Dutch Atlantic Decline during “The Age of Revolutions”

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The Age of Revolutions heralded fundamental changes in the Atlantic. The American, Haitian and Latin American revolutions did away with colonialism in most of the Americas, though the Caribbean remained a European stronghold. The British abolition of the slave trade potentially severed the ties between Africa and the Americas and initiated the ending of slavery itself, even if illegal slave trading would continue into the 1860s. The economic ascent of the United States laid the basis for the later political supremacy of the U.S. in the Americas. By 1825, of all the European colonial powers only Great Britain continued to be a serious competitor to the US in the Americas – while simultaneously, this entire period served to broaden the divide between “the West and the rest.”¹

Like all other European states, the Dutch suffered heavy losses in the process. At the threshold of the Age of Revolutions, the Dutch Atlantic had been far more successful for the Republic than is often assumed, even after the pioneering seventeenth-century “Dutch moment in Atlantic history” – a felicitous phrase coined by Wim Klooster – had passed. Throughout most of the eighteenth century, growth rates of Dutch Atlantic shipping had been superior to domestic economic growth and to most international trades, the Dutch East India Company (VOC, 1602–1795) trade to Asia included. Jan de Vries calculated that whereas Asian imports had been consistently higher ever since the mid-seventeenth century, by 1780 the annual value of Atlantic imports into the Republic surpassed the Asian share.² This Atlantic success started to crumble with the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War in the early 1780s. As this chapter will argue,

1 Wim Klooster, *Revolutions in the Atlantic World: A Comparative History* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 88 and *passim*.

2 Jan de Vries, “The Dutch Atlantic Economies,” in *The Atlantic Economy during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: Organization, Operation, Practice, and Personnel*, ed. Peter A. Coclanis (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press), 1–29, 19; and Jan de Vries, “The Limits of Globalization in the Early Modern World,” *The Economic History Review* 63, no. 3 (August 2010): 710–733, 729. For further discussion, see Gert Oostindie and Jessica Vance Roitman, “Repositioning the Dutch in the Atlantic, 1680–1800,” *Itinerario* 36, no. 2 (August 2012): 129–160, 136–139.

the Age of Revolutions, which brought about such radical changes in the rest of the Atlantic, was, in the Dutch domains, a period of slow, yet inexorable, contraction – a contraction that would eventually be the death knell for the Dutch Atlantic as an area of any real significance for either the metropole or for other nations. At the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the confirmation of the late-eighteenth century British takeover of Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo meant that the Dutch lost a plantation frontier. The British returned the rest of the Atlantic colonies, and Suriname became the only remaining Dutch asset economically. Curaçao and St. Eustatius lost their function as free trade zones in a post-mercantilist world. So did Elmina, as the slave trade came to a halt. Dutch Atlantic trade figures would never recover.

The Fourth Anglo-Dutch War of 1780–1784 was the first spectacular episode in the Dutch Atlantic decline, but there was a prelude to that. Previous economic growth in the Dutch Atlantic had been based only partially on production growth in the Dutch Guianas, mainly Suriname. Of growing importance was the transshipment of other nations' plantation produce through Curaçao and St. Eustatius. Dutch Atlantic commerce thrived because merchants from these two islands acted as middlemen in the wider Atlantic. But since the early eighteenth century, British and British North American merchants had started to emulate the Dutch in this role of Atlantic brokers. By the 1780s, they had already quietly displaced the Dutch as prime shippers to and from the Dutch Guianas, and in the next decades, they would displace them in the Caribbean Sea as well.

It seems that few either in the Dutch Republic or in the Dutch Atlantic colonies had anticipated such a decline, but as a result of the devastating maritime blows suffered in the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, an awareness of the extreme vulnerability of the Dutch state, both at home and overseas, did settle in. In fact, this chapter will show that it was the Dutch state's neutrality – a neutrality that was safeguarded or “permitted” by the other Atlantic powers – that had allowed the Dutch to build their niche as intermediaries within the mercantilist system. In the aftermath of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, the Dutch learned the painful lesson that their neutrality only lasted as long as it was condoned by more powerful states. But even before this, the vulnerability of the Dutch Atlantic colonies was foreshadowed. This translated in the 1780s into the rise of the so-called Patriot movement, aiming at reform of the stagnant, semi-monarchal Republic. Over the next decades, “Enlightened” Patriots and conservative “Orangists” – after the Stadtholder's family color – would vie for dominance at home and overseas. As this chapter will go on to argue, it was, time and again, foreign powers who would be decisive for the outcome of these struggles. With every change of regime, there were new hopes in the metropolis of

reinvigorating the Dutch Atlantic, inspired by the conviction that the Caribbean colonies were still vital to the metropolis. It would take until the second half of the nineteenth century before the Dutch economy embarked on a new round of steady growth, and indeed there was a strong colonial dimension to that. But this time unequivocally only the Dutch East Indies mattered.

This chapter charts the development of the Dutch Atlantic in the Age of Revolutions. It will show how the changes that actually mattered in the long-term in the Dutch Atlantic – changes such as abolition, loss of territory, and the diminished brokerage function – did not emerge from either movements within the metropole or from inside the colonies themselves, and especially not from the Creole elite (in stark contrast to so many other colonies in the Americas). Rather, they were externally imposed. The first section focuses on demographic and economic change, and argues that this period was a downward turning point in Dutch Atlantic history. The period was marked by geographical contraction as well as a definitive loss of the islands' broker function in the wider Atlantic, leaving only Suriname as an asset – though this colony too would soon lose its value to the metropolis. The second part of the chapter discusses political and social developments. Whereas outside interventions were crucial, internal political strife or challenges to the slave society as such had little impact except for on Curaçao. But even there, in the end, the only relevant political change was that the colonies came to belong to a Kingdom rather than a Republic, following regime change in the metropolis. Nowhere was there an urge for independence, or even for political reform. Clearly the elites of the Dutch Atlantic thought and acted differently from their peers in the Continental Americas, and similar to the white elites in the rest of the Caribbean. The closing section offers some thoughts on the rise and fall of the Dutch Atlantic as a set of interconnected and externally oriented regional hubs.

Economic and Demographic Decline, 1780–1825

Among the Dutch colonies in the Atlantic, three would demonstrate spectacular growth in the decades after 1780. These were Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo. Their success was mainly the result of massive British and North American involvement, included several British occupations, and climaxed with their formal transition to the British empire. With Trinidad, ceded by the Spanish, British Guiana became the new plantation frontier in the British Atlantic. The performance of Suriname paled in comparison to its neighbor, with population decrease and the value of exports initially growing at a slower

pace and even declining in absolute value from the 1820s onwards. The decay of Curaçao and Statia was even more graphic, with strong population decline because of migration to non-Dutch territories. With only a few dozen Europeans, Elmina had already become an imperial backwater at the eve of the abolition of the slave trade, and would not recover (Figure 12.1).

The demographic development of the Caribbean colonies had been linked primarily to the African slave trade, as net demographic growth continued to be negative throughout the eighteenth century, particularly so in the Guianas. The population decline in Suriname in the 1780–1815 period must be attributed

FIGURE 12.1 *Population Figures in the Dutch Atlantic, 1780–1863.*

Excluding Amerindians and maroons.

