CHAPTER 2

Non-Sovereign Caribbean Territories that Belong to Britain, France, the Netherlands, or the United States

After a period of colonisation by different European powers, decolonisation in the Caribbean officially began with the 1791 Haitian Revolution. Sovereignty was subsequently secured by the Dominican Republic (1844) and Cuba (1902), quite late by Latin American standards, but the rest of the region remained dependent on traditional metropolitan powers until late into the twentieth century and in some cases to this day. Colonies also frequently changed hands in the colonial era, which had an impact on feelings of national identity in the Caribbean. Higman gives the example of the British capture of Trinidad from the Spanish in 1797, which ‘spread a layer of British imperial rule and culture over an existing Catholic, French, and Spanish ruling population, creating cross-cutting levels of national identity and language’. This history is described in a fascinating way in V.S. Naipaul’s *The Loss of Eldorado*. Continuing along similar lines, and against the background of the Caribbean islands’ gradual conversion from settler colonies to exploitation colonies in the seventeenth century, Knight points out that imperial divisions were of minor significance – ‘a fact illustrated by the facility with which territories moved into and out of rival imperial administrative controls’.

The non-sovereign Caribbean territories that currently belong to either Britain, France, the Netherlands, or the United States are the object of analysis in this chapter. They will not be addressed individually in the country analyses since, by belonging to one of these four nation-states, they do not have their own citizenship legislation. The non-sovereign Caribbean territories in fact outnumber the sovereign ones, but their size and population are admittedly much smaller. Although independence was achieved in the 1960s and 70s by

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1 Abbreviated references in this section link to the separate bibliography listed at the end.
2 G. Oostindie and I. Klinkers, *Decolonising the Caribbean. Dutch Policies in a Comparative Perspective* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 9. While the book adopts a Dutch perspective on the Caribbean, it also contains concise analyses of the role of Britain, France and the United States in the region.
5 F.W. Knight, *The Caribbean*, 54.
the currently independent islands, resulting in eighty-five percent of the Caribbean people currently living in independent countries, Gert Oostindie and Inge Klinkers point out that this came at a high price.6

In general terms, standards of living in the non-sovereign Caribbean are significantly higher than they are in the independent countries. Furthermore, in a region that has witnessed many dictatorial regimes and territorial disputes, and which now faces the contemporary challenges of international crime, the remaining non-sovereign territories still continue to enjoy a higher degree of security and stability.7

Each of the metropolitan countries adopted a different approach to decolonisation. Britain’s aim from the very beginning was the full transfer of sovereignty to the newly independent states, a process that started in the 1960s. However, since this process came to a halt in the 1980s, a considerable number of scattered British overseas territories remain part of Britain to this day. The United States arrived as a new player in the region around the turn of the twentieth century, permanently incorporating Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands for geopolitical reasons relating to the Cold War, and temporarily occupying Cuba,8 Haiti,9 and the Dominican Republic.10 France hung on to its colonies, even though they were of little economic value, to retain its role in international politics as well as to preserve some its grandeur. The Netherlands, finally, saw Surinam become independent in 1975 but kept its overseas possessions in the Caribbean, be it under all kinds of different political arrangements.

While Britain had the greatest number of colonies in the Caribbean, the islands of the British West Indies (also called the Commonwealth Caribbean) were all relatively small.11 As a result, only a quarter of the Caribbean

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6 The authors refer to a total population of thirty-seven million people. According to Higman, this had increased to forty-two million in 2010.
7 G. Oostindie and I. Klinkers, Decolonising the Caribbean, 9.
8 Spain ceded Cuba to the United States after its defeat in the Spanish-American war of 1898, and the island subsequently became a U.S. protectorate for a while, with U.S. marines occupying the island until 1922. See B.W. Higman, A Concise History of the Caribbean, 201.
9 Ibid., 206. Revolt and governmental instability led to U.S. occupation of the island from 1915 until 1934.
10 Ibid., 204. The Dominican Republic’s serious debts made the United States occupy the country from 1916 to 1924. On U.S. imperialism in the Western Hemisphere, see E. Williamson, The Penguin History of Latin America, 322 ff.
11 For historical remarks on the British West Indies, see F.W. Knight, The Caribbean, chapter 10.