

# From Valuable Merchandise to Violent Rebels

## Depicting Enslaved Africans in the Dutch Periodical Press in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

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From the moment the Dutch West Indian Company formally entered the slave trade in 1637, the Dutch periodical press consistently carried reports on slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. This article offers a long-term analysis of this coverage in the Dutch Republic, showing for the first time how the representation of slavery developed over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It demonstrates, first, that through the periodical press, knowledge of slavery was more widely spread in the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century than is often assumed. The consistent, if intermittent, newspaper coverage meant that – well before the debates on abolition emerged – Dutch readers would be familiar with stereotypes of enslaved Africans as valuable merchandise or violent rebels. Second, this article argues that, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the periodical press offered its readers an ambiguous and contradictory image of slavery, contributing, on the one hand, to a public discourse underpinning slavery by depicting enslaved Africans as violent rebels, while at the same time covering political debates on the abolition of slavery.

Vanaf het moment dat de West-Indische Compagnie in 1637 formeel aan de slavenhandel deelnam, berichtte de Nederlandse periodieke pers consequent over slavernij en de trans-Atlantische slavenhandel. Dit artikel biedt een langetermijnanalyse van deze berichtgeving in de Nederlandse Republiek en laat voor het eerst zien hoe de representatie van slavernij zich ontwikkelde gedurende de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw. Het toont ten eerste aan dat door deze berichtgeving de kennis over slavernij in de zeventiende-eeuwse Nederlandse

Republiek breder verspreid was dan vaak wordt aangenomen. De consistente, zij het onregelmatige, berichtgeving in kranten betekent dat Nederlandse lezers bekend waren met stereotypen van tot slaaf gemaakte Afrikanen als waardevolle handelswaar of gewelddadige rebellen, lang voordat de debatten over de afschaffing van slavernij van start gingen. Ten tweede betoogt dit artikel dat de periodieke pers haar lezers in de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw een ambigu en tegengesteld beeld van slavernij bood. Aan de ene kant droeg de periodieke pers bij aan een publiek discours dat slavernij ondersteunde door tot slaaf gemaakte Afrikanen te stereotypen als gewelddadige rebellen, terwijl ze tegelijkertijd verslag deed van politieke debatten over de afschaffing van slavernij.

## Introduction

In the final days of 1637, the Amsterdam newspaper *Courante uyt Italien, Duytslandt, &c.* reported the capture of the slaving fort Elmina on the west coast of Africa, stating that Dutch ships had ‘fortunately captured the Castle de Mine/about which further details will appear in the next issue.’<sup>1</sup> The conquest of Elmina marked the beginning of a long engagement of the Dutch West India Company (West-Indische Compagnie, WIC) in the transatlantic slave trade. From this moment onwards, news reports about the transatlantic slave trade and slavery were consistently part of the coverage of the Atlantic world throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This news coverage on the slave trade, resistance against it, and the violence engendered towards the planters generally contributed to a popular image of transatlantic slavery as normal and acceptable.

So far, historical scholarship of Dutch abolitionism has paid limited attention to the early modern representation of slavery in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century periodical press. In 2001, Angelie Sens was one of the first to criticise the hitherto dominant economic focus of the historiography of abolition, arguing that it distracted from a broader colonial ‘ideology’ that emerged in the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Yet, she also noted in an earlier article, that the notion of slavery appeared in public discourse mainly ‘as a political concept to pinpoint the enslavement of citizens by the ruling elite’.<sup>3</sup> As mentioned in the introduction to this special issue, this observation has been further explored by René Koekkoek, who argues that political arguments

1 Jan van Hilten, *Courante uyt Italien ende Duytschlandt &c.*, no. 52 (Amsterdam, 26 December 1637): ‘[...]’t Casteel de Mine gheluckelijck hebben vermeestert/waer van naerder particulariteyten met den naesten.’ All translations from the newspapers are the author’s.

2 Angelie Sens, ‘Mensaa, heiden, slaaf’. *Nederlandse visies op de wereld rond 1800* (SDU 2001) XII.

3 Angelie Sens, ‘Dutch antislavery attitudes in a decline-ridden society, 1750-1815’, in: Gert Oostindie (ed.) *Fifty Years Later: Antislavery, Capitalism and Modernity in the Dutch Orbit* (KILT Press 1995) 89-104, there 97, 100-101.

in favour of slavery had been woven into the fabric of late-eighteenth-century Dutch political thought, and that – even though seemingly at odds – Dutch politicians were able to reconcile enlightened egalitarianism with consistent inequality.<sup>4</sup> These anti-abolitionist voices also made their way into the public domain via journals where, as Pepijn Brandon has shown, proponents of slavery bent abolitionist arguments to perpetuate the institution; via theatre plays where audiences were confronted with contradictory images of abolitionism and racialised subjection; and through the coverage of slave rebellions in the newspapers.<sup>5</sup>

The focus of these studies on the later eighteenth century obscures the fact that slavery had always been a contentious issue, and that well before opinions decisively shifted, a number of theologians and legal scholars had publicly voiced both dissent and assent regarding the practice surrounding the Dutch entrance in the slave trade. Several scholars have pointed out that there are indications of debate in the Dutch Republic on this matter already in the first half of the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> However, these ideas about slavery mostly appeared in less accessible theological, legal or literary works, often as part of a larger argument, and did not necessarily reach as broad an audience as newspapers. Generally, studies of both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries tend to emphasise theological, legal and political arguments, suggesting that ordinary citizens of the Dutch Republic would have little to no knowledge of slavery and the slave trade before the public (political) debates of the late eighteenth century.

- 4 René Koekoek, *The Citizenship Experiment. Contesting the Limits of Civic Equality and Participation in the Age of Revolutions* (Brill 2020). See also the introduction to this special issue: Karwan Fatah-Black and Lauren Lauret, 'Repentance and Reappraisal: Historicising the Defenders of Slavery in the Netherlands', *BMGN – LCHR* 139:3 (2024). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.12843>.
- 5 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>; Sarah Adams, *Repertoires of Slavery. Dutch Theater Between Abolitionism and Colonial Subjection, 1770-1810* (Amsterdam University Press 2023); Esther Baakman, "'Their Power has been Broken, the Danger has Passed". Dutch Newspaper Coverage of the Berbice Slave Revolt, 1763', *Early Modern Low Countries* 2:1 (2018) 45-67, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/emlc.61>.
- 6 Michiel van Groesen briefly discusses the debate on slavery in *Amsterdam's Atlantic: Print Culture and the Making of Dutch Brazil* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2017) 107-112. See also Bert Paasman, Reinhart: *Nederlandse literatuur en slavernij ten tijde van de Verlichting* (Nijhoff 1984); Gustaaf van Nifterik, 'Arguments related to Slavery in Seventeenth Century Dutch Legal Theory', *Tijdschrift Voor Rechtsgeschiedenis* 89:1-2 (2021) 158-191, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718190-12340005>. For the eighteenth century, Matthijs Lok has studied theological underpinnings of anti-abolitionist arguments. See Matthijs Lok, *Europe Against Revolution: Conservatism, Enlightenment, and the Making of the Past* (Oxford University Press 2023).

Yet, from the seventeenth century onwards, the literate Dutch public would be exposed to the issue of slavery and the slave trade simply by reading newspapers. Even though early modern Dutch newspapers mostly consisted of factual reports and were not explicitly opinionated, the selection of news stories and the language used do offer valuable insights into the representation of slavery in the public domain. In the seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic had a dynamic landscape of print media. From 1618 onwards, weekly – and later triweekly – newspapers appeared in the Dutch Republic, initially only in Amsterdam, but from the 1650s onwards other cities in Holland followed.<sup>7</sup> This consistent and regular appearance of periodical news publications since the early seventeenth century allows for a long-term analysis of the coverage from the 1630s until the 1790s.

