

Orangism, Patriotism, and Slavery in Curaçao, 1795–1796*

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ABSTRACT: The defeat of the Dutch armies by the French and the founding of the Batavian Republic in 1795 created confusion in the colonies and on overseas naval vessels about who was in power. The Stadtholder fled to England and ordered troops and colonial governments to surrender to the British, while the Batavian government demanded that they abjure the oath to the Stadtholder. The ensuing confusion gave those on board Dutch naval vessels overseas, and in its colonies, an opportunity to be actively involved in deciding which side they wished to be on. This article adds the mutinies on board the *Ceres* and *Medea* to the interplay between the Curaçao slave revolt of 1795 and the rise of the Curaçaoan Patriot movement in 1796. The mariners independently partook in the battle for the political direction of the island and debated which side they wished to be on in the fight between the French Revolution and the British Empire.

INTRODUCTION

In 1795 the island of Curaçao was rocked by one of the larger slave revolts of the age of revolution.¹ The revolt was closely connected with the uprising in Saint-Domingue and the unstable political situation in the

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1. David Geggus, “Slave Rebellion During the Age of Revolution”, in Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie (eds), *Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions, 1795–1800* (Leiden, 2011), pp. 23–56, 40–49.

Netherlands, and both in their symbols and their songs the rebellious slaves referred favourably to the French and Haitian revolutions.² The uprising occurred during a tumultuous time, for August 1795 was not long after the Dutch Republic had been invaded by the French revolutionary army in January of the same year. During the invasion revolutionary associations had taken control of government in many Dutch towns and had formed the Batavian Republic, which existed from 1795–1806. Opposition to the revolutionary ferment crystallized around Stadtholder William V. The Stadtholder, the head of state of the Dutch Republic, was traditionally a member of the House of Orange. William V, with the help of a Prussian invasion led by his brother-in-law, had crushed an attempted revolution under the leadership of the Patriot movement in 1787. Now, in 1795, when the Patriot movement had regained momentum and Patriot exiles had returned to the Netherlands, the Orangists looked again to the Stadtholder to lead a counter-offensive. But the French invasion drove William V to Kew, London from whence he began working to undermine the newly founded Batavian Republic. He wrote letters to the governors of the Dutch colonies and overseas possessions asking them to surrender to British forces.

Given the context, in which the Patriot movement is associated with both the uprisings by enslaved and free non-Europeans in Curaçao, as well as with the violent overthrow of the Stadtholder in the Netherlands, we should expect (in line with the position taken by the “petit blancs” in Saint-Domingue during the French and Haitian revolutions) that the sailors and soldiers on board vessels of the Dutch navy in the port of Willemstad would stand firmly behind their Prince of Orange and favour continuation of the segregation of white and black. At first sight the soldiers and sailors would not stand to gain much if their patron – and with him the entire system of patronage within the military – were to be overthrown; and still less if non-white colonial subjects should gain a more equal position, for that would reduce the few privileges enjoyed by the military as a result of their European ancestry. And indeed, quite a few soldiers and sailors did rally behind the Prince and were easily mobilized against the slave revolt. However, their allegiance to the Orangists seems to have been neither wholehearted nor unanimous, with clear signs of divisions in individual ships and between the crews of different ships about whom to support in the conflict. Some were outspoken in support of the Patriots while others “voted with their feet” by joining forces with non-white Curaçaoans to plot desertion and ultimate escape from the colony.

2. Klooster and Oostindie, *Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions*, a collection of articles on Curaçao's turbulent history at the end of the eighteenth century, treats these issues in great detail.

What determined the loyalties of Dutchmen in those turbulent times? Were their choices politically motivated and, in keeping with this volume's main topic, was there a sort of maritime radicalism in the Dutch navy informing their limited support for the Prince of Orange and the "aristocracy of colour"? Our inability to hear the voices of the men involved effectively prevents any definitive answer to those questions, but it is still possible to reconstruct fragments of exchanges on board the naval vessels using a range of sources. Of primary importance to this article is the shipboard administration of the frigate *Ceres*. The lists of debts and accounts of the auctions of the belongings of men who had died or deserted tell us a lot about shipboard life. From the colonial archive much becomes clear about the context in which men chose to desert, to mutiny, or to accommodate the momentous political and social transformation taking place in their world. I will look at the economic position of sailors, their role in the slave revolt, and their acts of resistance throughout their stay in the port, and I shall devote special attention to their involvement in the political conflict between Orangists and Patriots within the island's government and military forces.

BALANCE OF POWER

As a trade-oriented nodal point with a secure natural harbour, Curaçao was strongly centred on Willemstad, the single urban core of the island and named after William II, Duke of Nassau and Prince of Orange, who had been Stadtholder when Curaçao was conquered and taken from the Spanish in 1634. A census of 1789 established that there were 12,864 slaves, 3,564 whites, and 3,714 free black and coloured Curaçaoans on the island and that most of them lived in and around the town: in fact 42 per cent of the slaves, 95 per cent of the whites, and nearly 90 per cent of the free non-whites lived in Willemstad. The whole urban population, including the free black, coloured, and enslaved Curaçaoans "worked in the commercial and maritime branches of the Curaçaoan economy".³

Fort Nassau (its building now a restaurant) overlooks the port of Willemstad, and any vessel sailing through the harbour mouth would have come within range of its cannons. The fort was built as Fort Republiek [Fort Republic] on a hill above the town covering its port. That it was completed in 1797 by a Patriot military committee which had assumed power through a coup d'état against the Orangists in December 1796 testifies to the dynamism of the Patriot government as well as to their will

3. Han Jordaan, "Free Blacks and Coloreds and the Administration of Justice in Eighteenth-Century Curaçao", *New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, 84:1–2 (2010), pp. 63–86, 79–80.



Figure 1. View on Willemstad around 1800, with Fort Republiek prominently on the hill in the background.

Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, Washington DC. Public Domain.

to organize the island's defences without relying on the Dutch navy.⁴ The artillery placed in the fortress the same year was manned by coloured mariners recruited by the Curaçaoan Patriots of the Military Committee.⁵ The transition from the pre-revolutionary Dutch-led defence of the island to their more locally organized National Guard highlights how rebellious actions by slaves, sailors, and citizens in the colony intersected and changed Curaçao profoundly in the context of an age of revolution. It is therefore very telling that in the nineteenth century the Dutch chose to change the name to Fort Nassau, as if to erase the memory of its anti-Orangist history.

In the late eighteenth century the dire state of the Dutch navy and the lack of colonial control over Curaçao's population, both free and enslaved, created a volatile situation on the island. The Patriot movement

4. J. Hartog, *Het fort op de berg. Gedenkboek bij het tweehonderdjarig bestaan van Fort Nassau op Curaçao* (Assen, 1996), pp. 3–13.

5. Han Jordaán, "Slavernij en Vrijheid op Curaçao. De dynamiek van een achttiende-eeuws Atlantisch handelsknooppunt" (Ph.D. dissertation, Leiden University, 2012), p. 219.

that took control of Curaçao in December 1796 was a complicated mixture of a Dutch movement for national centralization of the state, the revival of the glory of the Netherlands as a republic, and a local movement that wished to maintain the position of the island as a free port between the various Atlantic empires. In the context of the Haitian and French revolutions the various incarnations of the Patriot movement were also a vehicle for the emancipation of people who had until then been excluded from positions of power simply because they were not Europeans. By taking control, the islanders with more than just European ancestry became fully integrated in the island's defence organization, and the garrison and naval vessels became less vital to the port's defence.

