

‘Oh Dutchmen, Defer this Catastrophe’

The Haitian Revolution and the Decline of Abolitionism in the Netherlands, ca. 1790-1840

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‘Oh Dutchmen, defer this catastrophe’ wrote a former Dutch plantation owner commenting on the temporary abolition of slavery in the French empire in 1794. It seems that his advice was heeded, as it took close to 70 more years to abolish Dutch slavery. Strangely, however, the successful defence of slavery does not feature prominently in the historiographical debate over the late abolition of Dutch slavery. This article ventures to explore the ideological defence of slavery in the Dutch Republic around the turn of the eighteenth century, and how it was connected to Atlantic debates on race, slavery and civilisation in the wake of the Haitian revolution (1790-1804). By studying historical publications I show that the Dutch interpretation of the Haitian Revolution came about through translated works. These works almost exclusively supported a racial conservative interpretation of Haiti. The revolt even became an important point of reference in Dutch political circles. These findings offer a new perspective on the decline of principled abolitionism in the Netherlands from the late eighteenth century until the 1840s.

‘Ô Nederlanders, schort dit onheil op’ schreef een voormalige Nederlandse plantage-eigenaar over de tijdelijke afschaffing van de slavernij in het Franse rijk in 1794. Het lijkt erop dat zijn advies werd gevolgd, want het duurde nog bijna 70 jaar voordat de Nederlandse slavernij werd afgeschaft. Het is opvallend dat de succesvolle verdediging van de slavernij nauwelijks een onderwerp van historiografisch debat is geweest, ook niet in de discussies over de late afschaffing van de Nederlandse slavernij. Dit artikel onderzoekt de ideologische verdediging van slavernij in de Nederlandse Republiek rond de eeuwwisseling, en hoe deze

verbonden was met Atlantische debatten over ras, slavernij en beschaving in de nasleep van de Haïtiaanse revolutie (1790-1804). Door onderzoek te doen naar historische publicaties toon ik dat de Nederlandse interpretatie van de Haïtiaanse revolutie vooral tot stand kwam via vertaalde werken. En deze werken gaven vrijwel uitsluitend voeding aan een raciaal conservatieve interpretatie van Haïti. De opstand werd zelfs een belangrijk referentiepunt in Nederlandse politieke kringen. Deze bevindingen bieden een nieuw perspectief op de neergang van principieel abolitionisme in Nederland van de late achttiende eeuw tot de jaren 1840.

A late abolition without ideological pro-slavery?

In 1797 Dutch publisher Jan van Geuns commented that publishing an anti-slavery tract was in fact ‘superfluous and wholly unnecessary’, as public opinion was already fully opposed to slavery.¹ This situation did not lead to abolition. As Dutch historians have noted, the possibility of abolition passed after the constitutional debate of 1797. In public discourse, abolitionism only resurfaced in the 1830s.² Pepijn Brandon argues that abolitionist rhetoric was grudgingly accepted by those defending slavery, while their policy proposals postponed actual abolition far into the future.³ This does raise the question why it became acceptable across the political spectrum to endlessly postpone the end of slavery, while at the same time the consensus was that it would have to end sooner or later. The ideological contours of the decline of abolitionism have not yet been fully explored. By studying newspapers, books and book reviews discussing or referencing the Haitian revolution between 1790 and 1840, I will argue here that the Dutch debate on slavery and its abolition became caught up in a very particular understanding of the Haitian revolution (1790-1804). This had consequences beyond the immediate question of abolition, as it contributed to the transformation of the understandings of race and the legitimacy of progressive politics in the Netherlands.

My argument starts from the remarks by other researchers, such as Bert Paasman, who stated that the events in Saint-Domingue from 1791 until

- 1 Willem de Vos and Jan van Geuns, *Philalethes Eleutherus over den slaaven-stand* (Leiden: D. du Mortier en Zoon, 1797) II.
- 2 Johanna Maria van Winter, ‘De openbare mening in Nederland over de afschaffing der slavernij’, *NWIG* 34:1 (1952) 65. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134360-90000111>; Maarten Kuitenbrouwer, ‘De Nederlandse afschaffing van de slavernij in vergelijkend perspectief’, *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 93:1 (1978) 69-100.

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.2018;Maartje Janse, *De afschaffers: publieke opinie, organisatie en politiek in Nederland 1840-1880* \(Wereldbibliotheek 2007\) 74.](https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.2018;Maartje%20Janse,%20De%20afschaffers:%20publieke%20opinie,%20organisatie%20en%20politiek%20in%20Nederland%201840-1880%20(Wereldbibliotheek%202007)%2074.)

- 3 Pepijn Brandon, ‘“Shrewd Sirens of Humanity”: the changing shape of pro-slavery arguments in the Netherlands (1789-1814)’, *Almanack* 14 (2016) 3-26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/2236-463320161402>.

1804 became an argument for anti-abolitionism in the Netherlands.⁴ Also, Marietje van Winter, in her study of Dutch public opinion on the question of slavery, suggested that ‘the memory of such revolutionary atrocities [in Saint-Domingue] would have an inhibiting effect’ on abolitionism.⁵ My impression is that the implications go further than that. As René Koekkoek has shown, the slave revolt in Haiti was the main point of reference for both the Dutch Patriot movement and Orangist defenders of the stadholderate in their discussions about colonial policy and slavery.⁶ As I will show here, the slave revolt kept this position in the minds of Dutch intellectuals and policy makers for a long time after the end of the revolution. Given these findings we have to change our understanding of the transformation that occurred in the late eighteenth century when the initial broad intellectual support for abolitionism turned into virtually none during the first decades of the nineteenth century.

Historians have often emphasised continuity in the thinking about slavery and race, and given primacy to economic arguments for the shifts in the Dutch political support for the institution of slavery. Surinamese historian Jozef Siwipersad wrote in his comprehensive analysis of the Dutch abolition of slavery that the arguments of the defenders of slavery were primarily ‘the rigid Calvinism of the seventeenth century’.⁷ He credited the influence of economic interest groups with delaying the end of slavery. Such explanations did not consider the declining economic importance of Atlantic slavery in the nineteenth century. Gert Oostindie therefore argued that by the nineteenth century it was no longer economic importance that hindered abolition, but that in fact the limited economic importance of the slave-based colonies in the Atlantic led to colonial neglect and lack of interest.⁸ While this might

4 Bert Paasman, *Reinhart: Nederlandse literatuur en slavernij ten tijde van de Verlichting* (Nijhoff 1984) 179. The island with the indigenous name Ayti was named Hispaniola by Columbus. The Spanish established the colony of Santo Domingo on the island. The French conquests on the western part of the island were recognised as a colony after the peace of Rijswijk and given the name Saint-Domingue. In the eighteenth century the Dutch were in the habit of calling both the Spanish and the French colonies Santo Domingo. In this article I will use the French name for the French colony to avoid confusion with Spanish Santo Domingo. After independence, the new rulers called their country Hayti, a spelling that also became common in the Netherlands. Nowadays, however, the usual spelling is ‘Haïti’. Finally, in this article, the term ‘Haitian revolution’ refers to the entire

process from Vincent Ogé’s uprising in 1790 to the declaration of independence by Jean-Jacques Dessalines in 1804.

5 Van Winter, ‘De openbare mening’, 65.

6 René Koekkoek, ‘Envisioning the Dutch Imperial Nation-State in the Age of Revolutions’, in: René Koekkoek, Anne-Isabelle Richard and Arthur Weststeijn (eds.), *The Dutch Empire between Ideas and Practice, 1600-2000*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series (Springer International Publishing 2019) 143. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27516-7_7.

7 Jozef Siwipersad, *De Nederlandse regering en de afschaffing van de Surinaamse slavernij (1833-1863)* (Groningen 1979) 218-219.

8 Gert Oostindie, ‘Explaining Dutch Abolition’, in: Gert Oostindie (ed.), *Fifty Years Later: Antislavery, Capitalism and Modernity in the Dutch*

indeed be the case for the later decades of the nineteenth century, the long ebb of abolitionism had set in long before the prospects of the plantation sector in the Atlantic had declined. Both lines of argumentation, emphasising economic importance or its opposite, seem to skip over the wider racial worldview that informed decision-making in Dutch politics.