Moreover, because newspapers were cheap and accessible, reports of events in the Americas and the Caribbean reached a relatively broad and diverse audience. The strong focus on trade and foreign politics ensured interest among merchants and officials, but the news appealed to a wider audience curious about the outside world.<sup>8</sup> Michiel van Groesen has argued that in the seventeenth century a cross-section of Dutch society likely read newspapers to a certain extent.<sup>9</sup> Newspapers had a wide reach, with early print runs estimated at around 1,250 copies, which increased to around 5,000 copies for the major newspapers in Holland by 1740.<sup>10</sup> Compared to occasionally printed pamphlets, and political and judicial tracts, newspapers had a broader audience, offering day-to-day coverage rather than incidental opinions. As such, newspapers – arguably more than any other source – offer insights into contemporary, commonplace attitudes in the Dutch Republic to the issue of transatlantic slavery.

For the first half of the seventeenth century, I primarily use the *Courante uyt Italien ende Duytschlandt &c.* by Jan van Hilten (see Figure 1) and the *Tijdinghe uyt verscheyde Quartieren* by Broer Jansz, both published in Amsterdam,

7 For an excellent overview of seventeenth-century Dutch newspapers, see Arthur der Weduwen, *Dutch and Flemish Newspapers of the Seventeenth Century, 1618-1700* (2 parts; Brill 2017). For the eighteenth-century Dutch-language press, see Joop Koopmans, *Early Modern Media and the News in Europe: Perspectives from the Dutch Angle* (Brill 2018) and Joop Koopmans, 'Bloei en beteugeling van kranten, 1700-1813', in: Huub Wijffjes and Frank Harbers (eds.), *De Krant. Een cultuurgeschiedenis* (Boom 2019) 47-85.

8 For the developing interest in news, see Andrew Pettegree, *The Invention of News: How the World*

*Came to Know about Itself* (Yale University Press 2014).

9 Michiel van Groesen, 'Reading Newspapers in the Dutch Golden Age', *Media History* 22:3 (2016) 334-352, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2016.1229121>.

10 Esther Baakman and Michiel van Groesen, 'Kranten in de Gouden Eeuw', in: Huub Wijffjes and Frank Harbers (eds.), *De krant. Een cultuurgeschiedenis* (Boom 2019) 21-45, there 25; Koopmans, 'Bloei en beteugeling', 47-85; Hannie van Goinga, *Alom te bekomen. Veranderingen in de boekdistributie in de Republiek 1720-1800* (De Buitenkant 1999) 35-40.

## Courante uyt Italien ende Duytschlandt, &amp;c. 1640. No. 15.

Wt Praga den 24. Meert 1640.

**D**en 17 deser heeft sijn Excell. Johan Banier Sijndhs verlaten / de Bugghe van de Stadt ende Meulens gheruineert ende verbrandt / ende alle de Wercken gedemoleert / in ghelijckx hy mede dede tot Melnick / ende vertrouck so boot na Lutmarits / aldaer de gheheele Armee de Elbe passerde / ruinerende aldaer noch de Wallen / Doortzen ende alle andere Fortificatien: De Bugghe dede hy opnemen / ende alle de Wapen die hy niet konde mede nemen / vertreden ende te niet maken. Dooz dese onverwachte retirade / is eergisteren wederom alhier ghekomen onse Generaalstept ende Commandeur / nemende 't Woof-Quartier in dese drie Steden / de Crabaten ende andere wierden terfontd' over den Wapenberg ghecommandeert / ende alle Schepen na Melnick geboort / om ons Leger over de Sibiere te setten / alle Regimenten / uytghenomen de Colredische / Wallensteinische ende Lessische / die alhier in Garnisonen blijven / marcheren cito na ons Legher. Teussingh / Lutits / Plan / Copel hebben de Sweedische gheplouderd / ende van deseve plaetsen over de 300000 Rijder. affghepeert / alle hun Saubegardes dedens terfont oplichtten.

Een ander van den 27 dito.

Da dat de Sweedische van de Lippe / aldaer se sterck verchsants laghen / sijn opghetrocken / dooz manquement van mondt / kost / hebben de onse 't Slot ende Pas Sijndhs / aldaer de Sweedische de Wallen aen vier plaetsen hadden doen spzanghen / weder inghenomen ende beset. Den achtthienden den Pas Melnick. Den 19 Lutmarits / en den 21 't vaste Slot Letschen / vindende deseve plaetsen sonder Garnisonen / ende van alle Fortificatien / Staketelen ende Wapenwercken geruineert. Van Lutmarits hebben de Sweedische eenighe Capucijnen ende Gheestelicken mede ghenomen / met eenighe van de krabe. Onse Troepen sijn ten deele tot Wandijhs / dewijle men de Bugghe tot Lutmarits so haest niet konde repareren / over de Elbe gepasseert. Den 21 passerde hier dooz de Crabaten / om den Wapen eenigen afzweck te doen. Den 22 de Artillerie. Den 23 de Wasveldtsche / ende den 24 de Piccolominische Armee / waer op sijn Doctel. Doox. Leopoldus / vanderden daeghs ghevolcht is / men vermeent de Sweedische den pas af te sijnden / dooz dien sy haeren wegh op Wina ende Marienberg nemen. Dele Waghenen die de Sweedische niet konden mede voeren / hebben ghebooken ende staen laten / ende alleen over de 1500 Bagagie-Waghenen mede ghenomen. Twee stucken Geschuts heeft men by Costelits / die den Wapen in de Elbe hadde doen sincken / gheboonden.

Wt Ichna den 28 dito.

Wt komen wederom in groote beswaernisse / en laet sich aensien / dat wy 't eenemael tot den gronde sullen geruineert werden / dooz dien de Coningherckliche dooz Cerau na Septs sijn gegaan / ende den Obersten Slangh na Pierna / geresolbeert de heer-Sarische Quartieren alomme te verstozen: De Sarische die tot Naumburg ende in Waplandt hebben ghelegghen / sijn alle op de vlucht / ende boozhy Maeghdenburg in 't Wapstendom Aenhalt gheretireert / dooz desen onverwachten inval werdt alle 't Winter-hoopen op 't veldt gantsch vertreden.

ende de Landtsaten sullen van sionger moeten versmachten. Gilles de Haes schijft aen Hertogh Willem / dat hy van keiserliche Majest. last heeft Crantz te bloqueren.

Hier dooz sijn den vierentwintighsten deser drie hondert Sweedische te paerde gepasseert / refereren dat Banier met de Armee om Cometa in goede orde sach / ende dat de keiserliche noch verre van hem waren: De keiserliche macht is veel sterker / doch slecht ongheroeffent volck. Gisteren quam tijnbinghe dat de gheheele Sweedische macht na Annaberg quam / om haer uyt het Magesta van Swickan te verhsien / escht van Altenburg twee duysent schepel Baner: Indien Banier Sedem Belli alhier plant / sal 't de Armee seer soder hebben.

Wt Erfort den 29 dito.

Sijn Excell. Banier schijft uyt Cometa aen onsen Commandeur / datmen groote quantiteit van Probian sal versamelen / waer uyt wel te dencken staet dat de Armee alhier komen sal.

Wt Parijs den 31 dito.

In Italien sijn bepe Leghers noch niet bestant pets notabels dooz te nemen / twee duysent Franschen te voet ende te paerde hebben in de Dooz-stad van Sueno twee Lijf-Compagnien van den Prince Comaso gheslagen / ende de Dooz-stad in vrandt gheseken.