SOURCES: HANNEKE LOMMERSE, "POPULATION FIGURES," IN *DUTCH COLONIALISM, MIGRATION AND CULTURAL HERITAGE*, ED. GERT OOSTINDIE (LEIDEN: KITLV, 2008), 315–342, 323–334 AND GERT OOSTINDIE, "BRITISH CAPITAL, INDUSTRY AND PERSEVERANCE' VERSUS DUTCH 'OLD SCHOOL': THE DUTCH ATLANTIC AND THE TAKEOVER OF BERBICE, DEMERARA AND ESSEQUIBO, 1750–1815," *BMGN – LOW COUNTRIES HISTORICAL REVIEW* 127, NO. 4 (2012): 28–55, 35. NB: FIGURES FOR ELMINA AND THE NEARBY DUTCH FORTS NOT INCLUDED. INHABITANTS WERE PRIMARILY MILITARY PERSONNEL. IN 1788, THE POPULATION WAS JUST OVER 300, OF WHICH SOME 70 WERE EUROPEANS. IN 1816, THE TOTAL NUMBER WAS DOWN TO 220, OF WHICH ONLY 20 WERE EUROPEANS. ESTIMATES KINDLY PROVIDED BY HISTORIAN HENK DEN HEIJER, WHO IS PREPARING A MONOGRAPH ON ELMINA.

primarily to the collapse of the Dutch slave trade in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. This, in turn, was due to the 1773 financial crisis in Suriname and the consequent withdrawal of credit facilities, as well as the decline of Dutch shipping during and after the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War. Berbice and above all Demerara and Essequibo in contrast benefited from British capital as well as the British illicit slave trade decades before the formal takeover, as British investors rightly perceived that this new plantation frontier promised much higher yields than "depleted" colonies such as Barbados or Antigua.³

The contraction of Curaçao and Statia was not primarily due to negative natural demographic growth and a lack of slave imports, but rather to large-scale emigration. For Curaçao, this included all segments of the population, but in uneven proportions. The island's total population shrunk by one-third from some 21,000 in 1791 to 14,000 in 1816. The number of slaves decreased from nearly 13,000 to just over 6700, which is almost half. In contrast, the number of free citizens of color increased by over 20 percent. One may assume that some slaves had moved into that category in this period and others had died, but considerable numbers must have been taken by their owners to other destinations in the Northern Caribbean, particularly St. Thomas, a Danish colony that was able to develop into a flourishing free trade port thanks to not only the slave trade, but to metropolitan neutrality.⁴

Something of the same sort must have happened in St. Eustatius. Its development as a free trade zone for the Northern Atlantic had involved the immigration of merchants from Curaçao, who would have taken their slaves with them. The 1781 ransacking of Statia involved the forced exile of many Europeans, including Jews who were particularly targeted by Admiral George Rodney. There was a short recovery, surely inspired by hopes of restoring the island as a free trade port, with total population reaching an all-time peak of nearly 8000 in 1790. The collapse thereafter was definitive, with the population decreasing with two-thirds between 1790 and 1816 and the white segment by almost 80 percent.⁵ A prime migration destination again was St. Thomas.

Ironically then, the two waning Dutch free trade zones lost a considerable part of their population to a competing, equally small free trade port owned by Denmark, an even smaller player in the Caribbean. The key to St. Thomas'

3 Oostindie, "British Capital," 35, 40–43.

4 Wim Klooster, "Subordinate but proud: Curaçao's free blacks and mulattoes in the eighteenth century," *New West Indian Guide* 68, nos. 3–4 (1994): 283–300; Wim Renkema, *Het Curaçaose plantagebedrijf in de negentiende eeuw* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1981), 366–367.

5 Cornelis Christiaan Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean and in Surinam 1791/5–194* (Assen: Gorcum, 1990), 152–154.

short-term success lay in Danish neutrality during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War and in the first years of the revolutionary wars (until 1800), but in the long run, as mercantilism waned and was eventually abolished in the decades after 1815, St. Thomas too would decline.⁶ But that was still to come. In the late eighteenth century, St. Thomas – since its earliest days a settlement with a strong Dutch presence – hosted not only whites and their slaves from Curaçao, but also free blacks born on that island now working as sailors out of St. Thomas. In 1803, 156 out of 1000 free coloreds in the capital of Charlotte Amalie were born in Curaçao; another 62 hailed from Statia. As late as 1830, a Dutch visitor to the island remarked that, among the non-white population, Papiamentu was widely spoken.⁷

6 Ideologically, mercantilism started to fall into disrepute with Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, but in practice it took a long time before laws derived from this period were repealed. Thus the U.K. abolished the Corn Laws only in 1846 and the Navigation Acts in 1849, while France ended mercantilist regulations during the second empire (1852–1870). See Robert B. Ekelund and Robert D. Tollison, *Politicized Economies: Monarchy, Monopoly, and Mercantilism* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 1997). The population of St. Thomas continued to grow until the 1840s. See Neville Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992), 5. The white population included substantial numbers of Jewish settlers, partly hailing from Curaçao and Statia. See Jens Larsen, *Virgin Islands Story: A History of the Lutheran State Church, Other Churches, Slavery, Education, and Culture in the Danish West Indies, now the Virgin Islands* (Philadelphia: Muhlenburg Press, 1950), 152; Mordechai Arbely, *The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean: The Spanish-Portuguese Jewish Settlements in the Caribbean and the Guianas* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2002), 276.

7 David Whitney Knight and Laurette de T. Prime, eds., *St. Thomas 1803: Crossroads of the Diaspora: The 1803 Proceedings and Register of the Free Colored Inhabitants in the Town of Charlotte Amalie, on the Island of St. Thomas in the Danish West Indies* (St. Thomas, U.S.V.: Little Northside Press, 1999), 163. For 522 out of a total of 1521 free coloreds, no place of birth was given. Gerardus Balthazar Bosch, *Reizen in West-Indië* (Amsterdam: Emmering, 1985), 2:366–367; Julius S. Scott, “Crisscrossing Empires: Ships, Sailors, and Resistance in the Lesser Antilles in the Eighteenth Century,” in *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion*, ed. Robert L. Paquette and Stanley Engerman (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1996), 128–143, 133; Cornelis de Jong van Rodenburg, *Reize naar de Caribische Eilanden, in de jaren 1780 en 1781: aan boord van s'Lands schip van oorlog Mars onder bevel van den schout bij nacht Willem Krul* (Haarlem: François Bohn, 1807), 297–298; Justus Gerardus Swaving, *Swaving's reizen en lotgevallendoor hem zelven beschreven* (Dordrecht: Blussé and Van Braam, 1827), 12; J.P. van de Voort, “Dutch Capital in the West Indies during the eighteenth century,” *Acta Historiae Neerlandicae: The Low Countries History yearbook* 14 (1981): 85–105, 94–95; Tim Deahl, “Een vergeten parel op de Deense Kroon: de ontwikkelingen van de Nederlandse connecties met het Deense eiland St. Thomas, 1770–1807,” (unpublished MA thesis, University of Leiden, 2011), 36–37, 53–58.

Demographic decline and economic contraction fed one another. The decade after the conclusion of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1785 to 1795) Suriname produced an unprecedented peak in the combined value of sugar, coffee and cotton, totaling some 10 million Dutch guilders per year. It is impossible to reconstruct the development of plantation exports between 1795 and the early 1800s. The overall value of the exports of these three staples reached a last peak of 10 million guilders in 1815–1819, which possibly explains the optimism about the colony prevailing in Holland at the time. But export value declined steeply afterwards, to a low of 4 million in the 1840s followed by a slight recovery to 4.8 million guilders in the 1850s, followed by further contraction.⁸

Not all products fared the same. From 1815 onwards to Emancipation in 1863 we see a steep growth in sugar exports, compared to a more erratic pattern for cotton and the virtual disappearance of coffee. But even then, the share of Suriname sugar in the Dutch and world markets dwindled. In a globalizing market, of all Caribbean producers only Trinidad, British Guiana and particularly Cuba would continue to matter as the century progressed – but the once dominant Caribbean share in world sugar production was rapidly decreasing anyway, to below a third by 1900.⁹ On the Dutch market in 1831, Dutch sugar imports from Suriname were roughly at the same level as its new colonial competitor Java. In 1850, Java exported five times as much sugar to the Netherlands, in 1860 14 times as much.¹⁰ The post-Emancipation introduction of indentured labor would not bring a halt to that relative decline, and alternatives were hard to come by until the twentieth-century development of bauxite mining. Before that, as a desperate Minister of Colonial Affairs, Hendrik Colijn, sighed in Parliament in 1935: "Everything that has been tried in Suriname, it has all simply failed."¹¹

Prior to their turn-of-the-century demographic decline, the Antillean islands had never exported much, Curaçao and Statia making fortunes only through re-exports. As North American merchants came to control

8 Alex van Stipriaan, *Surinaams contrast: rooibouw en overleven in een Caraïbische plantagekolonie 1750–1863* (Leiden: KITLV, 1993), 437.

9 J.R. Ward, *Poverty and Progress in the Caribbean, 1800–1960* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985), 27. The Caribbean share in world sugar production, both cane and beet sugar, was 35 percent in the 1870s, 25 percent in the 1920s, and 14 percent in the 1960s.