As I have discussed elsewhere, a general discomfort about the overseas practice of slavery can be observed throughout the early modern era. Principled anti-slavery (defined as a critique of ownership rather than a critique of the condition of the enslaved) can be found throughout the period. Racial rationalisations for slavery came as a direct response to the paradox of being opposed to slavery in the Netherlands while practising it overseas.⁹ Changes in the ideas about racial slavery did not occur in isolation, but were always connected to processes in neighbouring societies.

Historians outside of the Netherlands, too, have long thought that obvious economic interest drove out principled critiques, but they are revising this view. Research into the history of (anti-)abolition in the United States – a country that in the 1830s saw the emergence of one of the most outspoken pro-slavery movements in history – shows that the pro-slavery camp was not just defending the economic interests of the plantation owners, but actually defended a specific worldview and society.¹⁰ Studies on the defence of slavery in France, the United States and Great Britain have increasingly focused on how the defenders of slavery incorporated the issue into a broad and modern view of society.¹¹ Following the debate abroad, we could argue that the context is not only one of colonial ideology, but the whole of political philosophy at the time.

Orbit (University of Pittsburgh Press 1995) 1-23; Seymour Drescher, 'The Long Goodbye: Dutch Capitalism and Antislavery in Comparative Perspective', *The American Historical Review* 99:1 (1994) 44. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2166162>.

9 Karwan Fatah-Black, *Slavernij en beschaving: geschiedenis van een paradox* (Ambo|Anthos 2021) 89-109.

10 Matthew Karp, *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* (Harvard University Press 2016) 153; Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860* (Louisiana State University Press 1981).

11 Christopher L. Miller, *French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and culture of the slave trade* (Duke University Press 2008); David Richardson, *Principles and Agents: The British Slave Trade and*

its Abolition (Yale University Press 2022); Paula E. Dumas, *Proslavery Britain: Fighting for Slavery in an Era of Abolition* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016); Alfred L. Brophy, *University, Court, and Slave: Pro-Slavery Thought in Southern Colleges and Courts, and the Coming of Civil War* (Oxford University Press 2016); Michael Sugrue, 'South Carolina College and the Origins of Secession', *Slavery & Abolition* 39:2 (2018) 280-289. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2018.1446809>; Jody L. Allen, 'Thomas Dew and the Rise of Proslavery Ideology at William & Mary', *Slavery & Abolition* 39:2 (2018) 267-279. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2018.1446783>; Lolita Buckner Inniss, "'A Southern College Slipped from Its Geographical Moorings': Slavery at Princeton", *Slavery & Abolition* 39:2 (2018) 236-250. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2018.1446785>.

Internationally, historians argue that the Haitian revolution (1790-1804) was of great significance for Western attitudes to slavery.¹² While it hastened the abolition of the slave *trade*, it complicated the ending of slavery itself. The revolt led to growing security concerns and doubts about the viability of mass enslavement in the colonies. At the same time, the revolt led to a decrease in (white) abolitionism in Great Britain. The explanation of how the abolition of slavery became effective in the British Empire hinges on the way in which the abolitionist movements overcame the white colonial fear of a second Haiti. In the British Empire the Demerara Revolt (1823) and Sam Sharpe's Christmas uprising on Jamaica (1832) were important catalysts for abolition in the British case.¹³ In the Netherlands, however, the spectre of Haiti seems to have haunted public opinion for longer than most other slave-holding empires.

To explain the Dutch ebb in fundamental critiques of colonial slavery, it is important to consider the broader political and philosophical context of the late eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth century. Dutch public opinion on the issue of enslavement cannot be reduced to its economic importance alone, but was malleable, changeable and deeply connected to visions on the place of the Dutch nation in world history. As outlined in the introduction to this special issue, thinking about slavery became caught up in a much larger constellation about ideas regarding race, slavery and civilisation.¹⁴ The late eighteenth century – especially between 1787 and 1795 – saw clashes between supporters of the ideals of the French and American revolutions and their enlightened conservative opponents become sharper.¹⁵ Late-eighteenth-century Dutch conservatives such as the powerful political figure Laurens van de Spiegel, historian Adriaan Kluit and the influential polemicist Elie Luzac felt the need to become more emphatic about the importance of civil law and social hierarchy, countering the revolutionaries who argued that natural law should be applied in a way that would lead to general equality.

One would expect that the outbreak of the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue and the tumultuous way in which it catapulted its generals such as George Biassou, Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines into the intellectual public sphere in the Western world would lead to a polarised appreciation of the merits of the revolt and its leaders (see Figure 1). This, however, does not seem to be the case in the Netherlands. The place of Haiti

12 David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Cornell University Press 1975); Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge University Press 2009); João Pedro Marques, Seymour Drescher and Piet Emmer, *Who Abolished Slavery? Slave Revolts and Abolitionism: A Debate with João Pedro Marques* (Berghahn Books 2010).

13 Drescher, *Abolition*, 256-265.

14 Angelie Sens, 'Mensaaap, heiden, slaaf': *Nederlandse visies op de wereld rond 1800* (SDU 2001) XII.

15 Wyger Velema, 'Enlightenment against Revolution: The Genesis of Dutch Conservatism', in: Matthijs Lok, Friedemann Pestel and Juliette Reboul (eds.), *Cosmopolitan Conservatism* (Brill 2021) 114.

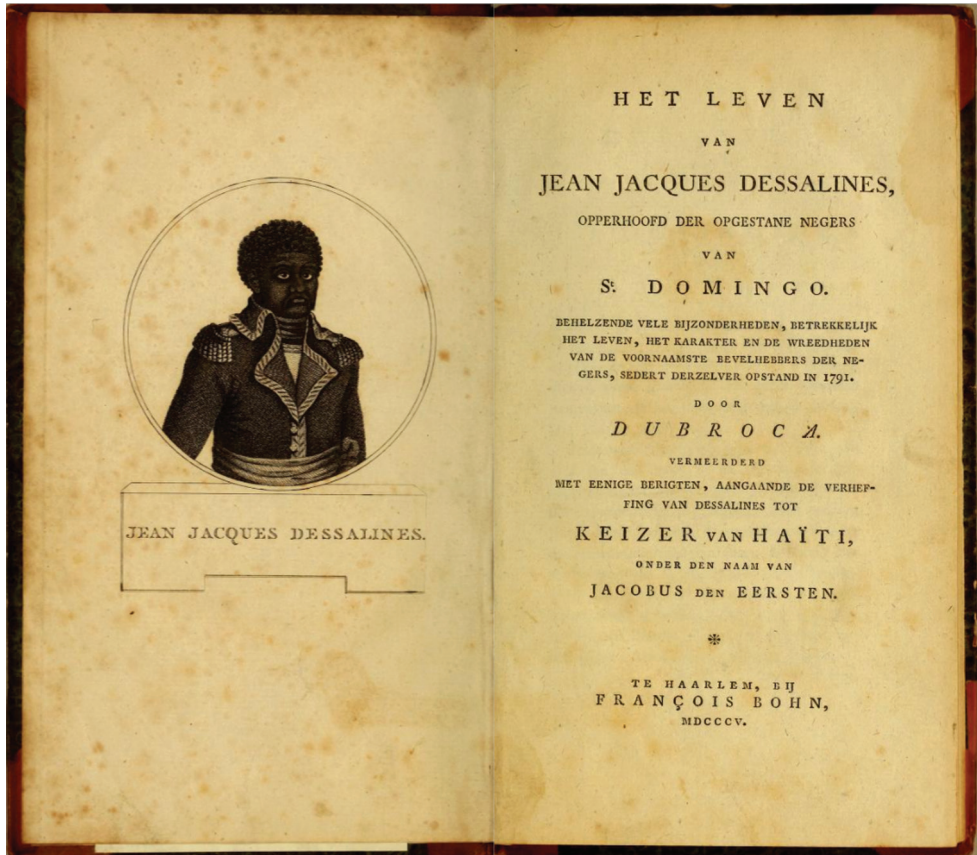


Figure 1. The leaders of the Haitian Revolution figured in several biographies in Europe. French author Jean-Louis Dubroca's staunchly conservative and racist characterisations of Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines were translated and published in accessible editions. Title page of Dubroca's, *Het leven van Jean Jacques Dessalines, opperhoofd der opgestane negers van St. Domingo* (Haarlem: François Bohn, 1805).