The changed status of the naval vessels in the organization of the local defences signified a great change in the balance of power on the island. The navy had been the primary instrument of state power on the island, but was manned and directed primarily by people from the Dutch Republic rather than the Curaçao-based civilian militia. In the two years after the founding of the Batavian Republic the frigates *Ceres* and *Medea* moored in Willemstad became the focus of struggles over political direction as much as over the working conditions on board the ships themselves. Disagreement developed into running battles in the streets, desertions, disrupted public ceremonies, refusal of orders, and a mass discharge of the crew and garrison in July and August of 1796. While the slave revolt of 1795 has received a good deal of attention from historians, the 1796 Patriot coup d'état and the insubordination on board the *Ceres* and *Medea* are treated as afterthoughts (if they are mentioned at all). On close examination, however, the landside revolt by the enslaved Curaçaoans in 1795, the rise of the local variant of the Patriot movement, and the insubordination of soldiers and sailors in 1796 turn out to be closely linked.

Orangism in naval crews is usually used to explain why they were rowdy and insubordinate during the Patriot takeover of Curaçao.⁶ The historiography has emphasized the support for the House of Orange found among common soldiers and sailors in Dutch service, but that support was by no means universal in the navy. Orangism, in fact, turns out to have been a phenomenon in the officer corps rather than among the lower ranks.⁷ In the Dutch Republic, popular Orangism formed the template for opposition to civic regents who were abusing their economic and political power in the Dutch cities, while the dynamic of supporting a distant Prince of Orange against the brutish locals certainly did not create

6. T.H. Milo, "De Bataafsche Marine in Curaçao, 1795–1800", *Marineblad*, 51 (1936), pp. 326–345, 483–496.

7. Niklas Frykman, "The Wooden World Turned Upside Down: Naval Mutinies in the Age of Atlantic Revolution" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2010), pp. 168–169.

any deep-seated loyalty. During the series of revolts and wars grouped under the “age of revolution” the God-given right of royal families came into question, and in the Dutch Republic the mythical role of the princes of Orange-Nassau in delivering the provinces from unjust rulers came under serious challenge from the Patriots who, in opposition to the royal aspirations of Orange-Nassau, argued for a centralized republic.

Overseas, the split in Dutch politics and society took a different form. In Willemstad the faltering international power of the Dutch made the split between Orangism and Patriotism less about the question of centralized government and reduced it to the choice either for a British takeover of the island – favoured by the Orangists – or against it. Within the Patriot movement on Curaçao there was a division between those who wished to recreate the position of the port as a neutral and autonomously governed nodal point in the Caribbean, and those who hoped for radical social change which they thought would be helped by the arrival of the revolutionary French army.⁸ In the context of a non-white population in the throes of emancipation, Patriotism denoted skin colour too,⁹ making oppositional lower-deck Patriotism on board naval vessels all the more interesting as a phenomenon, breaching as it did both the dominance of Orangism and white racial solidarity as frames of reference for insubordinate sailors. Politically divided and unreliable, the naval crews were in the end distrusted by the local Patriots, who then chose to strengthen their defences independently of the navy.

CURAÇAO IN THE CARIBBEAN

Curaçao was not simply a little bit of Dutch society overseas; it was strongly influenced by the world at large through its connections within the Caribbean and the wider Atlantic. In the mid-1790s the political conflicts between the Orangists and both the pro-French and the more autonomy-oriented varieties of Patriot support intersected with the regional interests of the British, French, North American, and “perhaps a Haitian drive to export revolution”, as well as “Venezuelan revolutionaries taking refuge in Curaçao”. The interplay of a multitude of forces was the result of the island’s “long-standing status as a free trade zone and the ties its inhabitants had developed around the region”.¹⁰

In the seventeenth century Curaçao had been a hub for both legal and illegal slave trading to the Spanish colonies. The *asiento de negros* of the

8. Karwan Fatah-Black, “The Patriot Coup d’Etat in Curaçao, 1796”, in Klooster and Oostindie, *Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions*, pp. 123–140, 127–130.

9. Jordaen, “Slavernij en vrijheid”, pp. 229–235.

10. Gert Oostindie, “Slave Resistance, Colour Lines, and the Impact of the French and Haitian Revolutions in Curaçao”, in Klooster and Oostindie, *Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions*, p. 11.

Spanish crown had been the formal agreement by which traders of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) could sell Africans to the Spanish mainland colonies. Before and after the formal *asiento* trade Curaçao functioned as an illegal slave market,¹¹ but with the rise of the commercial and military power of the English and French in the Atlantic, the WIC lost its *asiento* and, simultaneously, Curaçao's position as a hub in the Atlantic world declined. However, its natural harbour and proximity to Tierra Firme did ensure its position as an entrepôt where Caribbean goods could be collected before they were sent to Europe.¹²

The colony was closely connected to the wider Caribbean, and important trades in Curaçao were cacao from the Spanish colonies and indigo from the southern peninsula of French Saint-Domingue.¹³ Southern Saint-Domingue saw successful indigo production by free coloureds, and the trading partners of the Curaçaoan merchants on Saint-Domingue were often former Curaçaoans.¹⁴ Garrigus has detailed the career of Julien Raimond, including his contributions to racial reform during the 1780s and early 1790s and his commercial relations with Curaçao.¹⁵ Such “contacts were strengthened through intermarriage between the well-to-do coloured families of both colonies”. Preceding the slave revolt of 1795 there was a rumour that Rigaud, a mulatto general from southern Saint-Domingue, was on his way to lead a liberation struggle on Curaçao.¹⁶ The actual general of Curaçao's rebellious slave army, Tula, was himself nicknamed Rigaud. Those who fled Saint-Domingue for Curaçao after the beginning of the 1791 slave revolt were cited by Curaçao's government as a troublesome element in the city.

Coloured Curaçaoans who maintained connections with their mother colony could be found in many different colonies dotted around the Caribbean.¹⁷ Curaçaoan sailors and small traders or smugglers transmitted information within the wider Caribbean, and news of the revolt in Saint-Domingue or the French occupation of the Netherlands was more likely to be circulated to their families and friends by the seamen directly than by passengers on board foreign vessels. In the mid-1780s “sixty-eight

11. Johannes Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600–1815* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 26–55.

12. Wim Klooster, *Illicit Riches: Dutch Trade in the Caribbean, 1648–1795* (Leiden, 1995).

13. Han Jordaen, “Patriots, Privateers and International Politics: The Myth of the Conspiracy of Jean Baptiste Tierce Cadet”, in Klooster and Oostindie, *Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions*, pp. 141–169, 153.

14. Wim Klooster, “The Rising Expectations of Free and Enslaved Blacks in the Greater Caribbean”, in Klooster and Oostindie, *Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions*, pp. 57–74, 67.

15. J.D. Garrigus, “Opportunist or Patriot? Julien Raimond (1744–1801) and the Haitian Revolution”, *Slavery & Abolition*, 28 (2007), pp. 1–21.

16. A.F. Paula, 1795, *De Slavenopstand op Curaçao: een bronnenuitgave van de originele overheidsdocumenten* (Curaçao, 1974).