Wt Venetien wert van den 23 de doot van den grooten Turk geconfirmeert / oudt zijnde dypendertigh jaren / in 't seventhiende jaer van sijne Kegeringe: sijn Soeder seventwintigh jaren oudt / is den 10. Februarij in sijne plaetse tot keiser verkozen / hy is gheresolbeert den hirjgh teghens Polen aen te nemen / ende met een gheweldighe Armee in 't veldt te komen / tot dien epnde alreede 70000 Tartaren in Waslachen waren.

Monsieur Senantes sal twee duysent Doctmechten ende vijft hondert Paerden na Italien brengen / tot assistente van 't Fransche Leger. Monsieur de Boydeaur is na Provence / om aldaer de Armee te water ende te lande te commanderen. Den Prince van Conde gaet na Langedocq / en den Marechal Castillon na Champagne. Monsieur de Millerap behout de grootste ende Coninck. Armee in Piccardien. Den Hertogh van Chaune sal de Volontarisen commanderen.

Wthier is een boeck / gheintituleert: Opratus Gallus de Schifmanic virando, 'welck van 't Parlement is ghecondemneert / ende openlicken dooz den Voul verbandt: indien men den Lustheer hadde / soudemen in ghelijcken met hem doen / hy wil de onde Ligue weder optwecken.

Wt Vlissinghen den 5 Meert.

Capiteyn Abraham Cozmissen is met de Sint Malos Waerder alhier inghekomen / ende heeft geen Dupnkerkers vernomen. Hier liggen gereedt om in Zee te gaen / Capiteyn Coznelis Evertsen / met Capiteyn Swart / ende den doozs Abraham Cozmissen / ende Capiteyn Frans Janz / waechen hui mede ghereedt.

Wt Maestricht den 7 dito.

Gisteren sijn hier ingebacht achtthien Paerden met vijft kuyters / welcke booz 't Ranfoen van eenighe andere ghequeesten bozghie ghebeyen sijn. Dese partijne / sterck 43 te paerde / is van een partijne van de onse in Zabant geslagen / de Waghenen diese conboerden / hebben hui ghesalbeert. De doozs achtthien Paerden



Figure 1. Jan van Hilten, Courante uyt Italien, Duytslandt, &c., 14 April 1640. Image from Delpher, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010555163:mpeg21:p001>.

while for the second half of the seventeenth century, I mainly focus on the *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant* printed by Abraham Casteleyn.<sup>11</sup> These newspapers consisted of a single sheet of paper printed in two columns on both sides, with the mostly foreign bulletins ordered chronologically, the oldest news coming first, preceded by the dates and places of correspondence. These newspapers were the most highly regarded newspapers in their period and offer a representative sample of seventeenth-century coverage of slavery and the slave trade in the Atlantic world, especially since regional newspapers in the Dutch Republic often copied much of their content. Moreover, the preservation rate of these newspapers is relatively high, allowing a long-term analysis and close reading of these newspapers. For the eighteenth century, I use a wider variety of newspapers, including the four largest Dutch-language newspapers, which resided in Amsterdam, Haarlem, Leiden (see Figure 2) and The Hague, as well as smaller, regional newspapers from Rotterdam, Middelburg, Groningen and Leeuwarden. For the French-language newspapers I focus on the most prominent papers, the *Gazette de Leyde* and the *Gazette d'Amsterdam*.<sup>12</sup> Due to the large number of surviving newspapers, I rely more heavily on digitised copies for the eighteenth century. As a result, the newspapers of Utrecht, Delft and The Hague mostly remain outside the purview of this article, as they only have been digitised to a limited extent. A brief exploration of these papers, however, shows that their content did not greatly differ from their digitised counterparts.

Using a digital approach for the eighteenth-century newspapers has the advantage of being able to search through a large number of issues. However, optical character recognition (OCR) has severe limitations when it comes to early modern print. OCR is known to have deficits when it comes to older typesets and is very sensitive to low paper and image quality. As a result, the accuracy of the character recognition is limited. Andrew Prescott estimates that for the Burney collection of newspapers, held in the British Library in London, the accuracy rate is around 50 per cent and for the seventeenth-century newspapers in Delpher that number is unlikely to be any higher.<sup>13</sup> To avoid the pitfalls of the limited capabilities of OCR in early modern texts, 'fuzzy search' has been combined with targeted searches in newspapers from the second half of the seventeenth century onwards. Search words included places where slavery was common in different spellings (e.g. Suriname,

11 Broer Jansz also published a French edition of his newspaper, a literal translation, and I have used this where the Dutch version has not survived.

12 For both newspapers the surviving issues have been digitised, the *Gazette d'Amsterdam* by the Voltaire Foundation, and the *Gazette de Leyde* by the Royal Library in Brussels, Belgium.

13 Andrew Prescott, 'Searching for Dr. Johnson: The Digitisation of the Burney Newspaper Collection', in: Siv Gøril Brandtzæg, Paul Goring and Christine Watson, *Travelling Chronicles. News and Newspapers from the Early Modern Period to the Eighteenth Century* (Brill 2018) 51-71, there 67-68.



Berbice, Martinique, Jamaica, Barbados), as well as various early modern terms for enslaved Africans (e.g. *slaaf*, *ne[e]ger[s]*, *swarten*, *ne[e]ger-slaaf*). Dates of specific events served as guidelines to pinpoint the moment that news arrived in Europe, and once I located a certain storyline, I studied all issues in the weeks or months before and after.

This article takes a long-term perspective to provide a clearer understanding of the representation of slavery in the public domain before abolitionist debates took centre stage. It examines the coverage of the slave trade and slavery by the Dutch periodical press, and other news publications, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It shows, first, that through this coverage, seventeenth-century public knowledge of slavery extended well beyond the learned circles where slavery was occasionally debated, and that the news coverage underpinned and legitimised slavery. Second, it argues that, especially in the second half of the eighteenth century, the periodical press offered its readers an ambiguous and contradictory image of slavery: on the one hand contributing to a public discourse underpinning and legitimising slavery by stereotyping enslaved Africans as violent rebels, while covering political debates on the abolition of slavery on the other hand – thus presenting the public with two opposing views on slavery.

### Humans as cargo

In September 1637, the WIC captured the Elmina slave fort on the African Gold Coast, signalling the Company's formal engagement in the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>14</sup> From this moment onwards, the Dutch press followed the Dutch involvement in this trade with some consistency. Specific references to the trade arrived around two or three times a year, but increased somewhat later in the seventeenth century. What stands out about this early coverage of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade in Dutch newspapers is how it was presented as just another form of trade – hardly different from the trade in other commodities – confirming to readers that Africans were to be considered goods, not people.