in Dutch gradualist (anti-)abolitionism appears analogous to the observation that ‘Conservatism arose not against the Enlightenment but within it.’¹⁶ We might say that a new defence of slavery arose within abolitionism, and did so by way of the Haitian revolution. While around the Atlantic, a conservative racial Enlightenment was pitted against, what Marlene Daut has termed, ‘Black Atlantic Humanism’, there appears to have been a lot of the first and very little of the second in the Dutch public sphere.¹⁷

The Dutch colonial knowledge landscape

This paragraph seeks to demonstrate the cross-imperial circulation and formation of ideas about race and colonial slavery, and the place of pre-revolutionary Saint-Domingue within this. In the Atlantic world, understandings of the legitimacy and practice of colonial enslavement circulated across imperial boundaries. When arguing in defence of Surinamese slave owners, the Surinamese plantation owner F.G.A. du Chêne offered a quote from a book about Saint-Domingue.¹⁸ Similarly, in the 1780s, the Dutch politician Willem Carel Hendrik baron van Lynden van Blitterswijk drafted a plea for support for the Dutch slave trade, his arguments were similar to those in the simultaneously published *Mémoire sur l’esclavage des nègres* by Pierre-Victor Malouet in 1788.¹⁹ When Van Lynden van Blitterswijk in 1814, a quarter of a century later, expressed his distaste for the Dutch abolition of the slave trade, he quoted the same French colonial administrator, plantation owner and politician again.²⁰

Malouet first drafted his 1788 argument in defence of slavery in response to the work of the anti-slavery philosopher Nicolas de Condorcet,

16 Jerry Z. Muller, ‘Introduction: What Is Conservative Social and Political Thought?’, in: Jerry Z. Muller (ed.), *Conservatism. An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present* (Princeton University Press 1997) 3-31, cited by Velema, ‘Enlightenment against Revolution’, 110.

17 Marlene Daut, *Baron de Vastey and the origins of Black Atlantic Humanism* (Palgrave MacMillan 2017) xviii.

18 F.G.A. du Chêne, ‘Eenige aanmerkingen op de bekroonde prijsverhandeling van den heere J. Haafner over de zendelingschap’, *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen 1808* (Amsterdam 1808) 290-295.

19 Pierre-Victor baron Malouet, *Mémoire sur l’esclavage des nègres: dans lequel on discute les*

motifs proposés pour leur affranchissement, ceux qui s’y opposent, & les moyens praticables pour améliorer leur sort (Neufchâtel 1788).

20 Karwan Fatah-Black, Lauren Lauret and Joris van Tol, *Serving the chain: De Nederlandsche Bank and the last decades of slavery, 1814-1863* (Leiden University Press 2023) 36-38. See NL-HaNA, 2.02.01, Staatssecretarie [State Secretariat], inv. no. 6555: “Brieven aan en consideraties en aantekeningen van W.C.H. baron van Lijnden van Blitterswijk, lid der Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal betreffende slavenhandel, 1787-1815” [Letters to and reflections and notes by Baron W. C. H. van Lijnden van Blitterswijk, member of the Senate of the States General, concerning the slave trade, 1787-1815], 1, cover.

and it was based on his experiences in Saint-Domingue, Cayenne and Suriname.²¹ Malouet had visited Suriname to discuss the refugee crisis that ensued after Dutch forces routed the Boni maroons (also known as Aluku) and forced refugees to move to Cayenne. During his visit, Malouet travelled to plantations and devised a programme to reform slavery. After the uprising on Saint-Domingue and the subsequent temporary abolition of slavery in 1793, he unfolded his plans in the *Collection de mémoires et correspondances officielles sur l'administration des colonies: et notamment sur la Guiane française et hollandaise* of 1802.²² To people such as Van Lynden and Malouet, the knowledge about plantation slavery in Saint-Domingue, Jamaica and Suriname was considered interchangeable, even if they would sometimes take jabs at each other for being brutal in their management of enslaved people. These examples illustrate a feature of the Dutch public debate about colonial policy.

In the Dutch colonial knowledge landscape, the French colony Saint-Domingue already held a prominent place long before the eyes of the world turned to the uprising and revolution.²³ In the second half of the eighteenth century, newspapers catered especially to the interests of the business community. On 8 April 1769, the *Rotterdamse Courant* wrote that ‘conflicting tidings from Saint-Domingue are causing much concern for those interested in the colony; for it seems that there is always a fermentation, of which nothing good can be expected’.²⁴ The recall of a French governor received attention in the Dutch newspapers as well, which was unusual for non-Dutch colonies as it could be considered of minor importance for the business community and those interested in international political developments.

The level of detail in the articles about Saint-Domingue is noteworthy. For example, after an earthquake in 1770, the damage was listed, and it was reported that ‘the harvest will not be delayed for more than a month,

21 Matilde Cazzola and Lorenzo Ravano, ‘Plantation Society in the Age of Revolution: Edward Long, Pierre-Victor Malouet and the Problem of Slave Government’, *Slavery & Abolition* 41:2 (2020) 234-255. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2019.1615270>.

22 Pierre-Victor baron Malouet, *Collection de mémoires et correspondances officielles sur l'administration des colonies: et notamment sur la Guiane française et hollandaise* (Paris: Baudouin, 1802).

23 Publications in the leading newspapers the *Rotterdamse Courant* and the *Leydse Courant* between 1 January 1764 and 31 December 1789 offer an idea of the attention that Saint-Domingue received before the outbreak of

the revolt. However, it is necessary to make a qualifying remark about the nature of the articles. The majority of the articles mentioning the colony are shipping announcements. Only a part of them are also about politics, such as the appointment of a new governor, troop movements and resistance to tax measures. The frequent earthquakes and hurricanes also received specific discussion.

24 ‘De tegen elkander aanlopende tijdingen die men van St. Domingo heeft, verwekken voor de bij de kolonie geïnteresseerde personen zeer veel ongerustheid; want het schijnt dat er altijd eene gisting is, waar van niet als kwade gevolgen verwacht worden.’ *Rotterdamse Courant*, 8 April 1769.

and ship owners do not have to postpone their intended shipments'.²⁵ The fact that at Petite Guave 'fire spewed from a mountain' was no cause for concern either; according to the report, the river that supplied twenty plantations with water might have been blocked, but 'it is hoped that a means will be found to restore its course'.²⁶ A hurricane also made it into the Dutch newspaper, accompanied by an inventory of the sugar cane destroyed and the number of sugar mills damaged.²⁷ According to the newspaper, the fact that the hurricane also stranded a large number of ships would affect the prices of cotton and indigo.²⁸ Given the particular and extensive coverage of the French colony in the Dutch newspapers, it is no surprise that alleged conspiracies and slave uprisings on the island also received prominent coverage in the Netherlands.²⁹ News about natural disasters, political developments and slave rebellions drew attention because of their possible repercussions for newspaper readers with business interests in the plantation economy or the trade in plantation products (see Table 1).³⁰

	Suriname	Saint-Domingue	Puerto Rico	Curaçao	Jamaica	Guadeloupe
Articles	493	240	15	245	166	40
Advertisements	843	566	519	210	32	2
Total	1.336	806	534	455	198	42

Table 1. Frequency of articles and advertisements in the *Leydse Courant* referring to major colonies in the Caribbean from 1764 to 1789. Source: Digitised editions of the *Leydse Courant* on Delpher.nl.

Not only newspapers showed an unusual interest in the non-Dutch colony of Saint-Domingue; books and periodicals dedicated to the French empire were also read both in their original language and in Dutch.³¹ French public historian and philosopher Abbé Raynal's *Histoire philosophique et politique. Des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (1770) appeared in Dutch and praised the French in Saint-

25 *Ibid.*, 9 August 1770.

26 *Ibid.*, 9 August 1770.