10 Van Stipriaan, *Surinaams contrast*, 35; Jan Jacob Reesse, *De suikerhandel van Amsterdam van 1813 tot 1894: een bijdrage tot de handelsgeschiedenis des vaderlandshoofdzakelijk uit de archieven verzameld en samengesteld door J.J. Reesse* ('s-Gravenhage: Nijhoff, 1911), xxxiii, xli.

11 National Archives of the Netherlands, The Hague (NL-HaNA), 2.02.21.01, Verslagen van de Handelingen der Staten-Generaal, 1876–1877, 1939–1948, inv. no. 681–690, *Handelingen Eerste Kamer 1934–1935*, 9 May 1935. Translations from Dutch archives and publications into English are mine throughout this chapter.

intra-Caribbean trade, and as mercantilism was effectively abolished in the nineteenth century, it is only logical that the islands lost their economic function as regional hubs. Once they were applauded by Adam Smith in *Wealth of Nations*, for amassing fortunes in their function of “free ports, open to the ships of all nations,” in an otherwise mercantilist environment. Now, these “barren islands” took the full brunt of the poverty of their natural resources.¹² Throughout the nineteenth century and up to the establishment of oil refineries in Aruba and Curaçao in the 1930s, successive Dutch governors would report on deep poverty, economic stagnation and would consider one plan for economic development after another, all of which would come to naught. In 1901, Member of Parliament H. van Kol, who had made his fortune in the Dutch East Indies, qualified Curaçao and the other Antilles as “a colony in dire straits,” worse off even than in the early nineteenth century.¹³

Of Elmina, finally, not much may be said. Even prior to the abolition of the slave trade, its function as seat of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) had lost its former importance. Some experiments were made after abolition with cotton and indigo plantations as well as with trade, but to little avail. Between 1831 and 1872, the Dutch recruited local soldiers in Elmina to serve in the colonial army. Partly because this scheme was criticized as an ill-concealed form of semi-bondage, and partly because cheaper alternatives were found in the Indonesian archipelago, this practice was discontinued. By 1872, the Dutch eagerly ceded Elmina to the British in a swap which included confirmation of Dutch control of Northern Sumatra and permission for the Dutch to acquire indentured labor for Suriname in British India.

We should not assume that contemporaries were already anticipating this overall decline of the Dutch Atlantic. During the Age of Revolutions as well as at its conclusion, policy makers voiced optimism in spite of their painful awareness of Dutch decline, or at least the conviction that the Caribbean colonies could play a vital role in the Netherlands regaining the status of a serious world player. Thus in 1795 parliamentarians of the “revolutionary” Batavian Republic were of the opinion that their new state could only survive with the support of its colonies, “in particular those in America.”¹⁴ After the Peace of

12 Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Amsterdam: MetaLibri, 2007), 442.

13 Gert Oostindie, ed., *De gouverneurs van de Nederlandse Antillen sinds 1815* (Leiden: KITLV, 2011); Henri Huber van Kol, *Een noodlijdende kolonie* (Amsterdam: Masereeuw & Bouten, 1901), 1–2.

14 Quoted in T.P.M. de Jong, *De krimpende horizon van de Hollandse kooplieden: Hollands welvaren in het Caribisch zeegebied, 1780–1830* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1966), 124.

Amiens, the Dutch quickly dispatched a large fleet to the Caribbean to restore their sovereignty, investing serious money in the expectation of future rewards. Even as during the Napoleonic Wars almost all Dutch colonies had again been "temporarily" taken over by the British, there was the expectation of their recovery. In an 1806 report written at the request of the recently-appointed King Louis Napoleon, the Dutch Department of Colonies argued that the Atlantic properties, including Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo, were "among the most prominent colonies world-wide." A second memorandum expressed the conviction that these colonies, and the African slave trade, were "indispensable" for Dutch recovery as "a merchant state."¹⁵

Upon the restart of the country as the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1813, King Willem I hoped to make the colonies work to the benefit of the metropolis, but it would take until the mid-1820s before he could make real progress with his ambitions for state reform including colonial rule. In 1820 the King still nurtured high hopes for his American possessions, in spite of the loss of much of the Guianas, for which, incidentally, Amsterdam merchants blamed him.¹⁶ By 1825, government reports qualified Suriname as "a highly important colony," and "almost the only still flowering branch of trade and shipping for Amsterdam."¹⁷ This was the last optimism to be voiced regarding the Caribbean. In the next decades, it would dawn upon government circles and entrepreneurs alike that the Dutch East Indies were becoming the only part of empire that really mattered. Prompted by Willem I, the state assumed control, with evident success, for the national treasury. Income from the East Indies, mainly derived from the semi-feudal Javanese "Cultivation System," accounted for 32 percent of state income in the 1830s, 53 percent in the 1840s and 45 percent in the 1850s.¹⁸

Dutch Colonial Policies in Revolutionary Times

The Dutch Revolt against Habsburg Spain had resulted – somewhat surprisingly even to its protagonists – in the establishment of a Republic, albeit a

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- 15 Memorandums written by civil servant J.C. van der Kemp, 2 September 1806, quoted in J. de Hullu, "1786. Mémoire sur l'isle de Saint-Eustache," in "De handel van St. Eustatius in 1786," *West-Indische Gids* 3, no. 1 (1922): 35–51 and his "De algemeene toestand onzer West-Indische bezittingen in 1806," *West-Indische Gids* 2, no. 1 (1921): 407–421, 413, 419.
 - 16 De Jong, *Krimpende Horizon*, 129, 136.
 - 17 "Uit de pers," *West-Indische Gids* 1 (1919): 496–500.
 - 18 J.L. van Zanden and Arthur van Riel, *Nederland 1780–1914: staat, instituties en economische ontwikkeling* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2000), 223.

republic of a strongly federal character and with a semi-monarchal structure. The “Republic of the Seven United Netherlands” had its center in the province of Holland, but included six more provinces of which Zeeland was most important to overseas trade, particularly in the Atlantic. Sovereignty lay with the States-General, a parliament in which the several provinces were represented in conformity with their demographic and economic clout. Each province had its own council or “Staten.” Amsterdam was the most important player in the “Staten van Holland.” Nevertheless, the seat of government was The Hague, an administrative center in Holland of much lesser economic importance. The most important metropolitan cities in the Dutch Atlantic were Amsterdam, followed by a large margin by Middelburg/Vlissingen in Zeeland and Rotterdam in Holland.

Despite this ostensibly Republican structure, ever since its 1581 proclamation of war against Spain, the Republic had also retained an institutional relationship with the noble family of Oranje-Nassau who intermittently served as a pseudo-monarchy, even if the so-called Stadtholders never had the royal prerogatives usual in *ancien régime* Europe. There was a constant competition between the House of Oranje-Nassau and the *Staten van Holland*, particularly the dominant city of Amsterdam. Between 1581 and the 1790s, there had been two periods in which the Dutch burgher elite ruled the country without the interference of Stadtholders at all, from 1650 to 1672 and again from 1702 to 1747. For the rest of the period, the States General shared their powers with the Stadtholders in an uneasy compromise. As for colonial affairs, the Stadtholders were nominally presiding over the two companies, but in practice their involvement in colonial affairs was limited.

Colonial affairs in the Asia and Southern Africa were relegated to the semi-state VOC.¹⁹ Financed by private means as a chartered company, the VOC was beneficial to the Republic both by the employment and riches it brought to cities and individuals in the Republic and because the company paid various kinds of taxes to the States General. The WIC failed to perform as satisfactorily.²⁰ The first WIC (1621–1674) faltered after the loss of Brazil and its

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- 19 The VOC built a network of trading posts along the Arabic and South and Southeastern Asian coasts of the Indian Ocean and hence to East Asia, with permanent colonies in Sri Lanka and the Indonesian archipelago. In addition, the VOC founded the Cape Colony in Southern Africa which soon developed into a settler colony. The VOC was a semi-state institution, as the States-General had relegated governance, including military powers, as well as a trade monopoly to the company. For most of the seventeenth and part of the eighteenth centuries, the company performed well and was therefore allowed to continue its mission.
- 20 Henk den Heijer, *De geotrooieerde compagnie: de VOC en de WIC als voorlopers van de naamloze vennootschap* (Deventer and Amsterdam: Kluwer and Stichting tot Befordering der Notariële Wetenschap, 2005), 168–172.

successor, the second WIC (1674–1792), was not financially successful either. The WIC lost its trade monopoly in the 1730s and only wielded direct governance in Elmina and the Antillean islands. Suriname and the lesser Guianas were ruled by corporate associations in which the WIC had a share, at best, as was the case with the "Sociëteit van Suriname." But of course, even if it did not yield the nice dividends to its shareholders that the VOC did, as an institution of governance the WIC was indispensable to the functioning of the Dutch Atlantic and as such had an economic function for the Republic no matter the poor returns paid to its share holders.

