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 U.S in the Americas – while simultaneously, this entire period served to broaden the divide between “the West and the rest.”

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. This Atlantic success started to crumble with the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War in the early 1780s. As this chapter will argue,

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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-monarchical 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