27 *Ibid.*, 31 October 1772.

28 *Ibid.*, 7 November 1772.

29 *Ibid.*, 2 October 1770.

30 Both the *Leydse Courant* and the *Rotterdamse Courant* were used for the qualitative analysis. However, the *Rotterdamse Courant* could not be used for a frequency analysis in Table 1, because the data from digital searches were incomplete for the period between 1772 and 1784. Search terms used in Delpher were: for Suriname

the spelling 'Surinamen', for Saint-Domingue the search term 'Domingo', for Puerto Rico 'Portorico', for Curaçao 'Curacao', for Jamaica 'Jamaica' and for Guadeloupe 'Guad*loupe'. The Delpher digital search system makes a distinction between articles and advertisements, and this distinction is also used in this study.

31 In the letters about the administration of the colonies Essequibo and Demerary, the *Considérations sur l'état présente de la colonie Française de St. Domingue* was quoted with approval. Paasman, *Reinhart*, 155.

Domingue: ‘Their steps towards progress were like the steps of giants’.³² Understanding the future developments in Saint-Domingue was relevant to a dynamic section of Dutch traders and entrepreneurs, and their hunger for knowledge extended beyond direct information about ship movements and interruptions in production, and also included knowledge of social and political relations.

It is important to note that these publications were not just translations but could also be edited to give them added relevance for Dutch audiences. Slave rebellions in the region were of specific interest to those involved in Atlantic trade, warfare and colonisation. In 1787 an article by de Condorcet about the Makandal rising in Saint-Domingue appeared in the French magazine *Mercure de France*.³³ The revolt had taken place in the late 1750s and had scared the colonists tremendously. It coincided more or less with three other uprisings in the area: in the Tempatie region of Suriname (1757-1760), in Berbice (1763) and on Jamaica (1763). After its publication in the *Mercure*, the piece was reprinted in *L’Esprit de journaux Français* and appeared a year later in the English *Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure*.³⁴ By coincidence or good timing, the piece appeared around the start of the Saint-Domingue revolt in Dutch in 1791 in the *Algemeen magazyn van wetenschap, konst en smaak*.³⁵ The Dutch version of the article was slightly different from the original, as it included a motto by Voltaire and in the penultimate paragraph there was a closing remark that helped the Dutch reader to assess how probable the outbreak of slave revolts in Saint-Domingue still was. The added paragraph shows that the seriousness of the 1791 revolt had not yet been appreciated, or perhaps that the news of the uprising and burning of the plantations of the plains around Le Cap had not yet reached the Netherlands when the journal wrote that ‘such evils [devastating slave revolts] are rarer, but not yet entirely eradicated’.³⁶ News and literature about Saint-Domingue was purposefully edited to make it an integral part of the Dutch knowledge landscape and an important source for the general understanding of the slavery-based colonial system in the Atlantic world.

32 ‘Zyne schreden tot den voorspoed, waren reuzenschreden.’ Guillaume Thomas François Raynal, *Wysgeerige en staatkundige geschiedenis van de bezittingen en den koophandel der Europeaanen, in de beide Indiën v* (Amsterdam: Schalekamp, 1775) 146.

33 M. de Condorcet, ‘Makandal, histoire véritable’, *Mercure de France* (1 September 1787) 102-114.

34 M. de Condorcet, ‘Makandal, histoire véritable’, *L’Esprit de journaux Français* (November 1787) 215-227; *ibid.*, ‘The Negro Makandal, a true history’, *The Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure* (1788) 90-95.

35 *ibid.*, ‘Makandal, a Negro on the Island of St. Domingo. A true history’, *General Magazine of Science, Art and Taste* 5:2 (1791) 614-626.

36 *ibid.*, 626.

For the Dutch newspaper reader of 1789, there was no concept of a French or Haitian revolution yet. The events in France simply coincided with those in its largest colony, and the news about Saint-Domingue appeared usually in the section with the latest news from France. Whether the proclamation of human and civil rights had ushered in discord on the island or whether the failure to crush the rebellion terminally undermined the authority of the French King was not yet a matter for debate. Given the proximity of the British colony Jamaica to Saint-Domingue, news about revolt also arrived from British reporters and commentators. Prominent politician Edmund Burke and plantation owner and author Bryan Edwards had already been confronted with anti-slavery sentiments in the British Empire earlier and were able to respond quickly to Saint Domingue's uprising as an occasion to publicise their vision of the destructive effects of emancipation in general.³⁷ In the Netherlands, Dutch enlightened conservatives received news and interpretations through these French and British connections and were eager to integrate these narratives of the doom and destruction caused by equality and natural law in their pantheon of ideas (see Figure 2).

The Dutch enlightened conservatives had several characteristics that made them particularly receptive to the racial colonial argumentation arriving from British and French thinkers. They lauded commercial society as a progressive and rational alternative to the previous arrangements – including the Romans and Greeks, who were so admired by the revolutionaries. Because they were critical of the violence and force that accompanied earlier societies, they could not easily bring themselves to discuss the force and violence inherent in the commercial system, especially in the case of slave-based colonial commerce.³⁸ The colonial narratives about the Haitian revolution came to fill this awkward gap in their reasoning, as it provided a racial argument to make an exception in the case of the violent enslavement of people of African descent.

The initial response by Dutch enlightened conservatives to the outbreak of the revolt in Saint-Domingue was to oppose, with some asides, the French measures taken towards equality in the French colonies and the abolition of slavery in Saint-Domingue. Already in 1793 the historian Adriaan Kluit discussed the Saint-Domingue uprising in his response to the French declaration of the rights of men.³⁹ Kluit's main claim was that the French reforms were unnecessary in the Dutch Republic because it already had the best combination of civil rights and dynastic stability. He defended Dutch

37 Fatah-Black, *Slavernij en beschaving*, 128-130.

38 Velema, 'Enlightenment against Revolution', 114.

39 Adriaan Kluit, *De rechten van den mensch in Vrankrijk, geen gewaande rechten in Nederland. Of*

betoog, dat die rechten bij het volk van Nederland in volle kracht genoten worden. En iets over onze vrijheid en patriotismus (Amsterdam: Wouter Brave, 1793).

slavery, as opposed to that of the French and others, by stating that Dutch laws had regulated slavery in such a positive way that the enslaved would have no reason to object to the institution.⁴⁰ Faced with article XIX of the French charter (no person may give themselves away or be taken as chattel), Kluit turned more directly to the case of Saint-Domingue. Very similar to the pro-slavery ideologues of the southern United States 40 years later, Kluit argued that there were certainly 'inhumane monsters' among the slave holders, and he did not deny the brutality of the slave trade, but he defended the institution as such. He only wished that 'humanity might think of a way in which it could voice and bring into practice that humanity is not chattel'.⁴¹ When the dust began to settle on the revolt, and conservatives were able to integrate it more fully into their narrative, their opposition to abolition became more refined. At this point we see the pre-revolutionary enlightened conservatism transform into a more grating anti-revolutionary conservatism.

Already in the early stages of the revolt, conservative authors practised racial conflation of legal categories: they saw free and enslaved people of African descent all as undeserving of freedom and equality, and referred to them as if there was no distinction. By not distinguishing between the claims of the free *gens de couleur* to equal civil rights and the later slave revolt and its aim of *liberté general*, this conflation of two distinct parts of the disruption in the colony became important for muddling the narrative of the revolt later on.⁴² According to René Koekkoek, the confusion about the chronology of the revolt in Dutch debates was due to the complexity of the conflict.⁴³ However, it seems to be a specific kind of confusion that allowed the authors to fit the uprisings into an increasingly sharpening anti-revolutionary narrative. The request for equal rights by the free people of colour was cast in the same light as the later slave revolt. In their mind, the slave revolt did not start in 1791 when the slaves rose up around Le Cap, but with the political demands of the free people of colour in 1789. And therefore, anti-revolutionary voices came to argue that the devastation of the colonial economy *followed* from the release from slavery, rather than the abolition being an outcome *after* a devastating outbreak of violence. An example of this is an anonymous former plantation owner from the relatively new Dutch colony of Demerary (now part of Guyana) who wrote: 'One has to consider, since the liberation of the Negroes and the upheavals that followed, the destruction of

40 *Ibid.*, 278.