Even prior to the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, the Republic had become fragile economically and militarily, and this instability affected colonial affairs as well. But the war acted as a catalyst, with the British sacking of St. Eustatius in 1781 serving as a painful reminder of the vulnerability of Dutch maritime strength. Since the 1713 Peace of Utrecht, the Dutch had performed their role as middlemen in the Atlantic on a basis of neutrality between the larger European rival states. The war demonstrated that this rewarding role could only be performed as long as competitors tolerated this. When the British decided that the Republic's neutrality was no longer convenient, the Dutch found out that they lacked the military means to defend their interests. Unable to protect their own merchant fleet and colonies, their future laid in the hands of the British, and to a lesser extent the other Atlantic states.²¹

This humiliation stimulated the existing misgivings among part of the educated classes against the status quo. Inspired by Enlightenment ideas, a "Patriot" movement had started to organize against the governing aristocratic elite and its leader Stadtholder Willem V in 1781, one year into the war. Not surprisingly, the Patriots sympathized with the American Revolution. In the mid-1780s the Patriots started organizing themselves in militias, and by 1787 there was a genuine Patriot coup. Pro-Orange Prussian intervention, however, prevented regime change and the Patriot leadership had to seek exile in France. Some of the leading Patriots would return in 1794 as members of an armed force supporting revolutionary France's invasion army. In this way, they contributed to the fall of the Dutch Republic and the exile of Stadtholder Willem V to England.

The proclamation of the Batavian Republic in January 1795 signaled both a victory for the Patriots and their absolute dependence on revolutionary France. Internal dissent characterized the Patriot movement, particularly on the issue

21 Piet Emmer, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Economy, 1580–1880: Trade, Slavery and Emancipation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 219–220.

of the continuation of a federal state, or rather the shift to a unitary state. Moderate factions differed from radical ones in their plans for reform and the implantation of revolutionary projects, but all Patriots were anti-British and pro-French. Their now defeated Orangist opponents were obviously pro-British. The Batavian Republic lasted until 1806, at which point Napoleon Bonaparte decided to turn the country into a dependent “Kingdom of Holland” with his brother Louis Napoleon serving as its first king. In 1810, against his brother’s wish, Napoleon annexed the Netherlands altogether. Three years later, the Anglo-Prussian defeat of France resulted in the establishment of a Kingdom of the Netherlands, with the last Stadtholder’s son appointed as King Willem I.

This long – and at times revolutionary – intermezzo would have crucial consequences for the Netherlands itself, but also for the management of Dutch colonial affairs. First, the semi-state-owned VOC and WIC were dissolved and the direction of the colonies was entrusted to genuine state institutions.²² With the establishment of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, colonial affairs became a prerogative of King Willem I. Only with the liberal democratic reform of 1848 would the States-General reclaim this authority.

Next, British military interventions narrowed the surface of the Dutch colonial empire. Upon taking up exile in England, Stadtholder Willem V, in the so-called “Kew Letters,” had instructed the overseas officers to admit the troops and ships that would be sent by the British King, “and to consider these as Troops and Ships of a nation that is in friendship and Alliance [with the purpose to] prevent that this Colony will be invaded by the French.”²³ One assumes he did not anticipate that his protectors would not return all possessions after the wars. During the wars, the British indeed took “protective possession” of all Dutch colonies, albeit at different intervals. At the 1814–1815 Peace of Vienna, the United Kingdom returned most Dutch colonies, but retained the Cape Colony, Sri Lanka as well as Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo.

Finally, the Patriot intermezzo yielded a modest harvest of pamphlets addressing colonial affairs and sparked some debate in the new National Assembly about colonial policy, but all this was of limited importance. By the

22 For the Atlantic, this was first the Council of American Possessions and Settlements (1791–1795), next the West India Committee (1795–1800) and finally the Council of American Possessions (1801–1806).

23 Quoted in *Rechtsgeleerd advies in de zaak van den gewezen Stadhouder, en over deszelfs schrijven aan de gouverneurs van de Oost- en West-Indische bezittingen van den Staat*. Door de burgers mr. B.[avius] Voorda en mr. J.[ohan] Valckenaer. Ingelevert ter Vergadering der Provisioneele Representanten van het Volk van Holland. op den 7 Januarij 1796 en in 't licht gegeven op last derzelve Vergadering (In den Haag: ter 's Lands Drukkerye van Holland, 1796), 11–12 (University of Leiden Special Collections).

late eighteenth century, the Dutch Republic had ceased to be the intellectual powerhouse, or at least printing house and repository, it had once been, the Dutch printing business having even ceased to be export-oriented, so there was little Dutch contribution to international political or philosophical debates.²⁴ In the Netherlands as elsewhere – except for a brief period of radicalism in France, including the 1794 abolition of slavery, a law revoked in 1802 – “Enlightened” politicians struggled with the contradiction between high ideals about the equality of men and the economic benefits of colonialism, and eventually concluded that the time was not yet right for ending either colonialism or slavery. As for colonialism as such, a Dutch state commission concluded in 1796 that colonies served “exclusively” for the benefit of the metropolitan economy, and should therefore be “subservient to the Batavian people.”²⁵

The issue of slavery was discussed in the National Assembly, with Pieter Vreede, the leader of the radical Patriots, strongly opposing slavery as being incompatible with the Rights of Man. In the ensuing debates considerations of national interest prevailed, and occasional allusions to the Haitian Revolution were used to illustrate that the enslaved Caribbean populations were not quite ready for freedom. The Assembly concluded that the idea of inalienable rights to freedom could not yet be extended to non-European colonial subjects, much less to slaves. The lack of radicalism is further illustrated by the fact that the 1798 Constitution even withheld full citizenship rights from Europeans in the colonies. Surely the earliest revolutionary debates in metropolitan France had reflected more radical thought.²⁶

The only real change was in the field of governance and economics. Enlightened thinkers had long criticized mercantilism, with its supposedly stifling monopolies. It was therefore quite logical that the Dutch Patriots were highly critical of the VOC and WIC, as they had been consistently since the 1780s. In the debates leading to the Constitution, the Patriot representatives agreed that neither of the by then ailing companies should be revived. Henceforward, all colonies were simply possessions of the state.²⁷

24 Benjamin Schmidt, “The ‘Dutch’ ‘Atlantic’ and the Dubious Case of Frans Post,” in this volume; Margaret C. Jacob and Wijnand W. Mijnhardt, eds., *The Dutch Republic in the Eighteenth Century: Decline, Enlightenment and Revolution* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), 212–213; Jeremy D. Popkin, “Print Culture in the Netherlands on the Eve of the Revolution,” in *The Dutch Republic in the Eighteenth Century*, 273–291, 282.

25 Quoted in Lubbertus Les, *Van Indië onder de Compagnie tot Indië onder de Staat: de koloniale titel in de staatsregeling van 1798* (Utrecht: Oosthoek, 1948), 2, 51.

26 Gerrit Jan Schutte, *De Nederlandse Patriotten en de kolonien: een onderzoek naar hun denkbelden en optreden, 1770–1800* (Groningen: Wolters, 1974), 15–16, 58–59, 144–149, Klooster, *Revolutions*, 98.