17. Klooster, “Rising Expectations”, p. 67.

vessels arrived annually in Willemstad from Saint Domingue”, and the outbreak of the revolt in 1791 did not break the connection. Maritime labour was a central occupation for free non-whites, giving many families, neighbourhoods, and parishes access to news from around the Caribbean. The number of sailors was so large that when “a disappointing number of free coloureds reported for militia inspection on Curaçao on the first day of 1793, their captains explained the many absentees by reference to the trade with the French colonies, in which they were employed”.¹⁸ Because of the closeness of the shipping network it is no surprise that there was much revolutionary interaction between such places as Coro, Guadeloupe, southern Saint-Domingue, and Curaçao, nor that some leaders of the slave revolt in 1795 had spent time in Haiti.¹⁹

ENSLAVEMENT AND FREEDOM

Slaves were in a peculiar position on the island. The maritime orientation of the colony made slaves “a vital cog in the maritime commercial system”, which simultaneously challenged their very enslavement by giving them “ample opportunities for escape into Caribbean and Atlantic maritime circuits”. The seaborne nature of the colony’s economy created a very particular relationship between the enslaved, the enslavers, and the sea. Slave owners “developed a temporary form of manumission” which was “pro forma, to go to sea”; it “freed enslaved sailors only when they were at sea, and was revoked when they returned to the port of Willemstad”. Their “freedom” was a ploy to prevent their treatment as prize goods if a ship should happen to be taken by a privateer.²⁰

Because of the many maritime connections, slave resistance on Curaçao mostly took the form of flight to Tierra Firme. The ties between Coro and Curaçao “dated from pre-Columbian times”, and efforts to escape slavery between the two areas started immediately after the Dutch takeover of the island in 1634. The distance between Curaçao and present-day Venezuela can readily be covered in a canoe or the small sailing vessels commonly used along the Curaçaoan coast for fishing or transport between coastal plantations and Willemstad. From the register of escaped slaves kept by WIC officials it emerges that most were skilled and many – at least 85 of the 585 recorded – were “seafarers”. After their flight they would stay in contact with those who remained on the island.²¹

Free non-white Curaçaoans had a reputation for rowdiness. Their food and housing were sometimes worse than those of the slaves and they

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 66–67.

19. Oostindie, “Slave Resistance”, p. 16.

20. Jordaán, “Free Blacks and Coloreds”, pp. 81–82.

21. *Ibid.*

were notorious for ganging together and clashing in town.²² According to Jordaan,

The lack of respect shown to Whites by non-Whites paired with uneasiness about the growing number of free Blacks and Coloreds and the numerical superiority of the black and colored population as a whole were translated into a series of rules and regulations designed to keep the entire non-white population under strict control, usually without distinction between slave and free.²³

Non-whites were banned from gathering, playing music, carrying sticks, or going out after dark unless they carried a lantern. Impertinent behaviour by non-whites could be punished directly by dishing out a “single blow of a cane”. Under the legal system introduced to the colony by the States General there was no official difference between free coloureds and free whites, although in practice free non-whites were treated similarly to slaves if they landed in court. One difference, which set Curaçao apart from its neighbouring colonies, was that there were relatively few restrictions on their economic activities.²⁴

CONNECTIONS TO ATLANTIC REVOLUTIONS

Julius Scott specifically names the “black and brown Curaçaoians” causing trouble wherever their ships docked, resulting in legislation in Jamaica in the early 1780s forcing ships’ captains “to take away such people as they bring into port”.²⁵ Curaçaoans were furthermore “part of the floating population of a run-away logwood community in Santo Domingo in 1790”. They were described as living “without God, law or King”. The Pointe Coupée conspiracy of Louisiana “featured a Creole slave from Curaçao”, who spread the rumour that the authorities were “awaiting at the Capital an Order of the King which declares all the slaves free”, a common and effective rumour to fuel a revolt.²⁶ It is therefore no surprise that the slave revolt of August 1795 was led by slaves who used the imagery of both the Haitian and French revolutions and deployed arguments based on their intimate knowledge of political developments in the Dutch Republic.²⁷

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. J.S. Scott, “Crisscrossing Empire: Ships, Sailors, and Resistance in the Lesser Antilles in the Eighteenth Century”, in Stanley L. Engerman and Robert L. Paquette (eds), *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion* (Gainesville, FL, 1996), pp. 128–143, 133–134.

26. Martín Lienhard, *Disidentes, rebeldes, insurgentes: Resistencia indígena y negra en América Latina. Ensayos de historia testimonial* (Frankfurt, 2008), pp. 97–98, cited in Klooster, “Rising Expectations”, p. 67.

27. Oostindie, “Slave Resistance”.

Because of the colony's close connections with regional ports belonging to other empires it was quite common for conflicts in the wider Atlantic world to be imported on to the island. When the American War of Independence (1775–1783) broke out, the Curaçaoan government had been obliged to take measures to prevent citizens of the warring nations from violently clashing with each other in the city, and enthusiasm for the ideology of the French Revolution was countered in a similar way in 1789.²⁸ News of the French invasion and founding of the revolutionary Batavian Republic in January 1795 arrived in Curaçao only after some delay, and by the time it did an ordinance had been issued forbidding the singing of French revolutionary songs and the wearing of decorations with French revolutionary slogans,²⁹ and in fact it was May before it was learned that there was peace, and an alliance with France.

Because of the peace between France and the Batavian Republic, Curaçao's local government was obliged to allow French privateers into its port, which made Curaçao a frequent stopover for the swarm of Guadeloupean privateers roaming the Caribbean. The French privateers had a significant impact on the local balance of forces in the colony. Guadeloupe was then under the leadership of Hugues, a specialist in privateering who increased his fleet from 21 to 121 vessels and attacked a stunning 1,800 ships between 1795 and 1798. But more important for Curaçao was that the crews of the privateers were black or coloured, "many of them ex-slaves", and many of their captains were free men "of African descent", which made these ships "a symbol as clear as the Republican tricolor".³⁰

After the slave revolt of 1795 the fear of renewed unrest remained, especially in the town of Willemstad. The French privateers and their crews were always subject to blame, so that when a new revolt threatened to break out the "crews of the privateers were ordered not to have contact with the island's blacks". That was to no avail, however, and on the "day before Christmas, sailors of the French privateers provocatively paraded through the streets with banners and drawn sabres, and with hundreds of Curaçaoan blacks in their wake". The "French free negroes or *citoijens*" were also accused of holding gatherings and singing revolutionary songs, resulting in fights "between the French sailors and the

28. J.A. Schiltkamp and J.T. de Smidt, *West Indisch plakaatboek. Nederlandse Antillen, Benedenwinden: Publikaties en andere wetten alsmede de oudste resoluties betreffende hebbende op Curaçao, Aruba, Bonaire. 1638–1782* (Amsterdam, 1978), p. 381.

29. Johannes Hartog, *Curaçao: Van kolonie tot autonomie* (Oranjestad, 1961), I, pp. 325–327, 322; Schiltkamp and de Smidt, *Plakaatboek*, p. 389.

30. Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution & Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill, NC [etc.], 2004), pp. 241–248.

garrison's Orangist soldiers".³¹ A year after the revolt the commanders of one of the Dutch naval vessels complained about the "people of colour, both Negroes and mulattoes, who have been banned from carrying clubs, but are nevertheless carrying clubs. Yes, are so rude, that they do not step aside, and do not refrain from singing loudly those tunes and songs which are detrimental to the good peace and order."³² The symbols of the French Revolution and the Patriots were intrinsically connected with the rising self-confidence of coloured and black Curaçaoans.