In Amsterdam, the *Courante* and the *Tijdinghe* both reported on the conquests in West Africa, their importance considered clear, as previous

14 For the early Dutch involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, see Johannes Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1815* (Cambridge University Press 1990); Piet Emmer, *De Nederlandse slavenhandel 1500-1850* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Nieuw Amsterdam 2020); Ernst van den Boogaart and Piet Emmer, 'The Dutch Participation in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1596-1650', in: Henry

A. Gemery and Jan S. Hogendorn (eds.), *The Uncommon Market. Essays in the Economic History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Academic Press 1979) 353-375; Rik van Welie 'Slave Trading and Slavery in the Dutch Colonial Empire: A Global Comparison', *New West Indian Guide* 82:1 (2008) 47-96, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/13822373-90002465>.

attempts had been made to gain a foothold in Africa in the 1620s. In the first issue of 1638, Van Hilten included a report in his *Courante* stating that the Dutch had captured a ‘renowned and widely known fortress on which many attempts had been made throughout the years, [...] one of the principal strongholds that the King [of Spain] possessed on the whole coast of Africa’.<sup>15</sup> And in March of the same year, he reported that the board of the WIC expected great profits from the slave trade.<sup>16</sup> Expectations were heightened further when, in 1641, the WIC captured the important slave depot of São Paulo de Luanda and the island of São Tomé to secure the supply of forced labour to the plantations in Brazil.<sup>17</sup> This time Broer Jansz printed a triumphant bulletin claiming that the Dutch now controlled the African west coast from Guinea to the Cape of Good Hope – a sentiment later echoed by Van Hilten – and presenting Luanda as a treasure for the WIC: ‘This place is famous for the sale of Negroes, which is done there yearly to the number of 16,000: this will bring the Company great treasure every year.’<sup>18</sup>

Clearly, the slave trade was considered a lucrative business that would bring profit to the Dutch Republic. As long as the WIC primarily used its presence in Africa to supply Dutch Brazil with forced labour, the Dutch press very matter-of-factly included the slave trade in the news bulletins concerning Dutch Brazil: the arrival of captured Africans would be reported as part of a cargo. In June 1638, for instance, Van Hilten relayed the cargo of two ships, the *Witte Leeuw* and *Ter Tholen*, arriving in Brazil from Guinea, as ‘1,797 merck 9 ounces 4¼ English gold. 18,405 pounds of elephant’s teeth. 173,000 pounds of grain. 15,000 pounds of metal. 14,000 [pounds of] Angolan copper. 6,000 [pounds of] redwood. 133 pieces of eight. 36 pounds of silver. 414 pieces Negroes, that have been sold in Brazil for 124,200 guilders’.<sup>19</sup>

15 *Courante uyt Italien ende Duytschlandt &c.*, 2 January 1638: ‘Is alsoo dese vermaerde ende wijtberoemde fortresse, waerop veel aenslage over vele jaren zijn ghepractiseert geweest, tot groote bewonderinghe, door so cleyn gheweldt overwonnen: ’t is een van de voornaemste stercken die den Coninck op de geheele cust van Africa heeft, ende is van blauwen Arduynaopael opgebouwt.’

16 *Courante uyt Italien ende Duytschlandt &c.*, 13 March 1638: ‘Voorts stonden de saken in Brasilien so wel, dat de E. Heeren groote profijten van recognitie ende de Negros te verwachten hadden.’

17 Klaas Ratelband, *Nederlanders in West-Africa, 1600-1650. Angola, Kongo and São Tomé* (written in the 1940s but published by Walburg Pers in 2001) 98-103.

18 *Nouvelles de divers Quartiers*, 13 January 1642: ‘Ceste place est celebre pour la vente des Nigros qui se fait là annuellement au nombre de 16000: ce qui apportera à la Compagnie tous les ans un grand thresor.’; *Courante uyt Italien ende Duytschlandt &c.*, 1 March 1642.

19 *Courante uyt Italien ende Duytschlandt &c.*, 12 June 1638: ‘Haer ladinghe in ’t generael is 1797 merck 9 oncen 4¼ enghels gouts. 18405 pondt olyphants tanden. 173000 pondt greynen. 15000 pondt metael. 14000[pondt] Angola’s koper. 6000 [pondt] roothout. 133 Realen van achten. 36 pondt silver. 414 stuks Negros, die in Brasilien voor 124200 gulden verkocht zijn. Voorts laghen tot Fernamboucq noch vier schepen in ladinghe.’

The *Courante* simply listed the captured Africans with other colonial goods, equating them with precious metals, wood or sugar. The enslaved are further dehumanised by denoting them as pieces, most likely referring to the *piezas de indias* – a unit of value used to enumerate enslaved Africans. In this system, a healthy male African between 15 and 35 years of age would be counted as one *piece*, while women, children and less healthy captives would count for two thirds of a piece or less.<sup>20</sup>

In fact, the use of the term *pieces* to denote the arriving number of captives reinforces their representation as merchandise – products sold for the benefit of Dutch merchants and planters – rather than as people in their own right.<sup>21</sup> Unsurprisingly then, some of these cargo lists stressed the value of this new kind of merchandise by including the selling prices of the newly enslaved on the Brazilian slave markets. In this particular case, 414 *pieces* of Africans had been sold for 124,200 guilders, but by December 1638, prices seemed to have risen considerably, judging by another report printed in the *Courante* of a shipment of ‘338 [pieces of] slaves that had been sold for 265,257 guilders’ (see Figures 3 and 4).<sup>22</sup> While such news on specific prices would primarily have been of interest to merchants, it also informed a wider readership of the practice of selling captured Africans in the colonies.

As the Dutch involvement in the transatlantic slave trade changed form after the loss of Brazil in 1654, the coverage became less precise and more diverse. Dutch newspapers started to report occasionally on the need for and the arrival of enslaved Africans in the emerging English colonies in the Caribbean, such as Jamaica and Barbados. At the same time, especially after the Dutch acquired the monopoly on the slave trade to the Spanish Main in 1671 – the so-called *asiento de negros* – Curaçao began to feature as a transit station for shipments of captured Africans. The island’s proximity to the Spanish colonies meant it was an excellent location for the *asiento* traders. Casteleyn’s *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*, for instance, reported in October 1669 that Spanish ships came to the island to ‘collect 1,500 Negroes’ and that two ships ‘from Guinea carrying Blacks’ had arrived.<sup>23</sup> In 1675, the same newspaper included a bulletin confirming that the *asiento* had been granted to Antonio Garcia, who collaborated closely with Dutch merchants

20 Henk den Heijer, *De Geschiedenis van de wic* (Walburg Pers 1994) 158.

21 Catherine Hall has called it a ‘special kind of property’, as the humanity of the enslaved Africans obviously resisted commodification: ‘Gendering Property, Racing Capital’, *History Workshop Journal* 78 (2014) 22–38, there 27–28, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198768784.003.0002>.

22 *Courante uyt Italien ende Duytschlandt &c.*, 18 December 1638: ‘Item waren uyt Guinea tot Fernamboucq ghebraght 338 slaven, die voor 265257 guld. vercocht waren.’

23 *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*, 8 October 1669: ‘[...] gemelde Spangjaerts seght men, dat 1500 Negers quamen afhalen: Het Schip Africa en de Maria waren uyt Guinee met Swarten aldaer aengekomen.’

ghehuypde Schepen garriveert  
 Den 9 Junij is in Terel ghearriveert het  
 Schip 't Post-paert van Guinea / refererende  
 dat 't Schip de Witte Leeuw ende Ter-  
 Cholen / mede van de Custe van Guinea / tot Fer-  
 namboucq gebleven waren. Haer ladinge in 't  
 generael is 1797 Merck 9 oncen 4½ enghels  
 Gouts. 18405 pondt Olpphants Tandens.  
 173000 pondt Grepnen. 15000 pont Metael.  
 14000  $\mathcal{R}$  Angolas koper. 6000  $\mathcal{R}$  Roothout.  
 133 Realen van achten. 36 pondt Silver. 414  
 stuks Negros / die in Brasilien voor 124200  
 guldens vercocht zijn. Doozts laghen tot Fer-  
 namboucq noch vier Schepen in ladinghe.

By Hendrick ...

Venuepinge vande negros gesonden uit  
 Guinea met de schepen Witte Leeuw of ten  
 Toelen adij 12 maartij 1838  
 te betalen in de sommen naefsonende  
 met gelde losse sijcken tot haer vande  
 Heeren Hoogel de Seeste Raaden.