27 Schutte, *Nederlandse Patriotten*, 3, 55–56, 90–105, 115, 141.

Patriots and Orangists in the Caribbean Colonies

The metropolitan conflicts between Patriots and Orangists had repercussions in the Caribbean colonies as they had elsewhere in the Dutch empire. It seems though that such conflicts did not arise before 1795, hence not before the establishment of the Batavian Republic, the Stadtholder's Kew Letters and the intermittent British occupations of Dutch territory. There is no indication that colonial Patriots were interested in undermining colonialism as such, or slavery, the pivotal institution of their colonial societies. Thus, while Jan Bom, a Patriot official to Demerara and Essequibo, characterized the Batavian Republic as a "free" state no longer "in the chains of the Aristocratic and Orange slavery," this did not imply that he disagreed about the fundamentals of slavery in the West Indies. Instead he insisted that he and his fellow Patriots in the colony had demonstrated remarkable zeal in successfully suppressing a "devastating Revolt of the Negro slaves" in 1795.²⁸

More plausible then is the assumption that political strife within the Dutch Atlantic colonies was driven at best partly by ideological divides, and more by local idiosyncrasies and interests in which many protagonists demonstrated considerable opportunism. Thus a Dutch-born member of the Curaçao elite, Albert Kikkert, actively participated in the repression of the 1795 slave revolt, next became a vociferous member of the Patriot and, hence, anti-Stadtholder and anti-British faction in local politics. He was consequently expelled after the 1800 British takeover but somehow managed to return to the island in 1816 as the first governor appointed by King Willem I. In his installation speech, he spoke of "the iron yoke of the French invaders," qualified Napoleon as "the worst of tyrants," and his monarch as "a caring father." This type of "weather-vane" conduct was quite characteristic in the context of the successive regime changes in the Netherlands itself too, and ensured a high degree of continuity between the "French" period and the monarchy.²⁹

A summary of events in the various colonies during these revolutionary times may illustrate the limited lasting impact of internal political bickering in

28 On a more personal level, he expressed anger because a private slave had been taken away from him during his travels to Europe. See Jan Bom, *Verslag van Mr. Jan Bom, voorheen secretaries van 't gouvernement der colonie Essequibo en Demerary, enz. Wegens syne en verscheidene burgers...doormengd met eenige reflection, over de oorzaak der overgave van die colonie aan Groot-Brittanie* (Amsterdam: self-published, 1799), 2–4, 17, 38–39.

29 Cited in Wim Renkema, "A. Kikkert," in *De gouverneurs van de Nederlandse Antillen sinds 1815*, ed. Gert Oostinde, 27–32, 27; Cf. Matthijs Lok, *Windvanen: Napoleontische bestuurders in de Nederlandse en Franse Restauratie, (1813–1820)* (Amsterdam: Bakker, 2009), 403.

all colonies except for Curaçao. With the symbolic support of the Kew Letters as a convenient justification, the British invaded all but one of the Dutch colonies, but not exactly at the same time. Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo were the first to be taken over by the British, from 1796 to 1802 and then again in 1803, this time indefinitely. Suriname was British from 1799 to 1802 and again from 1804 to 1816, Curaçao from 1800 to 1803 and again from 1807 to 1816, Statia from 1801 to 1802 and from 1810 to 1816. Only Elmina remained nominally Dutch throughout this period – an indication of the colony's insignificance, but nonetheless remarkable in view of its potential role in the Atlantic slave trade, made clandestine for the Dutch too after the British abolition in 1807.

There is an interesting pattern here. In the Atlantic, the colonies that eventually would not be returned – Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo – were the first to be occupied. Exactly the same transpired in the domain of the VOC. Thus the British took over governance of the Indonesian archipelago late and only for a short period (1811 to 1816), while they intervened earlier in the colonies that they would eventually retain – the Cape Colony (1795 to 1803 and again from 1806), Sri Lanka (ever since 1796) and Malacca (1795 to 1818 and again since 1825). In a sense, then, the entire period of regime changes and warfare in Europe provided Great Britain with convenient arguments to expand its empire. It is not surprising that the British West Indian interest in the metropolis – as well as local British planters and merchants in Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo – had applauded the earlier but short-lived takeover of the colonies in 1780 and, after 1796, thought of the Peace of Amiens (1802) as an annoying obstacle in their design to retain these promising plantation frontiers permanently.³⁰

At the eve of the establishment of the Patriot Batavian Republic, the white elite of Suriname arguably identified more with the metropolis than did either the lesser Guianas, with their robust British and American community and connections, or Curaçao and Statia with their traditionally stronger regional rather than transatlantic orientations. We may also assume that after the French and particularly the Haitian Revolutions, there was deep concern about the establishment of a possibly revolutionary Batavian Republic. News that the French National Convention had abolished slavery was received in December 1793 with deep concern, as the slaves in Suriname might be inspired to rebel. Slave unrest remained limited though.

In March 1795 Governor Friderici organized the usual celebrations for the Stadtholder's birthday. But shortly after, the Kew Letters arrived and the governor and his Colonial Council had to make up their minds about what

30 Oostindie, "British Capital," 48.

course of action to follow. Surprisingly, Friderici and his predominantly Orangist council decided to ward off a “protective” British takeover in spite of the Stadtholder’s instructions. The British reacted by establishing a maritime blockade until they attacked in August 1799. The conditions of capitulation included a clause regarding a possible permanent transition to British sovereignty.³¹ With a short intermezzo following the Peace of Amiens, Suriname would remain British until 1816. The British intervention would have one unexpected and, among the planter class, most unwelcome outcome, which was the abolition of the slave trade, a seminal measure that was confirmed in the 1814 treaties.

How do we account for the initial resistance among the Suriname elite to surrender to the British? Surely there was no interest in revolutionary ideas, hence no sympathy for France – even if the Batavian Republic was recognized, the Colonial Council forbade public debates on “French” issues such as the Rights of Man. This ban must have been inspired by fears of a spilling over of revolutionary ideas from Saint-Domingue or, more close by, the colony of Cayenne.³² And no one anticipated that the British intervention would end with the imposition of the ending of the slave trade. Perhaps, therefore, the initial refusal to follow the Stadtholder’s instructions to welcome the British may be understood as a reflection of the emergence over the preceding century of a white, originally quite diverse, Creole community defining itself both as part of the Dutch empire and as a legitimate defender of local economic and political rights and therefore wary of any permanent change of imperial affiliation that might adversely affect their local interests.

This confident attitude may be illustrated by referring to the *Essai historique* published in 1788 in Paramaribo by “a group of learned Jewish men” headed by David Nassy. Throughout the book the authors emphasized both their gratitude for having been allowed to live as Sephardim in the colony since its earliest days, and the crucial Jewish contributions to the development of Suriname. A deep loyalty pervades the book, starting with the opening dedication thanking the directors of the Sociëteit van Suriname “for living under the laws of the Republic of the United Dutch Provinces, and under your protection.” But this did not keep Nassy from requesting a lowering of taxes and allowance of free trade. This is a refrain uttered throughout the colony’s history by gentile settlers as well, no matter how divided among themselves they may have been on

31 Julien Wolbers, *Geschiedenis van Suriname* (Amsterdam: De Hoogh, 1861), 445, 455–457, 476, 484–485.

32 Wolbers, *Geschiedenis*, 463–464, Goslinga, *Dutch in the Caribbean and in Surinam*, 164.

scores of issues, including religious divides and bigotry in spite of toleration, as contemporary judge Adriaan Lammens wrote.³³

The British took over Suriname anyway. For the local business community this would have the adverse long-term consequence of the ending of the slave trade, but some positive short-term effects. The British *intermezzo* meant that no ships could be sent to French-controlled Holland, no debts paid off, and hence an accumulation of local wealth. In addition, there was unrestricted trade to North America and within the British Atlantic and, therefore, Suriname partook in the advantages of the British market and the West Indies lobby in the metropolis. But even then, this did not translate to a widespread longing to remain within the British fold. Only the planters of Nickerie, the most Western part of the colony and hence adjacent to Berbice, urged, in vain, for inclusion in what was to become the new colony of British Guiana. But then again, these planters were mainly British nationals to begin with.³⁴

The contrast with Berbice and particularly Demerara and Essequibo is evident. In the second half of the eighteenth century, British interest and presence in these colonies had been rapidly growing, and with Statia, these colonies had already been briefly occupied in 1780 during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War. This episode lasted only a few months, but a letter from 76 British resident planters may have alerted the Crown to this new frontier. The supplicants advised their King not to return these "little known" colonies to the Dutch, as they provided great opportunities. "[As] part of your Majesty's dominions," they argued, these colonies "would be equal to or rather exceed your Majesty's most flourishing settlements in the West Indies."³⁵ The colony was returned nonetheless, but the informal British takeover continued and was even applauded, naively so in retrospect. Thus a 1790 report commissioned by the

33 David Nassy, *Geschiedenis der kolonie van Suriname: behelzende derzelver opkomst, voortgang, burgerlyke en staatkundige gesteldheid, tegenwoordigen staat van koophandel, en eene volledige en naauwkeurige beschryving van het land, de zeden en gebruiken der ingezetenen* 2 vols., (Amsterdam: Allart en Van der Plaats, 1791), 1: 1, 2: 32–34. Adriaan François Lammens, *Bijdragen tot de kennis van de kolonie Suriname: dat gedeelte van Guiana hetwelk bij tractaat ten jare 1815 aan het Koninkrijk Holland is verbleven, tijdvak 1816 tot 1822: eerste afdeling Geographie, statistica, zeden en gewoonten: vierde afdeling Voornamen belangen der kolonie* (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 1982), 56; cf. G.W. van der Meiden, *Betwist bestuur: de eerste bestuurlijke ruzies in Suriname 1651–1753* (Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 2008).