THE CERES AND THE MEDEA

Heavily armed sailing ships were still important instruments of war and state power in the late eighteenth century. The ability of the Dutch Republic's navy to project violence and fear across the globe had been unprecedented in the seventeenth century, but during the eighteenth century its effectiveness began to wane. The long period without any direct military conflict with its main maritime rival, Britain, had created a situation in which the size, importance, and technical superiority of the Dutch navy had declined in comparison with its direct competitors. The decline went untested for a long time until it received a devastating blow from the British during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–1784). Despite some recovery in the late 1780s, the presence of the Dutch navy in the West Indies was rather limited, being composed mainly of convoying ships that would remain there on missions for some time before convoying back.³³

In Willemstad there were two frigates, the *Ceres* – a frigate of 860 tons and 40 guns – and the command vessel *Medea* – a frigate of 800 tons and 36 guns – as well as a host of smaller vessels, such as sloops to keep watch and punts transformed into cannon platforms. F.J. Wierts was captain of the *Medea* and in command of the navy in the port. After the death of Captain A.T. Ditmers, Albert Kikkert was appointed captain of the *Ceres*. The crews of both ships were in poor condition, and for Captain Ditmers and many of the crew it was most probably their first time in the tropics. The men on the *Ceres* had served under Ditmers on the *Zeehond*, fitted out with 16 cannons. It is still unknown if those men had followed Ditmers from his previous appointment in command of the 20-gun *Bellona*, but his appointment to the *Ceres* was certainly a promotion, for

31. Nationaal Archief, The Hague, WIC, entry 2.01.28.01 inv. no. 139, Governor's journal, 4, 5, and 1–2 August 1795, 9 December 1795, 12 December 1795, 24 December 1795; cited in Jordaen, "Patriots, Privateers and International Politics", p. 155.

32. Nationaal Archief, The Hague, Departement van Marine, Journaal van den Burger A. Kikkert, Colonel & Capitein ter Zee commendeerende het Bataafsche Fregat Ceres, 18 Februari 1795–3 Juli 1799 [hereafter "Log of the Ceres"], entry 2.01.29.03 inv. no. 73, August 1796.

33. Jaap R. Bruijn, *The Dutch Navy of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Columbia, SC, 2011).

it doubled the number of cannons at his disposal. After various cruises in the North Sea and through the English Channel, the *Ceres* crossed the Atlantic, arriving in Willemstad early in 1795.

European naval crews did not do well in the Caribbean, on occasion greatly reducing the effectiveness of European warships. During the crossing and once in Willemstad many on board the *Ceres* had died or were in hospital, with the rest hungry and in poor condition. Wierts had left the republic in July 1793 and during his stay in Willemstad the state of his vessel too deteriorated.³⁴ Commander Wierts asked Albert Kikkert on 18 February 1795 to take command of the *Ceres*. Kikkert had arrived in Curaçao for the first time in 1787 on the *Hector* and became part of the colony's ruling class of plantation owners after his marriage to Anna Maria van Uytrecht, one of the daughters of a wealthy family of planters.³⁵ Kikkert's plantation was exceptionally large for such a small island, which lacked the typical plantation production of tropical goods for the European markets such as could be found on the larger Antilles or in the Guyanas.

On the morning Kikkert took over his new command the vessel lay at anchor in the bay behind the city, and Kikkert found that his interim predecessor had engaged ten slaves and three coopers to work on board as replacements for the sick men. The *Ceres* had lost not only its captain and two of its next most senior officers, but some ninety-six other crewmen too, including some of its petty officers. The ship was relatively new, since it had entered service only in November 1793,³⁶ but when Kikkert came on board in February 1795 he noticed that it already smelled bad and the air between decks was stuffy at best. According to Kikkert's log the crew looked terrible – and he was referring to the ones not in hospital. They had sold all their clothes and the ship was “in the greatest disorder”.³⁷ Forty men were laid up sick, nine had deserted. In fact, of the original ship's complement of 230, only 82 were still on board, “mostly boys and old sailors”.

The lack of discipline on board was not the only problem Kikkert faced, for he also saw how poor the sailors were, and attributed their poverty to the detrimental role of the ship's *schrijver*. A *schrijver* was an accountant who could extend loans to captain and crew and was placed on board by the Admiralty to keep control of finances. Kikkert was shocked by the sums the crew had to pay the *schrijver* for their clothing.³⁸

34. Milo, “De Bataafsche Marine”, pp. 337–345.

35. Eric Penseel, “Gouverneur Albert Kikkert: ‘Yiu di Krsou o Makamba?’” (M.A. thesis, Leiden University, 2011), p. 37.

36. “In dienst stelling van de *Ceres*”, *Rotterdamse Courant*, 16 November 1793.

37. “[...] gantsch niet zindelijk en in de grootste disordre”, “Log of the *Ceres*”, 18 February 1795.

38. The price of clothing was so high “dat ik schrikte” [I was shocked]; *ibid*.

When he visited the hospital to see the *schrijver* of the *Ceres*, Kikkert was informed of the rules governing the extending of loans to sailors. On the ships of the Admiralty of de Maze, based in Rotterdam, it was customary for 40 per cent of each crew loan to be kept by the *schrijver*, so that when a sailor took out a loan of, say, 10 guilders he could spend only 6 of them. If the sailor wanted cash rather than clothes, the exchange rate for a *pathino*, or silver peso, was 88 *stuyvers*, an exchange rate highly unfavourable to the sailor. By comparison, for ships of the Amsterdam Admiralty the rate was said to have been set at 56 or 57 *stuyvers* per *pathino*.³⁹ The result therefore was that many Maze Admiralty crew members were heavily indebted while still too short of money to clothe themselves properly or supplement their meagre rations with local food and drink.

The crew of the *Ceres* were sinking ever further into debt as their time on board went on, and only the captain and his direct subordinates managed to stay out of even a small amount of debt. What had accumulated over the course of two and a half years affected practically all the common soldiers and sailors who had served on that particular ship until, by May 1794, the crew owed the *schrijver* a total of 1,157.90 guilders, while two years later, in July 1796, that figure had climbed steadily to 9,596.65 guilders. Of course not all the debtors were still on board, since many had died and others had simply deserted. When the possessions left behind by deceased or deserted crew members were auctioned off, they often fetched less than 10 guilders. The debt to the *schrijver* was universally loathed, making it the first matter that came up when Kikkert took command in 1795, and the clearest basic demand voiced by the crew during the tumultuous August days a year later.⁴⁰

When Kikkert boarded the ship together with Commander Wiert, he tried to gain control of the crew by establishing discipline and organizing sanitation. The entire crew, including the skipper and the first mate, were required to do their share of watch-keeping, and he reorganized the *baks* (division of the crew into mess tables) on board since there were no petty officers in any of the same *baks* as the common sailors, which had given the sailors much room to create “many disorders”. The crew had found ways to improve their poor economic situation somewhat, exploiting the inexperience of their officers and lack of oversight. When Kikkert came on board, Lieutenant Tichler informed him that the crew had managed secretly to break through the wall into the captain’s private store. They had then opened the wine cases and no fewer than 3,000 bottles of wine

39. *Ibid.*, 9 August 1796.

40. Nationaal Archief, The Hague, Admiraliteits Colleges, Confereer-rolle van s’lands fregat van oorlog *Ceres*, onder commando van Cap. Anth Theod Detmers, entry 1.01.46 inv. no. 909–910; “Log of the *Ceres*”, 9 August 1795.

had been stolen.⁴¹ Given the sheer number of bottles, that amount of drink cannot have been consumed entirely by the crew but was most probably sold ashore in the city, or passed on to other ships for a profit.