10 $\mathcal{R}$	manise Rodriguis mouds	ad 170:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	franc da Rocha & Vmcom	ad 175:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	migue Rodriguis mouds	ad 169:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	fran. de Brita	ad 195:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Joan Tenorio de moeina	ad 194:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	gonzalo novo	ad 188:
2 $\mathcal{R}$	antonio Rodriguis	ad 150:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Joan Faveros de matto	ad 204:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Joan Brandosa	ad 204:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Jesuan Valle	ad 190:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Joan Vadru Loyada	ad 194:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Joan Faveros de matto	ad 198:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	martinuis Landoum	ad 185:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	miguel Bondrichy	ad 197:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Andrick Geelty	ad 198:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Jordao da Costa	ad 202:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Joan Machado da Brito	ad 201:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	antonio Rodriguis moeina	ad 205:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Jacob Van der ...	ad 201:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Diego Loup de ...	ad 217:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Juan Tenorio molino	ad 214:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	mae mouds de Crasso	ad 209:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	de S. Jeruatinos Capomina	ad 179:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Joao Dias	ad 213:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Diego Suarez da Cunha	ad 225:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Joaquim Van der ...	ad 213:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Joan ...	ad 200:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Joao de ...	ad 207:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Joao ...	ad 194:
10 $\mathcal{R}$	Joao ...	ad 197:

of the Coymans family.<sup>24</sup> Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Dutch readers would find regular references to the slave trade in their newspaper, no longer in specific cargo lists but as part of colonial reports and shipping news.

The terminology used in the seventeenth-century Dutch newspaper coverage on the slave trade is worth a closer look. In the early days of Dutch involvement in the slave trade, reports occasionally referred to captive Africans as *slaven* (slaves) – as we have seen in the cargo lists – but most of the time they denoted them as ‘negroes’. In practice, the seventeenth-century Dutch periodical press would most often employ the Dutch term *slaaf* (slave) or *Christen-slaaf* (Christian slave) in bulletins concerning the enslavement of white European Christians by the corsairs in North Africa and the attempts to ensure their freedom. For instance, the *Amsterdamsche Courant* reported from Rome in 1672 that there was a plan ‘to organise a collection to [raise money] to liberate all slaves from the Holy See who were held captive in Turkey’.<sup>25</sup> Newspaper reports throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reflect that the practice of North African slavery generally sparked indignation and that the enslavement of Dutch, or other European, sailors and merchants inspired efforts to raise money to free them.<sup>26</sup>

Such a narrative does not surround the transatlantic slave trade, for which the coverage primarily adopted other terms. After the loss of Dutch Brazil in 1654, the use of *slaaf* to denote enslaved Africans decreased, while *negro* and *neger*, which had also been in use in the press from at least the 1630s onwards, became dominant. Entering a trade long dominated by the Spanish and the Portuguese, the Dutch adopted their word for black people, effectively equating being black with being enslaved. At times, the Dutch word *swarten* (blacks) or *mooren* (moors) would be used to refer to (enslaved) Africans, but this was relatively rare and, moreover, lacked precision, as it could refer to any kind of indigenous person in America, Africa or Asia. The eighteenth century

24 *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*, 5 February 1675.

25 *Amsterdamsche Courant*, 12 March 1672: ‘De Broederschap del Gonfalone hebben voorgenomen een Collecte te doen tot verlossing van alle de slaven van den Kerckelijcken staet, die in Turckyen gevangen sitten.’

26 For an account of contemporary experience, see Laura van den Broek et al. (eds.), *Christenslaven: de slavernij-ervaringen van Cornelis Stout in Algiers (1678-1680) en Maria ter Meetelen in Marokko (1731-1743)* (Walburg Pers 2006). Also: David Richardson, *Principles and Agents: The British Slave Trade and Its Abolition* (Yale University Press 2022) 104.



**Figures 3-4.** Above: the cargo of the ships *Witte Leeuw* and *Ter Tholen* in the *Courante*. Detail from the *Courante uyt Italien & Duytschlandt*, 12 June 1638. *Bibliothèque Mazarine*, 2° 5028-2 [Res], scan provided by Stadsarchief Amsterdam. Below: detail from the list of enslaved Africans on the ships *Witte Leeuw* and *Ter Tholen* as recorded in the archive of the WIC. 1.05.01.01, Inventaris van het archief van de Oude West-Indische Compagnie (OWIC), 1621-1674 (1711) 53 1638, scan 35/1.

saw a recurrence of the word *slaaven* (slaves), and later a new term emerged: *negerslaaven* (negro slaves). For instance, when covering a slave revolt in Curaçao in 1750, the Haarlem newspaper stated that ‘a large number of negro-slaves’ had planned ‘to take over the whole island and kill all white Europeans, Eurafricans, free negroes and those slaves who did not belong to their own ethnic group, defined as the Elmine nation from Guinea.’<sup>27</sup> The introduction of this term again implies that the Dutch periodical press distinguished different kinds of slaves: those who were white and Christian and those who were black and presumably heathen, and, more importantly, that the latter kind of slavery was acceptable, while the former was not.

### Covering slave resistance: (imagined) conspiracy and rebellion

Resistance to slavery became a recurring feature in the Dutch coverage when, in the mid-seventeenth century, the focus gradually shifted from the Dutch involvement in the slave trade to the plantation colonies in the Greater Caribbean, especially the English colonies. Slave resistance was a common feature of slave societies, increasing in lockstep with the expansion of the plantation economies; as it affected colonial trade, it was of interest to European audiences.<sup>28</sup> The coverage of rebellion, whether real or imagined, tends to develop along the same lines: in one or multiple bulletins, the newspapers summarily relate the outbreak and the subsequent suppression of rebellion, while highlighting the violent intentions or behaviour of the enslaved. Only in certain cases, when a rebellion lasted longer or occurred in a Dutch colony, does the coverage expand beyond that.

Severely outnumbered by a suppressed and often desperate enslaved population, the planters became increasingly fearful of rebellion, seeing plots and conspiracies everywhere.<sup>29</sup> As a result, the issue of slave resistance and the difficulties of controlling a majority population of enslaved Africans emerged in the Dutch newspapers in the shape of reports about slave revolts and purported plans for insurrection. This anxiety is reflected in 1702, for instance, when the *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant* recounted the discovery of a

27 *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*, 17 October 1750: ‘[...] door een groot getal Neger-Slaven, die, zo gezegd wierd, reeds byna 3 Maanden van te vooren opgestemd hadden, het geheele Eyland te bemachtigen, en alle Blanken, Moulatten, vrye Negers en zulke Slaven, die van Guineese d’Elmiense Natie niet waren, vermoord te worden, op een cruelle wys zyn leven te verliezen.’

28 Seminal studies on slave resistance in the Atlantic world include: Eugene D. Genovese, *From*

*Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Louisiana State University Press 1979); Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Cornell University Press 1982).

29 For a recent study on (perceived) slave conspiracies in the British Caribbean: Jason Sharples, *The World that Fear Made: Slave Revolts and Conspiracy Scares in Early America* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2021).

conspiracy on Barbados to burn down Bridgetown, conquer the forts and take over the island. The bulletin also referred to the precarious position of the planters, suggesting that the colonial authorities had to tread carefully in punishing the perpetrators, because there were ‘at least 35,000 Negroes but only 5,000 to 6,000 Englishmen to be found on that island’.<sup>30</sup>

Jason Sharples has recently shown that planters’ fears fed into a specific narrative of rebellion in which the enslaved population would conspire across plantations, elect a leader so as to violently overthrow colonial rule, and attempt to massacre the European population.<sup>31</sup> Readers of the *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant* would learn about plots in Barbados in 1675, 1683-1684, 1692 and 1702, but only by way of reports confirming that they had been discovered, and the perpetrators had been punished. The *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*, for instance, reported in October 1675 that a ship from Barbados had come in with news ‘that many Negroes, who had been found guilty of the last insurrection, had been punished in exemplary fashion’.<sup>32</sup> The purported plot, according to earlier news reports, had been to ‘kill all the inhabitants’ of Barbados.<sup>33</sup> The newspaper reports did not leave room for doubt as to whether the threat was real or not, and as such the coverage of such incidents gave the impression of volatility to readers in Europe. Through such bulletins, the periodical press represented enslaved Africans as unpredictable and violent, amplifying Europeans’ fear of revolts and forming their ideas of what possible insurrection would look like.