34 Goslinga, *Dutch in the Caribbean and in Surinam*, 180.

35 Letter of 76 British settlers in Essequibo and Demerara to George III [early 1781]; NL-HaNA, Second West India Company (further NWIC) 1.05.01.02, inv. no. 533, fols 441–449.

States-General argued that further immigration of “planters from Barbados, Grenada and other isles, leaving their depleted lands” would make the colony flourish to the benefit of the Dutch metropolis. At the same time, the report complained of massive illegal slave imports by and for British nationals.³⁶

Shortly after the establishment of the Batavian Republic, and in accordance with the Kew Letters, a British fleet sailed to the Guianas to assume protective custody against France. This offer was initially refused, against the judgement of the Orangist Governor Willem August van Sirtema Van Grovestins, who secretly left the colony on a British ship. His successor, Antony Beaujon, would turn over the colony a year later to the British anyway.³⁷ British Atlantic investors must have applauded this. A delegation of local residents had already requested the government in Barbados to intervene, and with the British fleet came, as a contemporary wrote, “a great number of speculators” ready to invest their capital in this new frontier, hence it was “more like a country resumed, than ceded, to England.” Indeed, around 1800, two-thirds of the white population of Demerara was estimated to be British, while the rest were a cosmopolitan mix including, in addition to the Dutch, many other European nationalities.³⁸

The position of the British settlers need not surprise us, but what of the loyalties of the local Dutch population in Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo? It appears that there was more internal friction than in Suriname, and we may assume that this reflected a concern among at least some of the Dutch settlers that this was not primarily a struggle over political ideas but rather a hard-nosed competition over the possession of valuable territory. Thus the above-quoted former local official and fierce Patriot Jan Bom blamed not only the vile British for the 1796 takeover, but equally the “egoism” of “corrupt” local Dutch, including the “perfidious” Governors Van Grovestins and Beaujon. In vain had the Patriots attempted to protect the colony from the “vile and cowardly means of [British] treachery and bribery.” Bom bitterly concluded that the Orangists had joined in “the triumph of the English settlers.” He was convinced that the

36 Henry Bolingbroke, *A voyage to the Demerary, containing a statistical account of the settlements there, and of those on the Essequibo, the Berbice, and the other contiguous rivers of Guyana* (London: Phillips, 1807), 176–177, 209–210, 370. “Rapport aan zyn Doorlugtigste Hoogheid den Heere Prince van Orange & Nassau [...] naar de Colonien van den Staat in de West-Indien,” by W.A. van Sirtema van Grovestins and W.C. Boeij, 27 July 1790 NL-HaNA, NWIC 1.05.01.02, inv. no. 915, fol. 38–41, 96.

37 Jan Wagenaar, *Vaderlandsche historie, vervattende de geschiedenissen der nu Vereenigde Nederlanden, inzonderheid die van Holland, van de vroegste tyden af* (Amsterdam: Isaak Tirion, 1751), 33: 220–228.

38 Bolingbroke, *Voyage*, 50 (figures ca. 1800), 277–278, 312–313.

British would not return the colony at all, which they had hoped to add to their empire ever since the early 1780s.³⁹

Calculating Dutch settlers may have shifted their allegiances out of pure opportunism. There was always the concern that local conflicts could spark slave rebellions following "the terrible example of the French islands."⁴⁰ A transfer of sovereignty may also have rescued indebted planters from paying their debts, as a cynical commentator had already remarked in the Patriot newsletter *De Post van den Neder-Rhijn*, in reference to the quick surrender of Demerara to the British in 1781.⁴¹

Upon their return in 1803, the British initially dealt cautiously with Dutch sensitivities, allowing the pro-British Dutch Governors Antony Beaujon and Abraham van Imbyze van Batenburg to serve as lieutenant-governors under the new British governor.⁴² Born in St. Eustatius, Beaujon came from a family of merchants settled in both Curaçao and Statia and was a rare example of family interconnectedness within the Dutch West Indies. A Patriot settler accused him of having no loyalty, "no heart for Patria," of being "a Foreigner, intruding in the Colony without the least interest in the public cause."⁴³ Perhaps we may indeed qualify Beaujon's maneuvering as sheer opportunism, but then again, by 1800 "national" loyalties were less defined and stable than they would be a century later. Meanwhile the British resolve was clear. A Dutch visitor observed that by 1810 the Dutch settlers had only second-class status, while in 1840, the colony's European population was mainly English, "very few of the former Dutch settlers having remained in the colony."⁴⁴

There is little indication of Patriot versus Orangist strife in St. Eustatius. Both Statia and the adjacent Dutch colonies of St. Maarten and Saba were at the mercy of the British and French. This had first become clear in 1781 with Rodney's sacking of Statia and the subsequent three years of French occupation. In 1793, at the outbreak of the war between the French and the British,

39 Bom, *Verslag*, 1, 5, 7–10, 17–18, 22–23, 46–48.

40 J.C. Delacoste, *Geschiedkundig en waar verhaal der gebeurtenissen, welke in de colonie Demerary by en zedert het vertrek van den baron van Grovestins hebben plaats gehad* (The Hague: H.C. Susan, 1798), 91–93.

41 Oostindie, "British Capital," 48.

42 Pieter Marinus Netscher, *Geschiedenis van de koloniën Essequibo, Demerary en Berbice, van de bestiging der Nederlanders aldaar top op onzen tijd* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1888), 285–287.

43 Delacoste, *Geschiedkundig en waar verhaal*, 41.

44 Swaving, *Swaving's reizen*, 191–193, Robert Hermann Schomburgk, *A Description of British Guiana, Geographical and Statistical: Exhibiting its Resources and Capabilities, Together with the Present and Future Condition and Prospects of the Colony* (London: Cass, 1970), 42.

Dutch settlers had claimed the French part of St. Maarten, but two years later, the French took over all of the three Dutch Windward Antilles. The British, in turn, ousted the French in 1801, returned the islands to the Dutch after the Peace of Amiens, and resumed control in 1810 for another three years. In 1816, the three islands' combined populations had been reduced to half that of 1790, and over the next century and a half this figure would remain that low.⁴⁵ We may assume that rather than worrying about political positions, the more enterprising settlers simply left during the Age of Revolutions, taking their slaves with them.

While Curaçao had a similar drastic reduction of its population, this island did experience significant political turmoil in the first five years of the revolutionary period. Patriot versus Orangist strife, combined with successive outside interventions, led to a potentially revolutionary regime change in the period from 1795 to 1800, after which a combined British-American intervention secured the isolation of Curaçao from the Batavian Republic and revolutionary France. Thereafter internal factionalism ceased to matter, as French-leaning Patriotism was no longer tolerated.

The history of the six revolutionary years is quite complicated.⁴⁶ As in all Dutch colonies, the proclamation of the Batavian Republic and the conflicting instructions of the exiled Stadtholder forced the governing elite to profess loyalty one way or another. The news of the Batavian Republic reached Curaçao in May, 1795. The next year, the hesitant Governor Johannes de Veer was replaced in a local coup by Jan Jacob Beaujon, a member of the same Dutch Antillean merchant family that produced the pro-English governor who took over governance in Essequibo that same year. Beaujon in turn was replaced in 1796 by a local merchant of Swiss origins, Johann Rudolf Lauffer, again a man officially serving the pro-French Batavian Republic but nurturing no revolutionary feelings whatsoever. Small wonder then that Lauffer would be allowed to continue as governor after the British takeover in 1800. The remaining period up to the establishment of the Kingdom of the Netherlands saw two more changes in sovereignty (from British to Batavian in 1803, back to British in 1807), but none of these responded to a local political dynamic. French and British moves were decisive.