Even though the *Ceres* was a new ship, much filth had been allowed to accumulate on board. Barrels standing below deck had begun rotting out at the bottom because of the dirt they were standing in.⁴² The disease environment on the islands was far better than that of the plantation colonies, where malaria took a heavy toll on European crews and soldiers, but yellow fever was an ever-present threat in the Caribbean and was capable of crippling entire island societies very quickly. However, it is not clear what had struck the crew of the *Ceres*; the captain's log counts only the dead and the revenue from selling their belongings. Attempting to cleanse the air on board by running fresh water through the ship was one of the chief methods used by Kikkert to improve conditions below deck, but it is unclear if that helped. Perhaps the survivors among the crew recovered after simply proving better able to adjust to the tropical climate, but in any case they soon started coming back aboard from the city's hospital. Kikkert dismissed the slaves who had been hired and completely emptied the whole ship, and only after every item had been taken ashore and the ship thoroughly cleaned was everything put back. It might be that his actions had mostly symbolic value for Kikkert and were intended to emphasize his position as master of the ship, but over the course of the following weeks many crew members did go back on board. As soon as the ship and its crew were once again in good order the vessel was moved from inland water to the town, stationed opposite the command ship *Medea*.⁴³

Not long after order had been restored on the *Ceres*, international military tensions required the crew to be battle ready and there seemed to be the possibility that they would have to sail out to take a group of merchantmen into convoy. When news arrived on the island that France had invaded the Dutch Republic and that the Batavian Republic had been founded, Commander Wierts ordered his ships to be alert to the possibility that British ships might attack the island. A new conflict would demand fresh troops, and Commander Wierts ordered Kikkert to hire as many crewmen as possible.⁴⁴ The next day, six new men came on board, all clearly local sailors.⁴⁵

41. "Log of the *Ceres*", 7 March 1795 and 18 February 1795.

42. *Ibid.*, 19 February 1795.

43. *Ibid.*, 4 March 1795.

44. *Ibid.*, 26 May 1795.

45. On 27 May 1795 Kikkert hired Sebia Martin, Guan Bistie, Filip Daniel Verkade, Laxis Alercies, and Joseph Gregorie, and Guan Bologna came on board that day; Nationaal Archief, The Hague, Lijst van de voorgevallen veranderingen in de bemanning van de schepen, *Ceres*, entry 1.01.46 inv. no. 993.

Of the twenty-seven new men hired by Kikkert to replenish the ship's crew, ten were called Guan, three of them called some variation of Guan Francisco. These new sailors were local men, most likely of colour, and they were familiar with shipboard life on smaller inter-Caribbean vessels, and even more familiar with stories of revolts and uprisings, not just by slaves, but also by the freemen of Saint-Domingue. A month before the *Ceres* saw the new men board the ship, one such sailor, Simon Gomez, by name, had been locked up by the governor, Johannes de Veer, because he refused to speak anything other than French, triumphantly announcing in that language of revolution that Saint Martin had fallen from Dutch power into French hands. The incident shows a glimpse of the defiant attitudes alive among Curaçao's sailors, transmitting news of the spreading French Revolution to their colleagues and other islanders.⁴⁶

THE SLAVE REVOLT

From the standpoint of the slave revolt of 1795 Curaçao was wholly unsuitable for prolonged territorial conflict. Food, water, and fuel were limited. The slaves were unable to undermine the forces of the city and its navy, and so were forced to retreat to a barren part of the island. The revolt started as a strike of enslaved workers on the Knip plantation owned by C.L. van Uytrecht. As early as April 1795 Kikkert had, on one occasion, cause to order the *Ceres*'s stern-mounted cannons loaded "against the murmuring by the negroes".⁴⁷ After the alliance with France, small privateer vessels began to appear in Willemstad almost daily.⁴⁸ Strike action by enslaved workers on the Knip plantation spread like wildfire to other plantations, resulting in a well-coordinated attack by a slave army quickly organized under the leadership of Tula.

The influence on the Curaçaoans of travellers' reports of rebellion and revolution is clear from interrogations carried out after the revolt, as well as from the report made by the Catholic priest, Jacobus Schinck.⁴⁹ Schinck told of the singing of French revolutionary songs, the same ones banned when free men from Willemstad were singing them, and prohibited to the privateer crews who had paraded with flags and weapons through the streets of the city. In one of the interrogations a slave named Claasje was accused of placing a Jacobin hat and a machete on the altar of a church on the island. The leaders of the rebellion assumed the names of

46. The incident took place in late April 1795; Jordaan, "Slavernij en vrijheid", p. 230.

47. "Zette twee stukken achter uit tegen het mompelen der negers", "Log of the *Ceres*", 23 April 1795.

48. *Ibid.*, 23–30 July 1795.

49. Nationaal Archief, The Hague, Oud Archief Curaçao, inv. no. 105, Minuut-notulen van de gewone en buitengewone vergaderingen van Directeur (Commissarissen) en Raden, 1791–1804, "Verslag van Pater Jacobus Schinck, 7 September 1795", no. 69, 10 September 1795.



Figure 2. Curaçao and the Caribbean in the late eighteenth century. The slave revolt of 1795 started at Plantation Knip and the main battle with the colonial troops from Willemstad took place near Porto Marie. In Willemstad the defences were greatly improved by the building of Fort Republiek on top of a hill overlooking the city.

generals in the Haitian uprising, with Tula most famously adopting the name of Rigaud, leader of the coloured rebellion in the south of Saint-Domingue, the area with which the free coloureds of Curaçao had intensive trade relations.

The Haitian experience had frightened the white elite on the island. Their fear was fuelled by stories told by the white refugees from Saint-Domingue who settled in Willemstad. The slaves were accused during the revolt of wanting to install “a government of negroes”, suggesting that fear of a second Haiti haunted Curaçao, while the slaves themselves did their best to exploit the weakness of the white elite. They knew about the occupation of the Netherlands as well as the abolition of slavery in France, so that during the revolt in August 1795 the slave leader argued that the French occupation meant emancipation for Dutch slaves as well. As Tula, the general of the slave army, said: “We have been badly treated for too long, we do not want to do anybody harm, but we seek our freedom. The French blacks have been given their freedom, Holland has been taken over by the French, hence we too must be free.”⁵⁰

The Curaçao revolt was not exclusively a slave rebellion. Many free men and women participated in preparatory rituals, built barricades, ran

50. *Ibid.*

messages, and helped with the provisioning of the slave army. After the revolt began on Saint-Domingue, former Curaçaoans started to come back to their island, including some who had previously been banished from Curaçao. The rebels on Curaçao cemented their alliance by swearing an oath and drinking *awa hoeramentoe* [water of enchantment].⁵¹ The ritual was led by two free men of colour who prepared the ritualistic drink by mixing rum with powdered animal horn. In the aftermath of the revolt there were many free black and coloured men among those arrested. Arrest by itself did not necessarily mean that an individual was actually involved in the rebellion, but among those who were caught the accusations ranged from theft to being present when the takeover of the island was plotted, cooking for the rebels, and hiding weapons in private houses. During the revolt of the slaves the mulatto and black divisions of the colonial armed forces largely refused to mobilize.⁵²

