In 1779, shortly before his death, the Frisian nobleman, discredited politician and well known poet Onno Zwier van Haren decided that the occasion of the bicentennial of the 1579 Union of Utrecht presented him with a unique opportunity to put his mature thoughts on the state of the nation to paper. He did this in the form of a lengthy address to those who would have to take the country into its third century: the youth of The Netherlands. Van Haren’s message to the young men and women of the late eighteenth-century Dutch Republic was rather a bleak one. The manners and morals of the inhabitants of the Republic, he told his audience, were nothing less than disgusting. The country had sunk into luxury, sloth and ignorance and the integrity, good faith and love of the fatherland that had once made the nation great were almost completely extinguished. Such complaints by old men are, of course, familiar to all of us and can be heard through the ages. Yet Van Haren’s admonitions were much more than a vague and unspecified lament about general decline. For he continued to explain with great exactitude both when Dutch manners and morals had reached their apogee and when and how things had subsequently gone wrong. It was in the second and third quarter of the seventeenth century that the golden age (het gulden tijdperk) of Dutch national manners, morals and religion could be located. These were the decades in which, after
the miseries and violence of the Revolt, diligence and industriousness created an unprecedented prosperity, without however corrupting pure manners and morals. For as Jacob Cats, whom Van Haren obviously considered to be a reliable witness to the nature of seventeenth-century Dutch life, had shown, the potentially dangerous effects of rising wealth were kept in check by a life-style of sobriety and simplicity, by a considerable measure of social equality, and by a shared culture of the love of freedom and of the fatherland. These were the days in which the great Admiral De Ruyter, after a bloody sea battle lasting three days and ending in a glorious victory, could be seen feeding his own chicken and cleaning his own ship. These were also the days in which Johan de Witt, equal in political power to the mightiest kings of Europe, could make do, both at home and in his public appearances, with no more than one servant. It was during the last quarter of the seventeenth century that things started to take a turn for the worse. The Dutch, apparently unaware of their own true greatness, suddenly and unthinkingly began to adopt foreign manners and morals. Simplicity and sincerity were first undermined by the introduction of French politesse, brought into the country by the numerous Huguenot refugees from Louis XIV’s religious persecutions. This shift in values was then further reinforced by the presence of the luxurious and aristocratic international court of the stadholder-king William III. Taken together, so Van Haren assured his readers, these developments spelled the end of the golden age of pure Dutch manners and morals, fatally undermined “the love for the virtues of our ancestors” and thereby paved the way for the general decline of the Dutch Republic during the eighteenth century.

Two years after Van Haren’s pessimistic assessment of Dutch eighteenth-century manners and morals as compared to those of the glorious seventeenth-century golden age, the enlightened historian, civil servant and Patriot politician Cornelis Zillesen started publishing the six volumes of his monumental Inquiry into the Causes of the Rise, Decline and Regeneration of the Most Important Ancient and Modern Peoples. Despite its ambitious title, the work was actually largely devoted to a discus-

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5 Van Vloten, Leven en werken van W. en O.Z. van Haren, 513.
6 Ibidem, 515–516.
7 Very little has been written about Zillesen, but see Elias, Historiographie der Bataafse Republiek, 58–69 and Eco O.G. Haitsma Mulier, “Between Humanism and Enlight-