41 't Ware te wenschen, dat de Menschelijkheid zelve eenig middel konde uitdenken, om heure stem, zonder grooter onheilen en rampen onder het menschdom en over die slaaven zelve te brengen'. *Ibid.*, 279.

42 What is striking is that many historical authors confused the chronology of events. Pieter Paulus,

Verhandeling over de vraag: In welke zin kunnen de menschen worden gezegd te gelyk? en welke zijn de rechten en pligten, die daaruit voortvloeien? (Haarlem: C. Plaat, 1793) 206-207.

43 Koekkoek, 'Envisioning the Dutch Imperial Nation-State', 144.

hundreds of plantations, as buildings and fields were burned to the ground, as the honest and industrious planters were for a large part murdered, another part fled elsewhere, whether such a colony is capable of overcoming this in 100 years; thousands of slaves have been wiped off the face of the earth by the fire of war, how will they be replaced, since the Negro trade has been abolished?⁴⁴

This narrative of Saint-Domingue became so pervasive in Dutch political discourse that it even overshadowed discussion in the *Nationale Vergadering* (National Assembly) dedicated to the revolt on the Dutch island of Curaçao on 17 August 1795 – the largest uprising in the Dutch empire since the one in Berbice in 1763. Although the Curaçao revolt was a clear example of the spread of revolutionary fervour in the Caribbean and the wish of the enslaved to become free and equal citizens, subsequent Dutch discussions of slavery and abolition continued to refer to Saint-Domingue. In the National Assembly, Johannes Hansz, a well-known and radical Patriot from Curaçao, warned against Orangist plots on the island and was an outspoken advocate of the continuation of slavery.⁴⁵ There was no *animus* among the Dutch public to turn the revolt on Curaçao into an argument for the abolition of slavery. This effect was also felt two years later, when the outlines of the first Dutch constitution were discussed. In the meetings, the spectre of Saint-Domingue loomed large, raised solely to avert an immediate abolition of slavery in the Dutch empire. The Dutch debates in the assembly and the popular press did not distinguish between the slave trade and colonial slave-holding in general.

The lesson of Saint-Domingue, according to the anonymous planter of Demerary, was that ‘if the Negroes were suddenly given freedom, the earth, the nourisher of your commonwealth, would be drenched with civilian blood’.⁴⁶ Although the author uses racial language, he interprets violence as a universal result of freedom. He therefore condemns both the abolition of slavery and the French revolution: ‘events in France prove how a minority has brought the majority, and with them the entire Republic, to the brink of its

44 ‘Men ga nu eens na, zedert de vrymaking der Negers en de daaruit ontstaane beroertens, de vernietiging van honderde Plantagiën, daar gebouwen en velden tot op den grond zyn afgebrand, daar de nyvere en industriëuse Planters voor een groot gedeelte vermoord, een ander gedeelte na elders geweeken zyn, of zodanig eene Colonie in staat is zulks in 100 jaaren te boven te werken; duizenden van slaven zyn door het oorlogsvuur van den aardbodem geveegt, hoe zal men die remplacereeren, daar den Negerhandel afgeschafft is?’. Anonymous, ‘Vrymoedige gedachten van een (geweest zynde) Demerariaansch planter, over twee brieven,

geschreeven onder den naam van Zelidor aan Eliante, behelzende een beschryving van den slavenhandel, en onderzoek, of men recht heeft om vrye menschen tot slaaven te maaken’, in: *Brieven over wysgeerige en andere onderwerpen door Jean Henry de Villattes* (Amsterdam: Gaspard Heintzen, 1795) 66.

45 NL-HANA, Staten-Generaal, toegang 1.01.02, inv. no. 9628.

46 ‘als de Negers plotseling vry gegeven wierden; de aarde, de voedster van uw gemeenebest zoude met burger bloet gedrenkt worden’. Anonymous, ‘Vrymoedige gedachten’, 70.

destruction'.⁴⁷ A 'ferocious crowd' of French revolutionaries is not different from 'a group of mutinous and bloodthirsty Negroes'.⁴⁸ His message is that abolition may be inevitable, but it will have to be postponed: 'Ô Dutchmen, defer this catastrophe, if you cannot avert it altogether, do not wade with bowed heads into a pool of uncertainties'.⁴⁹ The defender of slavery thus disguises himself as a moderate abolitionist, simply warning against the dangerous passions that are unleashed if freedom spreads too quickly.

The transformation of principled abolitionists

The news of the Saint-Domingue revolt casted doubt on the possible effect of the abolition of slavery, and in fact any humanitarian efforts. The dynamic can clearly be observed in the transformation of the Dutch baptists Willem de Vos and Jan van Geuns. Their earlier affinity to more principled abolitionism can be seen in the depth of their arguments. The bibliography of their work shows their engagement with international abolitionism before the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution.⁵⁰ The Leiden minister Jan van Geuns wrote a text to accompany Willem de Vos's *Philaethes Eleutherus over den slaaven-stand* (1797).⁵¹ Despite their doubts about abolition, they did not embrace pro-slavery tropes. For example, Van Geuns rejected the thesis that Noah had cursed the dark-skinned descendants of his son Cham by arguing that it was prediction, rather than the destiny of Africans to become enslaved. De Vos was more radical than Van Geuns in his aversion to slavery and, moreover, in his approval of an immediate self-emancipation, rather than a delayed colonial abolition. Yet, he also opined that the 'French haste' did not lead to a desired outcome.⁵²

Van Geuns largely went along with De Vos in his disapproval of slavery, but in the text he slowly led his readers to an anti-abolitionist point

47 'de historien zedert de laatste 4 jaaren in Vrankrijk plaats gehad hebbende, bewyzen, hoe een minderheid de meerderheid, en met hen de gantsche Republiek, op den rand van haar verderf gebragt heeft.' *Ibid.*, 72.

48 'eene woeste hoop [...] een troupe miltzigtige en bloeddorstige Negers'. Anonymous, 'Vrymoedige gedachten', 73.

49 'Ô Nederlanders, schort dit onheil op, zo gylieden het niet geheel kunt afwenden, begeef Ul. niet met gebukte hoofden in een poel van onzekerheden.' *Ibid.*, 74.

50 There are many references to B.J. Fossard's *De zaak der neerslaaven*, which appeared in Dutch in

1790. De Vos and Van Geuns, *Philaethes Eleutherus*, 84. In a footnote we also find a reference, added by De Vos at the eleventh hour, to the *Reis na Guinea en de Caribische eilanden in Columbia* by Paul Erdmann Isert, published in 1790. De Vos and Van Geuns, *Philaethes Eleutherus*, xxxix.

51 Simon Vuyk, "'Wat is dit anders dan met onze eigen handen deze gruwelen te plegen?' Remonstrantse en doopsgezinde protesten tegen slavenhandel en slavernij in het laatste decennium van de achttiende eeuw', *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* 32 (Verloren 2006).

52 De Vos and Van Geuns, *Philaethes Eleutherus*, 84.

of view. The split between abolitionism and anti-abolitionism ultimately seems to be the interpretation of the events in Saint-Domingue. Van Geuns stated that Jesus never condemned slavery or called for its abolition: ‘Even less was it the intention of JESUS and his Apostles to actually change the form of government. A good government, based on equality of rights, and capable of allowing as much personal freedom as is compatible with the common good, must follow as soon as the teachings of JESUS have gained a significant influence on the minds of men.’⁵³ The fact that Van Geuns added both an extensive preface and an explanation to the end of De Vos’s text can be read as an attempt to defuse a more radical abolitionist text. Fear of revolution characterises Van Geuns’s entire argument and is given more attention in the text than the case against slavery.⁵⁴ He stated that among the Romans, ‘the frequent and successive civil wars (...) were not infrequently caused by slaves.’⁵⁵ In typical eighteenth-century fashion, Van Geuns presented Spartacus as a warning rather than as a heroic freedom fighter. Thus, a text that had the outward appearance of an abolitionist tract in fact called for the continuation of slavery. It is worth remembering that at the time of writing, the slave *trade* had not yet been abolished, and the author made no mention of it.⁵⁶ The political implications of the adoption of the narratives about the revolt in Saint-Domingue are clear. The constitutional committee discussing the possibility of abolition in preparation for the constitution of 1797 drew a contrast between ‘mere philosophy and true State’, and between ‘heart and the dictates of reason’.⁵⁷

Re-introducing slavery to abolish it

In the metropole, different sides of the debate over slavery implicitly agreed that it was more important to protect white dominance in colonial societies than to solve the problem of slavery. The Patriot publisher Adriaan Loosjes published the *Geschiedkundige beschouwing van St. Domingo* written by the British colonial slave-owning politician Bryan Edwards. Loosjes did so during Napoleon’s final attempt to reconquer Saint-Domingue and reintroduce slavery between 1801 and 1803. The publication was explicitly intended to indicate the imminent repossession of the island: ‘since the French Republic, with her allies, has sent such a large force of ships and soldiers to bring the island back under her control, it will undoubtedly help many of our

53 De Vos and Van Geuns, *Philaethes Eleutherus*, I.

54 *Ibid.*, XII.