The revolt quickly reached Kikkert's plantation, and indeed his stock of slaves would provide two of the four most important commanders of the slave army, namely Carpata and Wakkau. The other two were Louis Mercier from Saint-Domingue, sometimes called Toussaint, as the rearguard, and Tula, or Rigaud, who was in overall command. Kikkert on board the *Ceres* had sensed the impending slave rebellion, noting in his log in early August 1795 that "the negroes are being rowdy because of the many French Free Negroes or *Citoijenes*".⁵³ Just as in April, he ordered the cannons to be loaded with live ammunition and shrapnel, and road blocks were set up on the Altona hill and the Roodeweg as rumours of rebellions by natives on Aruba and slaves in Coro reached the island. The fighting that followed became a war of attrition, with the slaves' initial victories turning into a defensive retreat, leaving many of them dead. Throughout the second half of August and into September 1795 slaves were brought to town and put aboard the naval vessels to be imprisoned and, in the end, hanged. After a last stand on the Christoffelberg the slave army was routed. With gruesome symbolism the leader was executed with the other ringleaders in the most tortuous and elaborate manner.⁵⁴ After a month the core of the rebel army had been smashed, but it took many more months before most slaves had returned to the plantations.

51. J.H.J. Hamelberg, *De slavenopstand op Curaçao in 1795* (Willemstad, 1896), p. 123.

52. Westerholt reported "infamously bad behaviour among the Negro corps", cited in Paula, 1795, p. 299. The army tried to mobilize fifty "free mulattoes" for the corps, but only twenty turned up; AZKGA, *Journalen van Curaçao*, February 1795–December 1797, no. 139, cited in Paula, 1795, p. 34.

53. In his log he wrote "de negers thans door de menigvuldige Fransche Vrijnegers of Citoijenes hier ook wat baldadigheden doende", "Log of the *Ceres*", between 1 and 7 August 1795.

54. "Verslag van Pater Jacobus Schinck".

THE NAVY CRUSHES THE REVOLT

Militarily speaking, the slaves needed either to take the city or flee to Coro if they were to be successful. Both options were barred by the presence of the Dutch navy. Kikkert had reported that his ship was the only holder of sufficient ammunition, so the *Ceres* provided the powder for the armed forces marched against the slave army, while the garrison and armed forces too were supplied by the ship. The trained crew of the *Ceres* was mobilized to fight the slaves, while those who remained on the ship worked long days preparing hundreds of cartridges to be sent over in small boats to the troops, along with other supplies such as clothes to replace garments that had been torn to pieces on the island's thorny hedges.⁵⁵ The slave army was at a devastating disadvantage because it lacked naval supply lines. On some days the crews on the *Ceres* made more than 1,000 cartridges for the fighting troops on the island.

When the government heard of the strike on the Knip plantation the initial plan was to drive the slaves back onto their plantation. However, the next day news came that the rebels had taken possession of Kikkert's plantation and that many slaves were joining the uprising. The rebels were said to have caused major destruction and broken open storehouses. The rebel army was reportedly 350-strong, although not well armed.⁵⁶ To resupply the army a small boat was used called a *golette*,⁵⁷ which Kikkert sent to his plantation, where he picked up no fewer than 80 of his own slaves who had apparently not joined the uprising. Later the *golette* went to pick up all that was left of the maize in the storehouse of Kikkert's plantation to prevent it from falling into the hands of Tula's army.⁵⁸

The leading troops, who had been sent to contain the strike around Knip, were driven back by the rebels, so Captain Baron van Westerholt tot de Leemcule of the army was sent with sixty-four men in a barque, and Kikkert and Wierts sent sixty more men under arms with two officers overland, to link up with Westerholt.⁵⁹ The second confrontation, later known as the battle of Port Marie, ended in the imprisonment of twelve rebels, who were sent to the city.⁶⁰ To protect the city, the colonial administration had been forced to rely on the crews of merchant vessels. The sailors from the frigates marched into battle with sixty mulattoes and "free Negroes" to pull the ships' cannons up the roads and hillsides. Given the seriousness of the slave revolt, Kikkert planned to take armed civilians

55. "Log of the *Ceres*", 23, 24, and 27 August 1795.

56. *Ibid.*, 18 August 1795.

57. *Ibid.*, 20 August 1795.

58. *Ibid.*, 25 August 1795.

59. *Ibid.*, 19 August 1795.

60. *Ibid.*, 20 August 1795.

to provide reinforcements for the officers inland, and to arm his new ad hoc troops he used arms from the arsenal, the ships, and privately owned weapons. There was no powder ashore, so the *Ceres* and *Medea* supplied the powder for the operation. In a way, Kikkert argued, the absence of powder on land was a good thing, since the slave army would not be able to acquire any.⁶¹

After the initial victories of the revolt, the rebels were beginning to suffer defeats at the hands of the ad hoc colonial forces. Scores of prisoners were being sent to the city, but it is uncertain, of course, whether the army simply arrested anyone they found wandering around the island or properly targeted enemy combatants. The large number of prisoners could not be kept in the town's fort, so the *Ceres* was used as a floating prison and prisoners were brought to Willemstad using the smaller vessels, in any case a safer way to transport the re-enslaved than marching columns of them across the island. The small vessels were used not only for transport; they played their part too in crushing the spirit of the rebels. The naval sloop sailed into port with prisoners on board and with a slave hanging from the bowsprit⁶² – as it entered the port he was cut down. The *Ceres* held many people detained – at one time at least eighty suspected rebels – while they waited to be taken ashore to the fort by the public prosecutor P.T. van Teylingen, who tortured and questioned them.⁶³ When slaves were executed in the city an alarm was sounded and the ship's crew was sent ashore to provide cover for the execution.⁶⁴ A barque under the command of Lieutenant de Lange brought in more prisoners and reported that three of them had been hanged on board, and another man was hanged on a sloop before it returned to port.⁶⁵ The barque later came in with two of the leaders of the slave army, one of them Tula, and when the other two leaders were caught – both officially the property of Kikkert – the barque was again sent to pick them up.⁶⁶

If they ever existed, detailed records of the violence on board the smaller vessels have been lost, but judging by the reports of the hangings on the small boats during voyages that took no more than a few hours the confined spaces on those small vessels must have been the scene of some truly horrific and vengeful violence. One can hardly imagine the impact of seeing the man hanging from the bowsprit of the sloop on those lining the

61. *Ibid.*, 21 August 1795.

62. *Ibid.*, 2 September 1795.

63. *Ibid.*, 1 September 1795; OAC 121, Resoluties van Directeur (Commissarissen) en Raden, 1790 – 1804, “Memorie van P.Th. van Teylingen”, no. 65, 27 October 1795, in Paula, 1795, p. 188.

64. “Log of the *Ceres*”, 4 September 1795.

65. *Ibid.*, 19 September 1795.

66. *Ibid.*, 21 September 1795.

shore in the town. The last slave ship had arrived in Curaçao fully fifteen years before the revolt, but the tales of such ships must still have circulated among the enslaved, and the parallels with being kept on board the *Ceres* must have been obvious. The ordeal ended on 27 September 1795 with the elaborate torture and execution of the leaders of the revolt.

After the rebellion had been crushed and the initial celebrations were over, the problems on board ship resurfaced immediately. The slave revolt provided a distraction to the naval crews but it brought with it immediate experience of extreme violence on a scale that must have horrified the men. They were rewarded, and even received presents from citizens in Willemstad, 3 silver *pesos* and 6 *realen* each.⁶⁷ The bravest among them were rewarded with promotion, and *constable* mate Frans Klaassen (still in irons for theft) was let off with no more than re-mustering with the rank of able seaman. Nevertheless, the on-board camaraderie and harmony proved to be short-lived.