45 Goslinga, *Dutch in the Caribbean and in Surinam*, 154. The population of Statia declined from 7830 to 2591, St. Maarten from 5571 to 3559 and on Saba from 1301 to 1145, hence, in total from 14,702 to 7295. In 1960, the combined population stood at 4722. See Lommerse, "Population Figures," 334.

46 See Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie, eds., *Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions, 1795–1800* (Leiden: KITLV, 2011) for detailed analyses.

This had been quite different before.⁴⁷ Clearly there was some local sympathy on the island for the French Revolution, to the point that the government banned the singing of French revolutionary songs in 1789. By 1793 the governor also issued a ban on public criticism of the House of Orange. News of the establishment of the Batavian Republic intensified local strife in 1795, pitting Patriots and Orangists against one another. In August, the island experienced its biggest slave revolt ever, clearly inspired by the French and Haitians Revolutions. The ranks were immediately closed and the revolt was violently suppressed by a coalition including not only the white population, but equally the (separate) militias made up of black and "colored" freemen.

In the summer of 1796, the Batavian Republic sent an envoy to ensure the island's loyalty. Pressed to choose, the Orangist Governor de Veer refused to take the oath of loyalty to the republic and was consequently replaced by Beaujon. To Patriot dismay, the latter turned out to be Orange-leaning as well. This caused renewed factional strife between local Patriots and Orangists and ended in a coup d'état in which Lauffer took Beaujon's position, in December 1796. His appointment was made public in a declaration opening with the French revolutionary slogan "Freedom, Equality, Fraternity."⁴⁸ Yet Lauffer was no radical either. He had been one of the leading figures in a moderate Patriot movement demanding economic reform benefitting the local merchant class, but he nurtured no radical ideas. Once in power as a "Batavian," and hence officially a pro-French governor, his policy was to repress more radical Patriots and to keep the revolutionary French troops out of the island as much as possible. In the next years, he attempted to steer a middle course in the long-standing Anglo-French belligerence as well as in the "Quasi-War" fought between his assertive French allies and the United States. His only real interest in this was the defense of Curaçao's commercial interests – more radical ideas, particularly about slavery, were not relevant either to the local elites or to the three competing nations.

All of this climaxed when in 1800 predominantly black French troops from Guadeloupe landed on the island to preempt a possible British attack. Conspiracies involving local French revolutionary agents had precluded this dramatic episode – though it seems likely that their "revolutionary" fervor

47 The following is based on Karwan Fatah-Black, "The Patriot Coup d'État in Curaçao, 1796," in *Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions*, ed. Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie, 123–140 and Han Jordaan, "Patriots, Privateers and International Politics: The Myth of the Conspiracy of Jean Baptiste Tierce Cadet," in *Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions*, ed. Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie, 141–170.

48 Fatah-Black, "The Patriot Coup d'État," 137.

had more to do with French geopolitical interest than with ideals about slave liberation and links to revolutionary Haiti.⁴⁹ In this decisive conjuncture Lauffer, in spite of his self-portrayal as a man inspired by the French Enlightenment *philosophes*, had no qualms about seeking American and British protection against France. This explains why the British allowed him to continue as civilian governor after they had ousted the French and annexed the island.

Creole Triumphalism?

If we are to understand “Creole Triumphalism,” a concept applied by Bernard Bailyn to Latin as well as British America, as the pulsating circulation of revolutionary, anticolonial ideas leading to regime change, there is nothing in Dutch Atlantic history that comes close.⁵⁰ Nowhere did local white elites strive towards independence, and choices made in the Patriot versus Orange, pro-French versus pro-British dilemma were dictated by personal, or, at best, by local merchant and planter interests. Pragmatism or sheer opportunism prevailed. Within the margins dictated by the metropolis, everyday politics were made by Dutch and other European settlers in the colonies, and they embodied no revolutionary fervor at all in this Age of Revolutions. There was no striving for independence, no lasting urge for political reform, let alone social change. At the end of the Napoleonic Wars, local elites in the restored colonies – if they had not left for better shores outside of the Dutch realm – simply accepted the new realities, welcomed the governors now appointed by a real king, had to accept the abolition of the slave trade imposed by the British, and had no qualms about slavery and socio-racial hierarchies. In some of this they diverted from the European elites in British North America and Latin America, but not at all from their peers in the rest of the Caribbean.

Of course, the majority in the Dutch Atlantic were not Europeans but enslaved Africans and their offspring, whether slave or free. Even if we are fully aware of Alison Games’ dictum that “the most urgent and immediate challenge [in Atlantic history] is to restore Africa to the Atlantic,” it remains hard to highlight African agency as a decisive factor on either side of the ocean during

49 Jordaen, “Patriots,” 166–167.

50 Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 101, 104–105. See also John Elliot, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 329.

this entire period, for the Dutch Atlantic that is.⁵¹ Elmina hardly figured any more because of European wars and abolitionist legislation. As for the Dutch Caribbean, surely enslaved Africans and their offspring did not emerge triumphantly from the Age of Revolutions.

But then again, there were some attempts. As elsewhere in the wider Caribbean, news of the Haitian Revolution did reach the enslaved populations of the Dutch colonies. The massive 1795 slave revolt of Curaçao – involving 2000 of the island's 12,000 slaves – was among the largest of contemporary revolts in the wider Atlantic and was evidently inspired by the French and Haitian Revolutions. Thus, the revolt's leader, Tula, emphasized the equality of all men as they all originated from Adam and Eve, and reportedly declared: "we seek our freedom, the French [Caribbean] blacks have been given their freedom, Holland has been taken over by the French, hence we must be free."⁵² The 1800 French invasion of the island found support among the local enslaved population, but the invasion foundered and again there were no rewards for the slaves.⁵³ Slavery in Curaçao and the other Dutch Antilles would not be abolished until 1863.

It is likely that the news of the Haitian Revolution reached the enslaved populations of the Guianas as well. A merchant in Rotterdam, writing about this "terrifying news," shared with his agent in Paramaribo his hopes that the necessary vigilance would quell any "spirit of rebellion among the negroes" in Suriname. It is not clear whether more than the routine type of repression was needed during these years. The Dutch Guianas had a long tradition of slave revolts and particularly marronage, and the last "Boni" Maroon War (1789–1793) had just been concluded. In the next period, only a few minor slave revolts were recorded, and these came to naught even if there was some quite unusual participation of free black troops or maroons.⁵⁴ In Suriname too, slavery would persist until 1863, with an extension of another ten years under the period of "Staatstoezicht" modeled after the British West Indian period of apprenticeship.

51 Alison Games, "Atlantic History: definitions, challenges and opportunities," *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (June 2006): 741–757, 754.

52 Quoted in Gert Oostindie, "Slave Resistance, Colour Lines, and the Impact of the French and Haitian Revolutions in Curaçao," in *Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions*, ed. Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie, 1–22, 9. For a comparative perspective, see David Geggus, "Slave Rebellion During the Age of Revolution," in *Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions*, ed. Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie, 23–56.

53 Jordaen, "Patriots," 144, 166.

54 J.W. Hudig, Rotterdam, 10 November 1791, quoted in Gert Oostindie, *Roosburg en Mon Bijou: Twee Surinaamse plantages, 1720–1870* (Leiden: KITLV, 1989), 362; Wolbers, *Geschiedenis*, 464, 547–551; Goslinga, *Dutch in the Caribbean and in Surinam*, 175–176.

In contrast, this period did have repercussions for the free non-white population. First, this is a matter of figures. The proportion of the “free coloreds” in the total population of Curaçao doubled between 1789 and 1816. There are no similar figures available for Suriname, but as the share of the total free population tripled between 1774 and 1813, we may well assume that the proportion of non-white free segment increased considerably as well. Thus in both cases, the absolute number of free non-whites increased while the overall population contracted.⁵⁵ We might assume that the growth of this group opened avenues for upward social mobility for at least some of its members, particularly in the economic sphere, even if the color line would remain divisive well into the nineteenth century and indeed beyond.