55 *Ibid.*, XVI-XVII.

56 *Ibid.*, XVII. ‘Door het godsdienstig opvolgen dier grondregelen, moest dus het harde en onrechtvaardige van zelfs ophouden, en was, ook

uit dezen hoofde, het met name verbieden en afschaffen van het slaavenbeheer, ten eenemaale overtollig.’ *Ibid.*, XXV.

57 Paasman, Reinhart, 123; *Dagverhaal der handelingen van de Nationale Vergadering (1797)*, deel VI, 3.

compatriots who wish to be more accurately informed about the situation there’, according to Loosjes.⁵⁸

Edwards wrote this book to give the European public an insight into the damage the rebellion had caused, but also to inspire a broader political course.⁵⁹ For him, there is no room for nuance about the nature of self-government on the island; the rebellion threatens to become a ‘triumph of the lawlessness of the savages over all order and government’.⁶⁰ Edwards stands at the beginning of a colonial literature that looks back nostalgically to an era before the decolonisation process. The resemblance to the iconic work of Joseph Conrad a century later is obvious when Edwards writes: ‘We have to consider the human heart in its greatest despair; to see the savage man, out of control, committing atrocities, the story of which only makes the heart shrink, and committing crimes, hitherto unheard of in history’, after which he quotes Milton: ‘all monstrous, all prodigious things,/ Abominable, unutterable, and worse/ Than fables yet have feign’d, or fear conceived.’⁶¹ Breaking the chains of slavery freed monsters, Edwards stated. And he added that he hoped his book would inspire the ‘virtuous and thoughtful’ readers against those who sought reform.⁶² This passionate defender of slavery laid out a road map for abolition that would later be used to push abolition beyond the political horizon: ‘great and beneficial changes in the established orders of society can only be worked out by a gradual improvement of the lower ranks of the people.’⁶³

The emptiness of the abolitionist gesture is particularly obvious in Edwards, as he moves quickly from cautioning against a hasty abolition to planning the survival of racial slavery in the Caribbean colonies. What is important about Edwards’s racial thinking is that he observed racial mixing as the main problem: it was not Africans who had sparked the Haitian uprising,

58 ‘daar de Fransche Republiek, met hare bondgenoten eene zo aanzienlijke Scheeps- en Krijgsmagt derwaards gezonden heeft, om hetzelfde weder onder haar beheer te brengen, zal het ongetwijfeld veele onzer Landgenoten, die nauwkeuriger wegens den toestand van hetzelfde wenschen onderricht te zyn, aangenaam wezen van eene zo bekwaame en meesterlijke hand als die van Edwards, eene Geschiedkundige Beschouwing van dat Eiland te ontvangen’. Bryan Edwards, *Geschiedkundige Beschouwing van St. Domingo* (Haarlem: Adriaan Loosjes, 1802) 2.

59 *Ibid.*, II.

60 ‘de zegepraal van de regeeringloosheid der wilden over alle orde en gouvernement voltooid wordt.’ *Ibid.*, IV.

61 ‘Wij hebben het menschlijk hart in zijne grootste wanschapenheid te beschouwen; den wilden mensch te zien, ontslagen van bedwang, wreedheden plegende, waarvan het verhaal alleen het hart doet te rug krompen, en misdaaden bedrijvende, tot nog toe ongehoord in de geschiedenis.’ *Ibid.*, XX.

62 *Ibid.*, XXI.

63 ‘dat groote en weldaadige veranderingen in de gevestigde orden der maatschappij alleen kunnen uitgewerkt worden, door eene trapswijze verbetering van de laagere rangen van het volk.’ *Ibid.*, XXI.

but ‘creoles’ and ‘mulattos’. For the colonial elite this would become an argument for genocide: the clearing of the colony should be followed by a new slave trade, in which new, uncorrupted African slaves would bring the colony back to prosperity.⁶⁴ For Saint-Domingue, once the ‘monsters’ were unleashed, the solution was nothing less than genocide: ‘It will show the fraught ignorance of some, and the monstrous wickedness of others, among the reformers of this day, who, desiring to advance designs of perfection, and improvement in the state of human life, beyond the bounds of nature, kindle a consuming fire between the different classes of mankind, which can only be extinguished by the blood of man.’⁶⁵ Clearly, reconquest and genocide were on Edwards’s political agenda, and he sang the praises of the political and international – and implicitly racial – unity that emerged at the beginning of the rebellion, even between the French and the British.

A softer tone than that of Edwards seems to have been preferred in the Netherlands. Four letters by Daniel L’Escallier that were published as an appendix to John Gabriel Stedman’s *Voyage à Surinam et dans l’intérieur de la Guiane* about the Dutch colony of Suriname are a case in point.⁶⁶ This is relevant here because this French edition was the basis for the Dutch translation. In a career that resembled that of Malouet, L’Escallier had gone to Saint-Domingue at the age of nineteen and had subsequently gained an exceptional amount of administrative experience in Caribbean colonies. His plans expressed an emphatic desire to bring the abolition process fully under the control of plantation owners and the government.

In the text, L’Escallier remained vague about the practical implications, but his biography does show that he considered the ‘pacification’ of Saint-Domingue and the reintroduction of slavery a justified step on the road to abolition. Upon his return from French colonies in Asia, where – according to a biographical note from the nineteenth century – L’Escallier had prevented the outbreak of revolts such as in Saint-Domingue, he became Minister of Colonies. After a year, he left his administrative post with the intention to sail with 5,000 soldiers to Saint-Domingue to restore the colonial order on the island. However, the ships were unable to leave Brest because of a British blockade.⁶⁷ His letters about Saint-Domingue were probably written during his time as a minister. After L’Escallier’s unsuccessful mission, a much

64 Edwards, *Geschiedkundige Beschouwing*, xv.

65 ‘Het zal de bejammerenswaardige onkunde van eenigen, en de gedochtelijke snoodheid van anderen onder de hervormers van deze dagen ten toon stellen, die ontwerpen van volmaaktheid, en verbetering in den staat van het menschlijk leven verder willende drijven, dan de natuur toelaat, een verteerend vuur ontsteeken, tusschen de onderscheide classen van het menschdom,

dat niet dan door menschenbloed kan worden uitgebluscht.’ *Ibid.*, xxi.

66 John Gabriel Stedman, *Voyage à Surinam et dans l’intérieur de la Guiane* (Paris: Buisson, 1798).

67 Biographical note dedicated to L’Escallier written by Charles Mullié, *Biographie des célébrités militaires des armées de terre et de mer de 1789 à 1850* (Paris: Poignavant, 1852) 215-216.

larger and more disastrous military attempt was made by Bonaparte’s brother-in-law Charles Leclerc when he was sent with a large fleet to the island to restore the racial order there.

L’Escallier’s vision is not incongruent with that of Stedman, who explicitly warned against an abolition that was inspired by passionate ‘*menschlievendheid*’ (‘love for mankind’).⁶⁸ The Dutch translation of Stedman supplied with the appendix by L’Escallier can be read as an argument for the violent defence of a gradual abolition of slavery. Across imperial boundaries, men such as L’Escallier and Edwards were of a similar mind, and Dutch publishers and politicians were eager to adopt and disseminate their views.