These tropes were reinforced throughout the eighteenth century, and the rhetoric of violence escalated in 1763 when the Dutch press had to contend with a major uprising in Berbice, one of its own colonies.<sup>34</sup> With rebellion occurring within the Dutch empire, the periodical press naturally reported extensively and across the entire Republic – reaching a considerable audience. Building on the coverage of earlier rebellions, the newspapers chose to focus on the violence and destruction perpetrated by the rebel slaves, without paying any attention to the underlying causes of, or possible solutions to, the conflict. The early coverage of the insurrection in the Dutch

30 *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*, 25 March 1702: ‘doordien van de Negers ten minsten 35000 en maer 5 à 6000 Engelse op dat Eylant gevonden werden’; the *Amsterdamsche Courant* ran almost the same story but stated that the enslaved population amounted to around 45,000.

31 Sharples, *The World that Fear Made*, 12-15.

32 *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*, 15 October 1675: ‘Londen den 8 October. [...] Gisteren quam in Duyns een Schip van de Barbados, waer van den Schipper bericht, dat veele Negers, die aldaer schuldigh zijn gevonden aen de laetste Oproer,

exemplaerlijck zijn gestraft, en of noch eenige voort van deselve mochten overgebleven zijn, was op alle Plaetsen ordre daer tegen gestelt.’

33 *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*, 29 August 1675: ‘[...] dat voor desselfs [Barbados] vertreck eene Conspiratie van de Negers, om alle d’Inwoonders te vermoorden, aldaer ontdeckt was [...]’.

34 See Marjoleine Kars, *Blood on the River: A Chronicle of Mutiny and Freedom on the Wild Coast* (The New Press 2020); Baakman, “‘Their Power has been Broken’”.



**Figure 5.** Rebel armed with musket, bandolier for ammunition, and hatchet. Engraving after the drawing by J.G. Stedman (1744-1797) and print by William Blake by Tardieu l'aîné, in: *Voyage a Surinam [...]*, Parijs 1799. © Zeeuws Archief, Beeld en Geluid, inv.nr. 589.

press was that of total defeat in the face of barbaric violence of the enslaved population.

An early report from June 1763 related that around 3,000 ‘Creoles or Negroes’ had conspired to rebel and had besieged the main fort, which was soon abandoned and destroyed by the Governor, Wolfert Simon van Hoogenheim, leaving the colony wide open for the insurgents (see Figure 5). Even though these estimates were later downgraded to between 1,000 and 1,500, the coverage emphasised the ‘ferocity’ (*verwoedheid*) of the rebels and described how ‘they did not spare men, women or children, not even the plantation slaves who offered them any resistance’.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the *Opregte Groninger Courant* stressed the bloodthirstiness and barbarism of the insurgents, speaking of a ‘chilling revolt’, ‘indiscriminate’ and ‘inhumane killing’, and of the murdering of families, including ‘the most delicate children and infants’.<sup>36</sup> In July, the *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant* recounted in a long bulletin, based on the accounts given by European refugees from the colony, that in the initial wave of assaults around twenty Europeans had been killed, and most of the European families had fled aboard ships moored on the river. Of those who were unable to flee, some ‘had been severely whipped, others were slowly cut to pieces, and yet others were mercifully shot’.<sup>37</sup> As such, the mainstay of the reporting on the early stages of the Berbice revolt concerned the violent actions of the rebels and their ‘excessive anger and rage’, stirring up debate in the Dutch Republic as to how the colony could be assisted in its fight.

The coverage of larger-scale rebellions in the second half of the eighteenth century, such as the Berbice rebellion, clearly builds on earlier coverage of the preceding century. In contrast to the reporting in the seventeenth century, which tended to be terse and mostly factual in tone, these eighteenth-century news reports became more extensive as rebellions grew in scale, and these bulletins escalated the existing tropes of violence and bloodthirstiness by providing graphic descriptions of what allegedly happened across the Atlantic. Such news reports did not consider possible causes for revolts and offered no critical engagement with the issue of slavery, despite the increasing voices of dissent in especially literary circles. The newspapers’ focus was on the interests of the colonists and their suffering at the hands of the rebels, as well as the consequences for colonial trade.

35 *Leydse Courant*, 6 June 1763: ‘[...] dat zy niemant, het zy Man, Vrouw of Kinderen, ja zelfs de Plantagie-Slaaven, die hun maar eenigen tegenstand deden, spaarden’.

36 *Opregte Groninger Courant*, 10 June 1763: ‘[...] massacreerden, zelfs de tederste Kinderen en Zuigelingen niet uytgezondert [...]’. The definitive confirmation of the rebellion also

made it into the June issue of the *Maandelykse Nederlandsche Mercurius* 14 (1763) 230–231.

37 *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*, 12 July 1763: ‘Zommige zyn deerlyk van hen gezweept, andere zeer langzaam van lid tot lid van elkander gekapt, en wederom andere hebben op het genadigst een Kogel door het Lyf gekregen.’

**(Anti-)abolitionism in the press**

In the wake of several major slave revolts across the Caribbean and North America and growing issues with maroon communities across the Atlantic world, public debate on slavery in Europe gathered pace in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. In this emerging debate, the Dutch newspapers play an ambiguous, if not outright contradictory role. In its coverage of slavery in the Atlantic world, the periodical press maintained the stereotypes of enslaved Africans as violent and dangerous, which it had developed over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while it also provided extensive reports on political debates on slavery and the transatlantic slave trade in Great Britain and France – feeding into anti-abolitionist and abolitionist narratives in equal measure.

Dutch public debate on slavery remained relatively confined until the late eighteenth century. In the 1740s, Jacobus Capitein – a formerly enslaved African brought to the Dutch Republic – offered theological arguments in favour of slavery, whereas Bernardus Smytegelt used theology to voice dissent regarding slavery.<sup>38</sup> Both texts provide insights into the arguments of eighteenth-century proponents and opponents of slavery, but as scholarly writings, their contributions likely had a limited reach. In the 1770s, the Dutch debate relied for the most part on translations of a wide variety of publications directed against slavery and the slave trade appearing all over Europe, and on the attention devoted to the topic by a limited number of Dutch periodicals.

In 1774, *De Koopman* used the Maroon Wars in Suriname as a starting point for a discussion on slavery, arguing that the ongoing troubles with the enslaved population were a logical outcome of the abhorrent treatment of the enslaved.<sup>39</sup> In 1775, the spectator *De Vaderlander* connected slavery with the luxurious lifestyle of some in the Dutch Republic, reminding its readers that coffee was only available to them because of slave labour.<sup>40</sup> Until the mid-1780s this Dutch debate remained quite marginal, often led by Mennonites and Remonstrants, but foreign publications kept the discussion going. A little over a decade later, between 1789 and 1791, an extended exchange between advocates and adversaries of slavery in the journal *Bijdragen tot het menschelijk geluk* gave the debate on slavery a new impetus.<sup>41</sup> As a result, even though

38 Johannes Capitein, *Staatkundig-godgeleerd onderzoekschrift over de slaverny, als niet strydig tegen de christelyke vryheid* (Amsterdam: Gerrit de Groot, 1742); Bernardus Smytegelt, *Des christens eenige troost in leven en sterven* (Leiden: D. Donner, 1747).

