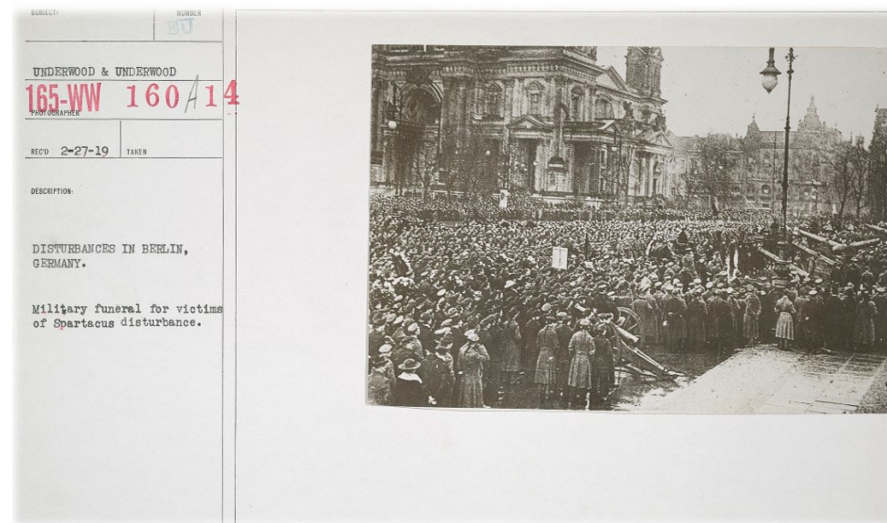


Figure 4: Military funeral for victims of the Spartacus Disturbance, 1919.

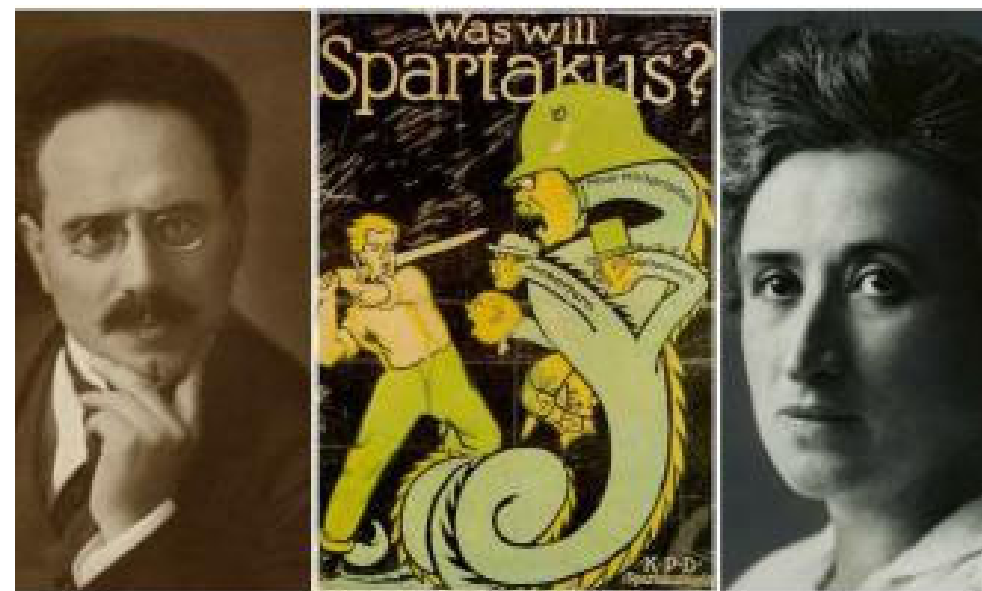


Figure 5: Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg and the Spartakusbund 'Spartacus League' 1919.

21st Century

The 21st Century reinvents Spartacus in two different ways- political as with previous centuries and commercial such as games, TV programs, movies and more.

Political: As seen with the 19th and 20th centuries, Spartacus is still used for the purpose of instigating change in society. The below image (Figure 6) is an example of Spartacus having been reinvented for online use on social media to bring attention to welfare cuts and governmental lies.

Commercial: Spartacus is now also being reinvented for commercial and entertainment usage, with his name and/ or image being used in TV programs/movies, online gameplay, board games and comic, as well as other forms of entertainment.

campaign against welfare cuts launched by a tiny band of disabled activists took the social media world by storm.

Over the course of Monday 9 January, hundreds of thousands of people tweeted around #spartacusreport. In the jargon, the hashtag "top trended" for most of the day. In other words, of all the topics of the day, a serious report (entitled Responsible Reform) outlining in careful detail the government's alleged multiple lies and evasions over its proposed disability living allowance (DLA) reform had proved, incredibly, hugely popular.

Prior to last Monday, virtually all the mainstream media had ignored the report, and the campaign itself. That morning, the buzz, diligently begun by a network of hundreds of disabled people, started to grow. Then powerful tweeters spotted it: the actor and writer Stephen Fry (who has more than 3 million Twitter followers) tweeted his support, unasked. The flood of public interest he sparked by that tweet temporarily crashed one of the websites on which the report was hosted.

Figure 6: How the Spartacus welfare cuts campaign went viral. Butler, 2012.

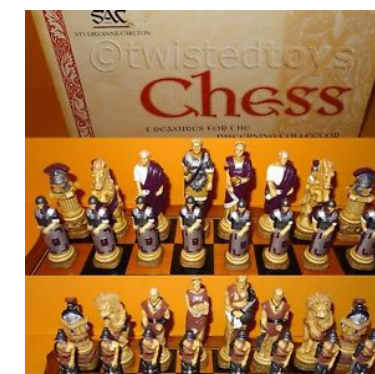


Figure 7: Spartacus Chess Set



Spartacus TV Program, Jan 2010–April 2013

Bibliography

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