Defenders of Haiti

Were there no cracks in the hegemony of gradualist anti-abolitionism in Dutch publications? However vociferous British conservatism may have been, in geopolitical terms Great Britain benefited from the loss of the most productive French colony. This simple fact contributed to the development of positive British public opinion about the Saint-Domingue rebellion. After the outbreak of the uprising, colonial officials and slave owners on Jamaica had feared that the violence would spread to neighbouring British territories, but after the French abolition, British strategists also anticipated that they might be able to take advantage of the chaos to take over Saint-Domingue and reintroduce slavery. After all, the island still had the reputation of being one of the most promising colonies. A British attack in 1797 resulted in a circle of occupied strongholds along the coast of Saint-Domingue. One of the soldiers who took part in these occupations was Marcus Rainsford. Similar to Stedman in Suriname, he came to put down a rebellion and re-establish colonial power, and like Stedman he was deeply impressed by the discipline of the black forces and, above all, their leader Toussaint Louverture at whose intervention he escaped the death penalty. In 1804, after the independence of the island, Rainsford became a defender of the Haitian State. He wrote a series of works, of which the most famous is *An historical account of the Black Empire of Hayti* (1805). The book presents Haiti as a natural and important ally of the British Empire. Because of his contribution to Haiti’s international reputation, he was awarded the honorary title of ‘Lieutenant General of the Haitian Army’ by the Haitian State.

Given the popularity of its subject matter, Rainsford’s book was immediately translated into Dutch as *St. Domingo, of Het land der zwarten in Hayti en deszelfs omwenteling* (Amsterdam: Johannes Allart, 1806). It appeared in two volumes, including etchings based on Rainsford’s drawings by the well-

68 John Stedman, *Reize naar Surinamen en door de binnenste gedeelten van Guiana*, part 1 (Amsterdam: Johannes Allart, 1799-1800) 270.



▲
Figure 3. The book by Marcus Rainsford presented a more positive view of the state of Haiti and was illustrated by the celebrated Dutch artist Reinier Vinkeles. The detailed and often gruesome images of the violence during the revolt have been reproduced many times. Titlepage of Marcus Rainsford's, *St. Domingo of het land der zwarten*. New edition, first part (Zutphen: W.C. Wansleven, 1824).

known Dutch artist Reinier Vinkeles (see Figure 3). The book was received quite positively in the Netherlands. The periodical *Algemeene vaderlandsche letter-oefeningen* states: ‘With regard to the actions of the *Black Republic*, he [Rainsford] has exercised great care to be truthful’.⁶⁹ In this review, Rainsford’s work is therefore placed opposite to that of French author Jean-Louis Dubroca, the staunchly conservative reading of the revolution that was also translated into Dutch.⁷⁰ In the review’s description of the second part of Rainsford’s book, the issue of the independence and black autonomy stays in the background, but it is remarked – perhaps typically for the time – that it is not surprising that ‘after all the atrocities committed by the republicans there (...) the French name has become a curse in those regions’.⁷¹ The Dutch anti-French sentiment led to a certain sympathy for Haiti, and Rainsford’s work fed into such interpretations; however, it was not followed by any real appreciation for the advances of the new State on the question of abolition.

Apart from Rainsford, little appeared in Dutch that might have led to a milder assessment of Haitian independence and self-emancipation. The only exception might have been the work by Baron de Vastey, the former minister of the Haitian king Henry Christophe, an extract of whose book on the Haitian revolution appeared in Dutch. Vastey’s original work, *Le système colonial dévoilé* (1814) is a polemical defense of the revolution against its French critics, and as such might be counted as one of the very first decolonial historical writings. The book is roughly 200 pages long, but after being trimmed down, only nineteen remained in the Dutch version. Those nineteen pages were preceded by three introductions (or rather diversions) of 77 pages, all of which seem to serve to water down Vastey’s message and reduce it to a curiosity, rather than a valuable analysis (see Figure 4). With this framing, it should come as no surprise that the book had little chance of making an impression on Dutch audiences. The reviews were subsequently limited to pointing out language errors in the translated text. The scarce attempts at offering a different perspective on the revolution with translations of the work of Rainsford and Vastey could not prevent the Dutch narrative of the Saint-Domingue revolution from taking on a decidedly conservative form. Vastey was presented as a curiosity in a Dutch market eager for publications about Saint-Domingue, and no mentions were made of his polemics with French colonial authors such as the aforementioned and influential Malouet.

69 ‘Ten aanzien van de handelingen der Zwarte Republiek, heeft hij groote zorgvuldigheid aangewend, om het midden der waarheid te houden’. *Algemeene Vaderlandsche Letter-Oefeningen*, 1807 (Amsterdam: G.S. Leeneman van der Kroe en J.W. Yntema en Comp., 1807) 163-170 and 659-664, there 165.

70 Jean-Louis Dubroca’s biographies of Bonaparte, Louverture and Dessalines were translated into Dutch in 1801, 1802 and 1805, respectively, and painted a negative picture of the leaders of the Haitian revolution.

71 *Hedendaagsche vaderlandsche bibliotheek van wetenschap, kunst en smaak, jaar 1808*, part II (1808) 571-572.