39 *De Koopman*, 4 (1773) nos. 32 and 33.

40 'De Oorzaak der Slaverny', in: *De Vaderlander* 43 (1775).

41 This exchange is discussed in Simon Vuyk, "'Wat is dit anders dan met onze eigen hand deze gruwelen te plegen?'" Remonstrantse en doopsgezinde protesten tegen slavenhandel en slavernij in het laatste decennium van de achttiende eeuw', in: *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen, nieuwe reeks* 32 (2006) 171-206, and is also referenced in Brandon, "'Shrewd Sirens of Humanity'".

no effective abolitionist movement arose in the Dutch Republic, abolitionist ideas did pervade public and political debate. The *Nieuwe Nederlandsche Jaerboeken* could rightly state in 1790 that ‘much is reasoned, doubted, argued at the moment whether the trade in and use of slaves is acceptable or not’.<sup>42</sup>

Amid all the arguing, the Dutch newspapers enter an ambiguous phase in their coverage of slavery. On the one hand, the general reporting on the colonies consistently emphasised the violent resistance of the enslaved. In April 1786, for instance, several newspapers reported that Saint-Eustatius, temporarily without a governor, had been left to the mercy of a violent black mob committing ‘the cruellest and most unspeakable crimes’.<sup>43</sup> There were also indications of how slave owners in the Caribbean, and presumably elsewhere in the Americas, framed the abolitionist debate. For instance, in 1788, an intriguing report from Jamaica related how, according to the planters, upon hearing that the abolition of slavery might be on the cards, the enslaved labourers reacted by violently turning on their masters.<sup>44</sup> Here, the Jamaican planter elite clearly employed the argument, often levelled in the abolitionist debate, that the enslaved were by no means ready to be free and that freeing them would bring disaster upon Europeans in the colonies. Despite such attitudes in the colonies, in the late eighteenth century there were also contrasting reports referring to the abolition of slavery (or attempts thereto) in the northern states of the recently established United States or to publications and speeches by abolitionists such as Thomas Clarkson in New York.<sup>45</sup>

This ambiguity in the Dutch newspaper coverage comes to a head in the years following the French Revolution. When a major slave revolt erupted in the northern province of Saint-Domingue, the centrepiece of the French colonial empire also characterised as the ‘pearl of the Antilles’, in August 1791, the coverage did not really diverge from the established pattern.<sup>46</sup> Initial reports blew the size of the revolt out of proportion: supposedly 30,000 slaves revolted, and almost 10,000 were said to have been killed in a counterattack by the colonists.<sup>47</sup> Even though the *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*

42 *Nieuwe Nederlandsche Jaerboeken* 1 (1789) 758: ‘veel wordt thans over den Slavenhandel geredeneerd, getwyffeld, voor en tegen getwist, of die handel en het gebruik van slaven geoorloofd is, of niet’.

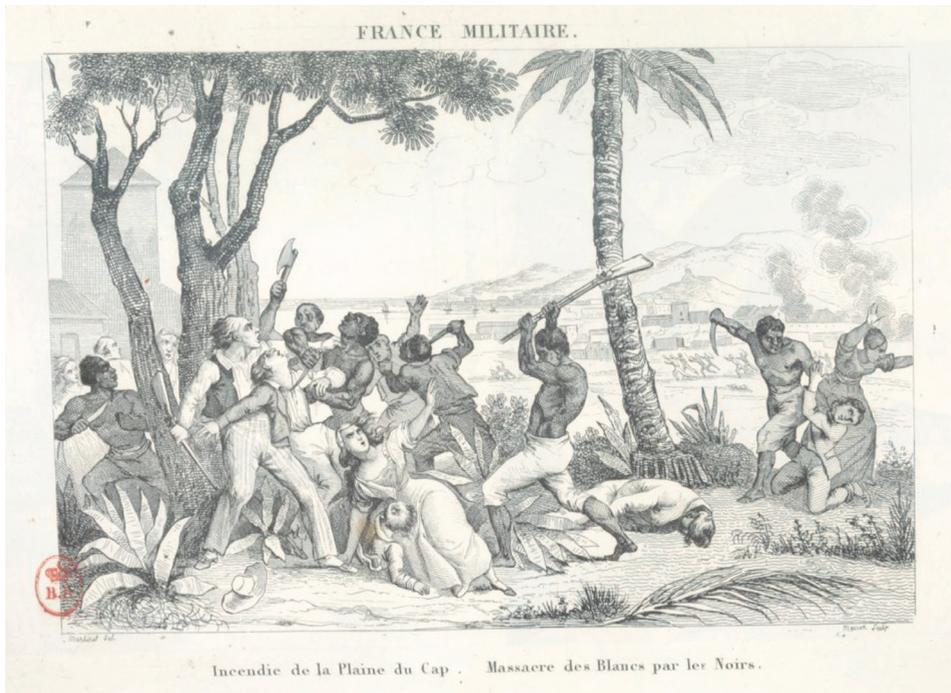
43 For instance, in the *Nederlandsche Courant* of 5 April 1786 and the *Leeuwarder Courant* of 22 April 1786.

44 *Rotterdamsche Courant*, 19 August 1788.

45 The *Hollandsche Historische Courant* of 12 May 1785 reported on the possible abolition in the state of New York; the *Rotterdamsche Courant* of 21 October 1786 referred to a speech given by Thomas Clarkson.

46 Karwan Fatah-Black already devoted some attention to the coverage of the revolt in his Keti Koti lecture: Kawan Fatah-Black, ‘Waar de ketenen begonnen te breken: de in Nederland vergeten afschaffing van 1793’, Amsterdam, 30 June 2020. See also his contribution in this special issue: Karwan Fatah-Black, ‘“Oh Dutchmen, Defer this Catastrophe”’: The Haitian Revolution and the Decline of Abolitionism in the Netherlands, ca. 1790-1840’, *BMGN – LCHR* 139:3 (2024). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmg-n-lchr.12788>.

47 *Rotterdamsche Courant*, 29 October 1791.



**Figure 6.** This nineteenth-century depiction of the revolt in Saint-Domingue entitled 'Incendie de la Plaine du Cap. Massacre des Blancs par les Noirs' clearly shows how compelling the frame of enslaved Africans as violent was. Illustration published in Abel Hugo, *France militaire: histoire des armées françaises de terre et de mer de 1792 à 1833*, tome 1 (Paris: Delloye, 1833) in between pages 264 and 265. © Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Philosophie, histoire, sciences de l'homme, 4-LH3-84. <http://ark.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb306249368>, Source gallica.bnf.fr/BnF.

conceded that these stories might not be true, such reports would most likely have been meant to instil fear in European readers and elicit support from metropolitan governments. After this, practically all the communications from the colony that made it to the Dutch press consisted of a litany of acts of violence allegedly perpetrated by the enslaved rebels – not dissimilar to how these newspapers had covered the revolt in Berbice 30 years before. Without exception the bulletins emphasised the horrors of the revolt. According to the *Leydse Courant*, an English merchant had never encountered ‘such a gruesome scene’ and considered ‘all to be lost’.<sup>48</sup> In emphasising the violence and the bloodshed, the coverage of the revolt on Saint-Domingue was in line with earlier coverage of slave resistance (see Figure 6).