From November 1795 the crew of the *Ceres* started to desert, and a number of incidents followed in quick succession until punishment turned harsher than it had been in the aftermath of the slave revolt. When a court martial was held to punish those who had been absent without leave, it resulted in the keelhauling of a boatswain and bottle master, who were put in irons until a chance came to banish them. Sailors started disappearing, as did soldiers; even a corporal chose to desert. Kikkert and his men were unable to retrieve the deserters, although they did discover that the sailors had paid money to be taken to Tierra Firme in a canoe. Since it is unlikely that anyone in town would have lent them the required sum, they might have used the money they received as reward for crushing the slave revolt as payment for their crossing to the Spanish Main.⁶⁸ In December a sailor tried to commit suicide because the captain had threatened to kick him to death – although that skipper was subsequently arrested and his discharge was requested by Kikkert for causing trouble among the petty officers. Both the captain concerned and the man who had attempted suicide were sent off the ship.⁶⁹ The *Ceres* was now missing 100 men from her full complement, and morale on board had fallen so far that civilians were brought on board to ensure that the crew would not surrender if the British attacked.⁷⁰

Without the support of the navy's two frigates and their smaller vessels the course of the slave revolt would have been rather different, and indeed the navy's presence was an important reason for the failure of the slave revolt to conquer the island. By providing supplies for the armed forces,

67. *Ibid.*, 23 September 1795.

68. *Ibid.*, 2–16 November 1795.

69. *Ibid.*, 2–5 December 1795.

70. *Ibid.*, 13–15 February 1795.

prison space, and somewhere to store powder out of reach of the rebels, the navy effectively ensured that the slaves would be at a major disadvantage. The ships provided the infrastructure, firepower, and garrison troops, but, though their crews were thanked for their efforts, over the following months many of them chose to abandon ship.

POLITICAL INCLINATIONS

The colonial government of Curaçao had some experience with the spread of revolutionary feeling among the white, black, and coloured populations. By 1793 adherents of a revolutionary undercurrent on the island were organizing gatherings, with speeches for poor whites and free mulattoes, which on 21 May of that year prompted a ban on publicly speaking out against the House of Orange. It was forbidden even to listen to such speeches, and anyone who heard forbidden pronouncements and failed to inform the public prosecutor, Van Teylingen, were themselves liable to be punished. Clashes between soldiers and citizenry intensified after news arrived that the Dutch Republic had been invaded by the French. On 4 August 1795 an ordinance was issued forbidding freemen and “Negroes” from going about armed with sticks or clubs, and soldiers of non-commissioned rank were banned from bearing arms when not on duty. A curfew was imposed on the sailors, who were required to be out of the harbour no later than 9 o’clock in the evening, when public houses and dance halls had to close too,⁷¹ although the harbour prohibition did not apply to crewmen of Dutch naval vessels.

Low morale was not limited to the *Ceres*, but for some reason the *Medea*’s crew seemed more prone to take collective action. The *Medea*’s crew clashed violently on the waterfront with men from a French privateer, frightening the privateer so much that it set sail and left the port.⁷² To counter the “unruliness”,⁷³ the crews of the *Ceres* and *Medea* were confined to their ships, and were further forbidden to associate with each other. The seaworthiness of both vessels deteriorated, and in March 1796 the *Medea* was deemed unfit to put to sea. The *Medea*’s crew became more and more Orange-leaning, until a yellow flag was raised over the *Medea* and some of them shouted “Hurrah”. They looked into who among them was on the side of the Orangists or the Patriots. Kikkert heard from the captain of a freighter that the *Medea*’s crew considered themselves to be serving the Prince of Orange and that only a dozen of them thought otherwise.⁷⁴

71. Hartog, *Curaçao: Van kolonie tot autonomie*, p. 324.

72. “Log of the *Ceres*”, 13–24 January 1795.

73. *Ibid.*, “balstorigheid”.

74. *Ibid.*

The geography of Willemstad is highly relevant to the episode that followed, in which the Orangists attacked the city's predominantly non-white neighbourhood. Willemstad lies at the mouth of the colony's natural harbour, which splits the town in two. In Punda, the old town, there is a fortress, Fort Amsterdam, which is still, in fact, the centre of the island's government today. It has historically always been a wealthier part of town, and it was where many of the warehouses stood. Geographically then, support for the French Revolution could be located on the other side of the city across the harbour, called the "Spanish side", also known as Otrabanda, which means "the other side" in Papiamentu. It was the less affluent part of the city, with many poor and coloured Curaçaoans, and with a synagogue which was seen as a hotbed of French-leaning revolutionaries.

Wierds, the Dutch naval commander and captain of the *Medea*, and one of his lieutenants, Robert Minors, were attacked in July 1796 by a violent mob wearing French cockades and most probably made up of crew members of French privateers, many of them non-white. Lieutenant Minors was killed and Wierds badly injured, and next day the incident sparked a response from the garrison in Fort Amsterdam. On their own initiative some soldiers left the fort and moved into Otrabanda. The officers were unable to control the soldiers, who organized incursions into Otrabanda in a spirit of revenge and again violently clashed with the crew of a French privateer. Patrols were sent after them to try to bring them back to the fortress, but to no avail. The soldiers were placed under curfew and banned from entering the city after 8 o'clock at night. However, the cannon shot meant to be fired from the fortress to indicate the start of the curfew was not sounded. In response the *Ceres* prepared for battle to prevent the plundering and burning of Otrabanda, and citizens approached the *Ceres* asking if they might spend the night there. The actions of the military speak of a very open anti-Patriot attitude, very possibly triggered by fear of the rise of the free coloured population, both in politics as well as in the defences, through their pre-dominance in the crews of French privateers.

MUTINY

The transference of power from the Stadtholder to the Batavian Republic was a messy affair on the island, that resulted in a full-blown mutiny among the navy and garrison. On 7 August 1795 Wierds received the order from Admiral Braak in Suriname to change the oath under which the navy, garrison, and the government served. Wierds went aboard the *Medea* and read the *Articulbrief* (ordinance on military discipline), but when he asked if the crew were willing to swear the oath he was met with "a deep silence"⁷⁵

75. "Een diep stilzwijgen", Nationale Vergadering van 16 December 1796, Rapport Wierds, cited in Milo, "De Bataafsche Marine", pp. 337–345.

from the officers, who bowed their heads to decline. In the end only the two openly Patriot officers were willing to swear the oath, along with the *schrijvers* and the surgeons, but the petty officers remained defiantly silent. The common sailors too declined, but at least they added an explanation: “we are released from one, then also from the other, we are free and therefore no longer in service”.⁷⁶ Kikkert reported that “none of the crew wanted to take the new oath, but instead wanted to be released and to receive their due pay”.⁷⁷ Wierts thought their response was led by the skipper. Kikkert, Wierts, and Heshusius, one of the loyal officers, pondered how to respond to the refusal, but finally decided to let the matter rest for a day.