Curaçao stands apart from the other Dutch colonies as to the importance of its free non-white population. Long before French revolutionary ideas about equality landed in the Caribbean, whites on the island had worried about what they perceived as the unacceptable arrogance of the free non-white population, a concern no doubt fed by the growing numbers of this segment. Manumission rates were high, resulting in a large non-white, predominantly Catholic, free population mainly living in Willemstad. By 1740 two-thirds of all mariners in town were non-whites. Most were poor, but Governor Rodier reported in 1769 that some 100 out of this group owned one or two slaves. In the later eighteenth century, while their numbers kept growing, white complaints were voiced about the group’s supposed arrogance, more taxes were levied, and discriminatory legislation enforced.⁵⁶ A 1789 report on the Dutch West Indian colonies argued that the non-white population of Curaçao had a reputation for being recalcitrant. Three decades later, another visitor observed that in comparison to Suriname, whites treated the free colored population with considerable more “denigration” – one is tempted to assume that this reflected a longing to create distance from a group that was constantly growing in size and clout.⁵⁷

55 Curaçao: 3714 (17.6 percent) in 1789 to 4549 (32.3 percent) in 1816. Suriname: from 2671 (17.6 percent) in 1789 to 6104 (12.2 percent) in 1816. See Hanneke Lommerse, “Population Figures,” in *Dutch Colonialism, Migration and Cultural Heritage*, ed. Gert Oostindie (Leiden: KITLV, 2008), 315–342, 326, 331–332.

56 Han Jordaan, *Slavernij en vrijheid op Curaçao: de dynamiek van een achttiende-eeuws Atlantisch handelsknooppunt* (unpublished PhD diss., University of Leiden, 2011), *passim*, Klooster, “Subordinate but Proud,” 286–290, 295.

57 Commissioners W.A. Grovestins and W.C. Boeij (1789) and Reverend G.B. Bosch, cited in Gert Oostindie, *Paradise Overseas: The Dutch Caribbean – Colonialism and Its Transatlantic Legacies* (Warwick: Warwick University Press, 2006), 38–39.

So on Curaçao there was indeed considerable non-white population agency and consequently serious white concern. There is no doubt that revolutionary news spread fast to the entire population precisely because of the mobility of the free blacks and "coloreds" in the wider region. But this did not imply that there was a concerted effort by the entire non-white population, whether free or enslaved, for regime change and the ending of slavery. On the contrary, non-white militias were instrumental in suppressing both the 1750 and 1795 slave revolts and in the turbulent 1796–1800 years; again, there was no consistent solidarity among the non-white population.⁵⁸

This brings us to the conclusion that for the Dutch Atlantic colonies, apart from the loss of the "lesser" Guianas, the only crucial and lasting change was the abolition of the slave trade, imposed by the British who emerged dominant from this entire period. There has been much discussion about the role the Haitian Revolution and slave resistance more generally played in the trajectory leading up to the abolition of the trade, and next, of slavery itself. Whatever the conclusions one would want to draw from this general debate, there is no indication that events in the Dutch Atlantic speeded up this process. Nowhere within the Dutch Atlantic did local elites vie for an end to the slave trade or slavery itself. The one major revolt (Curaçao, 1795) had no impact on debates on colonialism or slavery in the Netherlands, where abolitionism was – perhaps surprisingly⁵⁹ – absent or at best weak. In the end, and much to the chagrin of the Dutch West Indian interest on both sides of the Atlantic, Britain simply extended the abolition to the occupied Dutch colonies after debates on the ending of the British trade in which Dutch concerns had not figured.

Indirectly, abolition did have a bearing on the social and cultural development of the Dutch colonies and their majorities of African descent. The ending of the slave trade implied not only that the process of demographic and hence cultural creolization sped up, but equally that the bargaining power of the enslaved population increased. In Suriname, this involved state-controlled amelioration policies as well the admission of Christian missionaries to the plantations, where slave owners, unlike their counterparts in the Antilles, had long thought of Christianization as pearls before swine and potentially

58 Jordaen, *Slavernij en vrijheid*, 278–279, 260–261; Klooster, "Subordinate but Proud," 294; Oostindie, "Slave Resistance," 15–18.

59 Seymour Drescher, "The long good-bye: Dutch capitalism and antislavery in comparative perspective," in *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion*, ed. Robert Paquette and Stanley Engerman (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1996), 345–367.

disruptive for the slavery regime.⁶⁰ As the link to Africa was definitely severed, oral traditions maintained spiritual links across the Atlantic, but culture-building became even more a locally and regionally rooted process than it had been before.⁶¹

Contraction in Revolutionary Times

For the Dutch Atlantic, the period roughly spanning from the outbreak of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War to the end of the Napoleonic Wars came down to over three decades of economic and political contraction, without regime change and with only subtle, long-range cultural change sparked by the externally imposed abolition of the slave trade. The revisionist argument of this book is that the significance of the Dutch Atlantic to the early modern wider Atlantic has been systematically underestimated in the historiography of the past decades. But we can only conclude that the Age of Revolutions did ring the death knell for the Dutch Atlantic, both as an imperial entity with economic significance for the metropolis and as a web of serious entanglement with the wider tricontinental Atlantic.

The explanation of this decline is simple. If, economically, the Dutch Atlantic had been an asset to the metropolis, this was to a large extent because the Republic, by scale and military and naval power no match for the major Atlantic players, had used its neutrality to build a niche as a broker greasing the prevalent system of mercantilism. The years from 1780 to 1815 taught the Dutch that a weak state's neutrality lasts only as long as larger states condone it. Post-1815, in the emerging post-mercantile Atlantic, there was no longer a need for trade zones such as Curaçao or Statia at all, and no need for illicit connections at the margins of mercantilism, so the very issue of neutrality became insignificant. After the loss of the lesser Guianas, this left the Dutch with only Suriname as a potential asset, but this colony had declining comparative advantages in a quickly globalizing market for plantation produce.

On closer inspection, the Dutch role as an Atlantic broker operating from a range of regional hubs was already undermined in the previous period.

60 Oostindie, *Roosenburg*, 137–138, 188–192 and *Paradise Overseas*, 31–35, Van Stipriaan, *Surinaams contrast*, 369–407.

61 For a broader perspective on culture-making in the “Black Atlantic,” see Sidney Wilfred Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976); and John Thornton, *A Cultural History of the Atlantic World, 1250–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Merchant ships outfitted in the North American colonies were increasingly active in the trade with the Caribbean, to the extent that as early as 1713 a merchant commenting on American trade to the French islands had remarked that the Americans were taking over a role hitherto played by the Dutch.⁶² That observation may have been premature, but indeed North American shipping was on the rise and had even become crucial to the Guianas in the same period. After the American Revolution the nation's mercantile expansion in the Caribbean accelerated. Throughout the eighteenth century, British and British West Indian investments, shipping and migrations had an increasing impact as well, culminating in the takeover of what was to become British Guiana.

In this context of decreasing significance in the Atlantic, what changes did the major Dutch actors aspire to, whether in the metropolis or in the colonies? The imperfect monopolies of the West Indian companies were challenged and broken, eventually giving way to direct state control of colonial affairs. The colonial elites had no interest in anything more radical, surely not in independence and not even in a concerted effort to ensure political representation. Much less was there an abolitionist drive, on either side of the Atlantic. Colonials in the Dutch orbit were hardly inspired by the American, French or Latin American Revolutions and positively abhorred the far more radical Haitian Revolution.

So the changes that really mattered – abolition, geographical contraction, loss of broker function – were all externally imposed and grudgingly taken for granted in the Netherlands and among the local elites in the colonies. Slavery remained the key institution in the Dutch Atlantic and all considerations of those in charge departed from their concern about a social order constantly tested by the enslaved. The enslaved population had not been a direct party in the changes taking place between 1780 and 1815, but was at least entering the final, post-abolition phase of slavery, a period of intense creolization. The intermediate group of free men and women of (partly) African origins gained considerably in numbers in the period since 1780, and at least in Curaçao developed a political presence to be reckoned with. But ultimately the gradual and unfinished emancipation of the non-white majorities under the Kingdom of the Netherlands would be accomplished in the context of progressive marginalization of the Dutch Atlantic colonies.

62 Quoted in Christian Koot, "Anglo-Dutch Trade," in this volume.