However, in addition to the now conventional coverage of slave revolts as violent and gruesome, a new element came to the fore. Alongside the relatively factual reports from the colony, the Dutch newspapers carried reports from France and Great Britain that showed that from the outset, the story of the revolt in Saint-Domingue was highly politicised. Contrary to 1763, news of the rebellion reached Europe at a time when slavery was becoming a bone of contention in European public debate. What was extraordinary about the coverage of the uprising was an explicit shifting of blame and responsibility, for the first time. The *Gazette de Leyde* reported that two opposing parties within the National Assembly in Paris ‘blamed each other for those disasters’.<sup>49</sup>

The dissenting opinions in the ongoing debate in France regarding the severity of the revolt and the appropriate response of the French government were closely followed by the Dutch periodical press. On 10 November, the *Rotterdamsche Courant* reported that Jacques Pierre Brisot, a member of the French *Assemblée Nationale* and co-founder of the abolitionist *Société des Amis des Noirs*, spoke out against sending reinforcements to Saint-Domingue.<sup>50</sup> Five days later the same paper reported that another member of the *Assemblée*, Merlin ‘de Thionville’, refused to support a motion to thank the governor of Jamaica for his assistance. He reminded the assembly that ‘today you want to tighten those chains, and you forget that you, by sacred rebellions, have broken your own’.<sup>51</sup> This caution was then followed by the ‘more moderate

48 *Leydse Courant*, 7 November 1791: ‘Nooit zag ik zulk een yselyk Schouwspel [...] naar myn inzien is alles verloren.’

49 *Gazette de Leyde*, 8 November 1791: ‘C’est en ce Moment que les deux Partis, opposes dans l’Assemblée Nationale, s’accusent réciproquement de ces désastres.’

50 *Rotterdamsche Courant*, 10 November 1791.

51 *Rotterdamsche Courant*, 15 November 1791: ‘[...] heden wilt gy deze ketenen vaster klinken en

gy vergeet, dat gy, door heilige oproeren, de uwen verbroken hebt’. The report refers to the speaker as Mr Merlin. This is most likely Antoine Christophe Merlin ‘de Thionville’. See Gregory Fremont-Barnes, *Encyclopedia of the Age of Political Revolutions and New Ideologies, 1760-1815*: A-L (Greenwood Press 2007) 470-471.

view' that even if half of the news about the uprising were true, it would be very troubling, especially since Saint-Domingue was so central to the French colonial system.<sup>52</sup>

Based on the coverage, not all French voices justified or supported the revolt in Saint-Domingue. There are several references to the abolitionist *Amis des Noirs* as being responsible for the revolt, with the *Gazette de Leyde* even intimating that the King quipped, when apprised of the news of the revolt: 'Voilà, see here what comes of the predictions of Abbé Grégoire & the other [*Amis des*] *Noirs*', referring to the predictions of society-member Abbé Grégoire that violence would ensue if enslaved Africans were to be denied their rights.<sup>53</sup> When official reports from Saint-Domingue finally arrived, Governor Blanchelande stated that he feared that 'the revolt had been contrived by Whites, who were sent from France out of so-called love for humanity and have spread throughout the Provinces, in which case the Colony would be irrevocably lost'.<sup>54</sup> Clearly, in French political debate, the assessment of the capacities of the slave rebels in Saint-Domingue was somewhat contradictory. The same commentators who initially lamented the destruction of the colony by what they perceived to be a violent mob, later on implied that these same enslaved Africans could not have revolted on their own accord. So, the agency of the enslaved rebels was confirmed by the success of their insurrection, but was subsequently undermined by the suggestion that this could only have been achieved with European assistance, justifying the need for their enslavement.

The issues in Saint-Domingue sparked discussion not only in Paris but also in Great Britain, where parliament hotly debated the French and Haitian revolutions.<sup>55</sup> Edmund Burke, the famous critic of the both revolutions, argued that the notion of human rights had had dramatic consequences in the French colonies so far. Like the Jamaican planters before him, he was employing the argument that the promise of liberty and equality would lead to 'lack of government, confusion, and bloodshed'.<sup>56</sup> Unsurprisingly, then,

52 *Rotterdamsche Courant*, 15 November 1791: 'Dan lieden van een gematigder denkwijs [...]'. For the debate in the Constituent Assembly: David Geggus, 'Racial Equality, Slavery, and Colonial Secession during the Constituent Assembly', *American Historical Review* 94:5 (1989) 1290-1308, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1906352>.

53 *Gazette de Leyde*, 1 November 1791: 'Le Roi, en donnant lui-même cette facheuse Nouvelle à Mr de Cereste lui a dit, « Voilà pourtant l'effet des predications de l'Abbé Grégoire & des autres [*Amis des*] *Noirs* ».'

54 *Rotterdamsche Courant*, 17 November 1791: 'Het is zeer te vreezen, dat de opstand gesmeed is door Blanken, welken uit de zoogenaamde menschenliefde uit Frankryk gezonden zyn, en zich in de Provincien verspreid hebben, in welk geval de Kolonie onherstelbaar verloren is.'

55 See David Geggus, 'British Opinion and the Emergence of Haiti, 1791-1805', in: James Walvin (ed.), *Slavery and British Society 1776-1846* (Louisiana State University Press 1982) 123-149.

56 *Rotterdamsche Courant*, 17 May 1791: '[...] dat er niet anders dan regeringloosheit, verwarring, en bloedstortingn plaats hadden'.

the Dutch press also reported that the British decided to send assistance to the colonial government of Saint-Domingue to quell the revolt while at the same time strengthening its hold on the enslaved population on nearby Jamaica. The revolt on Saint-Domingue stirred the emotions of politicians in the slave-holding nations, and even though Dutch political debate remained marginal, Dutch readers could follow it through the eyes of French and British parliamentarians.

By covering these political debates in France and Great Britain, the Dutch periodical press indirectly contributed to abolitionist discourse in the Dutch Republic. This resulted in an interesting contradiction in the newspapers' approach to the question of slavery. On the one hand, the day-to-day reporting on the revolt did not diverge from the established pattern and presented a bleak picture of the behaviour of the rebels, reinforcing the existing stereotypes of enslaved Africans as dangerous and unfit to be given their freedom. This news narrative left little room for the justification of the revolt and its underlying causes, let alone the abolition of slavery. Yet, at the same time, the periodical press published accounts of the political debate in the parliaments of Europe, where slavery was increasingly contested, offering a window into the arguments on both sides of the debate, building on an awareness of slavery and the slave trade present since the early seventeenth century.

## Conclusion

The Dutch periodical press dealt with the issue of slavery and the slave trade in the Atlantic world from the moment the WIC became actively involved in the slave trade in the first decades of the seventeenth century. From the outset, the coverage underpinned and legitimised slavery by introducing transatlantic slavery to a wider public and presenting enslaved Africans as part of cargo lists, equated with material goods – stressing their dehumanisation. The language used to describe the captives further reinforced this, and through the coverage of conspiracies and rebellions in the American colonies, the newspapers confirmed stereotypes of the enslaved as violent and dangerous. In the course of the seventeenth century, the focus shifted mostly to slave resistance, but even though there was a slight shift away from the purely economic, slavery continued to appear as a matter of fact in the periodical press even in the final third of the eighteenth century – simply as part of the dealings of the Atlantic world. In their coverage the newspapers generally portrayed the enslaved rebels as ruthless, and the colonists as helpless and innocent victims. At the same time, the reporting of slave resistance and the political debates it inspired in the parliaments of Europe in the late eighteenth century did contribute to a certain awareness of the injustices of slavery – leaving it up to readers to reconcile the ambiguous representation of

slavery. So, even though there may not have been a British-style abolitionist debate in the Netherlands in the late eighteenth century, the Dutch newspaper audience would have been aware of slavery from the very first steps in the slave trade in Dutch Brazil, and by the late eighteenth century readers would be well placed to form their own opinion regarding the troubles in the colonies and the (political) debate surrounding the issue of slavery.



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