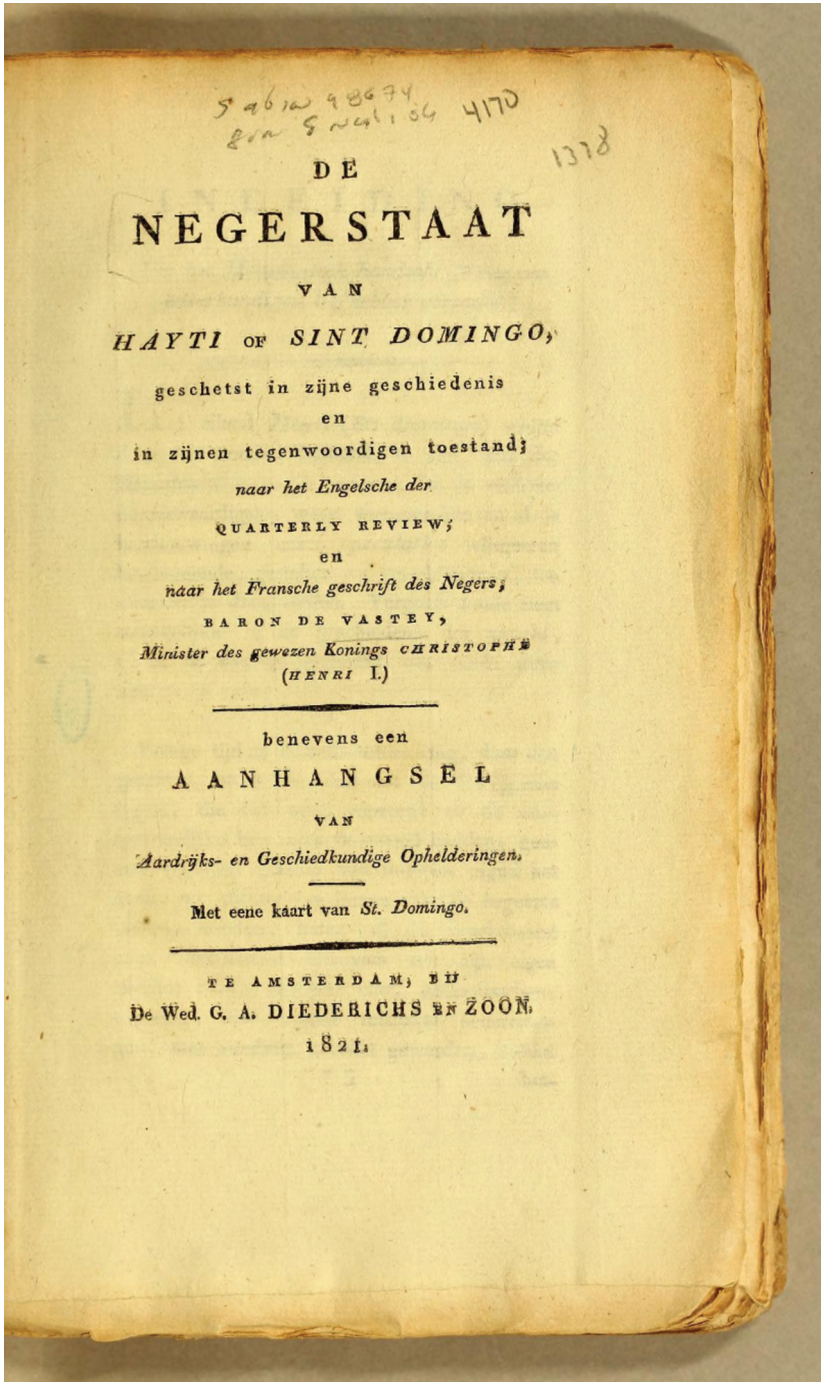


Figure 4. The polemical writings of Baron de Vastey were aimed at defending the advances of the Haitian revolution on an international stage. In the Dutch translation his writing was presented as a curiosity with little relevance to the ideological debates about the revolution. Titlepage of Baron de Vastey's *De Neger-staat van Haiti of Sint-Domingo* (Amsterdam: G.A. Diederichs en Zoon, 1821).

After Haiti had become independent and the news about it died down in the press, the cautionary tale about it remained a point of reference in political philosophy. Historian Marietje Van Winter quotes from the correspondence between the Dutch intellectuals Willem Bilderdijk and Meinard Tydeman, in which Bilderdijk remarks in 1816 '(...) the spirit of *menschlievendheid* as the source of the mad abolition of slavery? I am convinced of the opposite. It is the spirit that wanted to establish the kingdom of Satan by overthrowing all lawful government, and that is standing with one foot on France and the other on England.'⁷² The Dutch anti-revolutionary interpretation of the Haitian revolution can be found in many areas. The work on human equality by theologian Nicolaas Godfried van Kampen, *Proeve van beantwoording der vrage* (1809) states: 'Who wants to see how shamefully careless it is to distribute, on thoughtless philosophical grounds, the equal rights of the civilised Europeans only has to look at Saint-Domingue to see the blood and smoking ruins under the claws of those tigers in human form.'⁷³ The events on the island were the argument for him to set aside the theological criticisms of slavery: 'The division into *castes* is unnatural and dishonorable to mankind, I confess, and the slavery of the Negroes is much more so, but witness that its sudden abolition has made rivers of blood flow in Saint-Domingue.'⁷⁴ All these horrors are blamed on '*contemporary philosophy*', and the solution is Christianity according to Van Kampen: 'Only from *Christian* principles could that gentle spirit rise, which, by pairing humanity with prudence, gradually brings the Negroes to the rank of free beings'.⁷⁵ Despite the Christianity of the rebellion leaders, Saint-Domingue came to figure as an example to support paternalistic guidance against attempts of self-directed emancipation and social reform.

The Netherlands took a different course in the development of anti-abolitionism from Great Britain. British historians of slavery see the Demerara uprising of 1823 as a crucial event for the resurgence of abolitionism.⁷⁶ During that revolt, the British colonial forces showed themselves to be extremely cruel and bloody, whereas the image of the enslaved and the white

72 'aan menschlievendheid, als bron van de dolle afschaffing der slavernij? Ik ben van het tegendeel overtuigd. 't Is dezelfde geest, die door 't omstoten van alle wettige regeering, het rijk des Satans wilde vestigen, en met den eenen voet op Frankrijk, met den anderen op Engeland staat'. Van Winter, 'De Openbare Mening', 64.

73 'Wie zien wil, hoe schandelyk onvoorzigtig het zy, ook deze onberaden aan elk, onbepaald, uittedeelen, wende het oog naar

St. Domingo, en zie hetzelfde in bloed en rookend puin vergaan onder de klauwen dier Tygers in Menschengedaante, welke een onbedachte menschenliefde, uit bespiegelende gronden, gelyke Rechten met den beschaafden Europeër geschonken had.' Van Kampen, *Proeve*, 282.

74 *Ibid.*, 526.

75 *Ibid.*, 391.

76 Drescher, *Abolition*, 255-259.

missionary, who acted as their ally, was one of reason and piety. In Great Britain, the notable victim of the suppression of the revolt was an Anglican missionary who died while waiting for the execution of a death sentence that the colonial court had pronounced upon him. This had the effect of reviving the British abolitionist movement. In the Netherlands, however, after the suppression of the revolt, people wrote that the plot that would have turned ‘Demerary into a second Saint-Domingue’ had fortunately been foiled.⁷⁷

While the British saw a revival of the anti-slavery movement in the 1820s, in the Netherlands the opposite was true. No principled voices against slave ownership were heard in the Netherlands in those years, while the defenders of gradual abolition seemed to have a natural place in the political and cultural landscape. That place was not so much an explicit defence of slavery, but rather a self-evident aside in the general conservative political and cultural climate. An echo of Edwards’s bloody melancholy was heard in the work of the Surinamese slave owner, administrator and writer Adriaan François Lammens and conservative publicist Isaac da Costa. In 1823 they both wrote an anti-abolitionist piece. Lammens stated that ‘The unfortunate consequences of these loving principles, opaque and wrongly applied, have caused the most beautiful colony in the world to be lost.’⁷⁸ Isaac da Costa’s bitterly conservative essay *Bezwaren tegen de geest der eeuw* (1823) caused a stir as a successful provocation to all social reformers and made a fierce attempt to crush any progressive momentum with brusque rhetoric. Da Costa’s position on slavery is not dictated by the pro-slavery lobby, but is part of his broader vision on society. The position on slavery that the Dutch conservatives, like Da Costa, took and their constant warnings against well-intentioned reforms supported a broader societal outlook and remained virtually unanswered by abolitionists and progressives.

Conclusion

For a long time, historians have stated that the Dutch position on slavery was solely dictated by economic pragmatism. In this article, I argue that the defence of racial slavery in the Atlantic colonies came to have an important function in the political philosophy of Dutch society at the turn of the eighteenth century. Ideas about race, slavery and civilisation were formed within an Atlantic ideological context, in which the Haitian revolution played a fundamental role. The cautionary narrative about that uprising resonated with the Dutch public opinion to such an extent that it became a trope in Dutch political philosophy. The influence of the conservative and racialised interpretations of the Haitian revolution were more fundamental than the earlier studies by Paasman and Van Winter suggest.

77 *Rotterdamse Courant*, 18 October 1823.

78 Lammens (1823) 7–8, in: Paasman, Reinhardt, 123.

My survey of Dutch newspapers, periodicals and translated works has shown that the Dutch were already taking a special interest in Saint-Domingue long before the news of the world-changing revolt reached Europe. This was the fertile soil in which the conservative interpretation of the revolt could grow. The arrival of news and analysis was dependent on slave-holding colonists and colonial officials. While the subaltern narratives could circulate more easily in the Americas, the international colonial elite determined much of the narrative in the Dutch press. What is striking about the Netherlands is that there seems to have been no answer to the conservative narrative about the Haitian revolution. Progressive voices were so underdeveloped on the topic of social reform, slavery and race that they were unable to muster a response to the tropes about the Haitian revolution. The 1823 revolt in the former Dutch colony of Demerara was a turning point for the British abolitionists who were no longer pushed onto the defensive by acts of self-emancipation in the colonies. In the Netherlands, no such change occurred.

Historians have regarded the Dutch defence of slavery as being solely economically motivated, and its ideology merely a remnant of a bygone era. This interpretation underestimates that by reading, translating and referencing the most conservative French and British understandings of the Haitian revolution a distinctly modern narrative in Dutch conservative circles was created. From the late eighteenth century onwards, a particular Dutch interpretation of the Haitian revolution became a staple argument against any type of progressive social reform, including the abolition of slavery. The dominance of the conservative tropes about the catastrophe of the Haitian revolution was such that neither radical Christian nor liberal arguments in favour of immediate or even foreseeable abolition stood a chance in Dutch political circles before the middle of the nineteenth century.

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