Now it was time to go to the council and governor and get them to swear the new oath, but there too they met with an unpleasant surprise. The governor refused to take the new oath and so had to be replaced by a temporary governor, and when Wierts returned to the ship the next day he was presented with a letter from the entire crew telling him that they were released from the oath and were henceforth free. Now they wanted their pay, and they would decide for themselves if they wanted to return to service or not.⁷⁸ The mutineers also issued an ultimatum demanding satisfaction within twenty-four hours, “or else they would be forced to start in a different way”.⁷⁹ At that moment the armed forces in the fortress again joined the “debate” by shouting rudely from behind their battery, so Wierts ordered one of the cannon to be loaded with shrapnel and shown to the soldiers, who responded by moving away only to return with field pieces. However, neither side opened fire, and it is unclear from the various reports who the loyalists were who loaded the *Medea*'s stern cannon. But whatever the truth, it was now clear to the commanders that the soldiers had no intention of taking the new oath. In fact, the garrison in the fort were the first to back their refusal with the threat of gunfire.

Despite the mutiny in the armed forces, Wierts called the governing council and the governor to meet in session and demanded they take the

76. “[...] zijn wij van het eene ontslaagen, dan van het andere ook, en dus vrij uit den dienst”. *Ibid.*

77. Kikkert, who was there, wrote in the log “dog geene van de equipage wilde den nieuwen eed doen, maar zeiden van ontslagen te willen wezen met hunne afbetaling daarbij”; *Log of the Ceres*, 9 August 1796.

78. “[...] uit naam van de gantsche Equipage een zogenaamd Request gepresenteerd, en door de meest alle (eene weinige uitgezonderd) ondertekend, en beginnen eerstelijk met te zeggen: ‘Wij moeten ons geld hebben, hetgeen wij verdiend hebben zo lang wij onder den voorgaande Eed gestaan hebben, nu zijn wij vrij van den Eed en wagten op onze betaling, en dan zullen wij zien wat ons te doen staat, of wij weder dienst zullen neemen, of niet’”, in Milo, “De Bataafsche Marine”, p. 340.

79. “[...] zeggende verder, resolutie op de zaak te willen hebben binnen 24 Uuren, of anders zouden genoodzaakt zijn, op eene andere manier te beginnen”, in *ibid.*

oath of allegiance to the Batavian Republic. The governor, having served the island since the 1750s, had already announced that he would use the opportunity to retire, but two others resigned because they simply refused to take the oath. A certain J.J. Beaujon was appointed temporary governor in a letter from the National Assembly providing for a successor in the event de Veer's position became vacant. The soldiers refused to recognize the new governor and shouted "Hurrah for Orange" when Beaujon was presented to them. The council quickly cancelled the customary introduction of the new official to the city as the soldiers took over Fort Amsterdam wearing orange ribbons. The soldiers and their officers had been released from the old oath, although they did not actually swear the new one. Now the *Ceres*, *Medea*, and the fortress were all refusing to take orders from the military leadership, leaving the city without regular defences.

The governor and his council had lost control over their armed forces and the fort, as well as over the crew of the *Medea*, and because of the Orangist occupation of the fortress the councillors dared not meet there. As a counter-measure they sought to meet on board the *Ceres*; there the crew said they would allow the meeting only if they were paid. The first ship to be brought back under control was the *Ceres* on 12 August, when a ship's council was held and it was agreed that the crew would be discharged and all immediately re-mustered. They would receive arrears of pay within four days plus a golden Johannes – a Portuguese coin common on the island and worth 22.50 guilders – as a gratuity if they rejoined the service. Rations were to be increased and monthly pay raised by 8 *realen*.⁸⁰ In total, 80 men re-mustered to serve on the *Ceres*.

Meanwhile the soldiers were still openly resisting the new order, and most of them were decked out in Orange colours. The *Medea*'s crew refused point-blank to re-enter service because their ship was unseaworthy, and they feared that if they did remuster they would never return to the Netherlands.⁸¹ However, on 15 August the *Medea* abandoned its mutiny and negotiated a mass discharge from Dutch naval service, since none of the *Medea*'s crew wanted to return to service, and they came on board the *Ceres* to request that they be allowed to depart on an American brig. What amounted to a covert mass desertion by naval personnel was effectively condoned, and the following week the thirty men of the *Ceres*'s crew who did not want to take the oath to the Batavian Republic were likewise sent ashore. That week soldiers too began to submit to discipline again and those who were still on board received their due pay. The crews of the smaller vessels as well as the *Medea* were brought on

80. *Ibid.*, p. 342.

81. "Log of the *Ceres*", 9–16 August 1796; Milo, "De Bataafsche Marine", p. 343.

board the *Ceres*, the *Articulbrief* was read to them and they shouted “Vive la République” three times. They were then sent back to the *Medea*. When order had been restored, punishment for the Orangist ringleaders was mild.⁸²

The unstable situation on the island continued after the mutiny in the armed forces had fizzled out, but the crisis moved to a conflict between the French-leaning and autonomy-oriented Patriots in the council. The civilian militia took an active role in trying to push the colony towards the French Revolution, or at least to purge Orangist influences from the local government. The civilian militia was re-formed into a National Guard by the Military Committee, something of great significance for it provided the colony with a locally based military force and mobilized the island on an unprecedented scale. The National Guard was expanded to about “1,100 officers and men, organized in six companies of infantry, three companies of cavalry, and four companies of artillery”, on an island of 20,000 inhabitants.

The artillery was mainly made up of “free blacks and coloureds” recruited by Lauffer from the “seafaring population of the island”. Maritime labour had made the sailors “familiar with the handling of the cannons aboard the ships”. To encourage the experienced sailors “ship’s captains, who were often light coloured ‘*mustees*’, were given officer’s ranks”. That meant not only that non-whites were appointed to positions of command, but that they were dispersed over a number of divisions in an attempt to reduce “the power of the respective captains”.⁸³ Lauffer, a keen strategist, cleverly used the available non-white sailors to supplement the armed forces loyal to the Patriots. He used them to outflank the Orangists, and allowed them aboard the naval vessels to ensure loyalty there. The most visible legacy of the Patriot government of Lauffer is Fort Republiek.⁸⁴

CONCLUSION

The 1795 slave revolt was the largest single slave uprising in the Dutch Atlantic, but its repercussions among free and enslaved townspeople have only recently been documented. Research conducted by Han Jordaan on the position of the free people of colour within Willemstad has problematized the classical view of that group by revealing their high level of agency, their participation in a wide range of trading activities, and their assertive behaviour in local politics, society, and the law courts. But as a maritime nodal point, the permanent presence of ships of the Dutch

82. Sergeants Bulje and Bartels were sent off and it was left at that; “Log of the *Ceres*”, n.d.

83. Nationaal Archief, The Hague, 2.01.28.01, West Indisch Comité, inv. no. 136, cited in Jordaan, “Patriots, Privateers and International Politics”, p. 157.

84. Hartog, *Het fort op de berg*.

navy has never been considered part of the story. Even on this tiny island, with its highly mobile population, the worlds of land and water are often still regarded separately. Maritime lives and interconnections were constitutive to the slave revolt, providing those on the island with inspiring stories and examples that they used to press forward their agenda. It is strange that the crews of the Dutch naval vessels have remained invisible in this history because those same mariners independently took part in the following year's battle for the political direction of the island. The crews of the *Ceres*, *Medea*, and the garrison actively debated which side they wished to take in the fight between the French Revolution and the British Empire, and how they would ensure either an Orangist or a Patriot outcome on the island. That the crew of the *Ceres* did not default to the position of Orangism, and on the *Medea* too the Patriots had some following, brings into question the prevalent image that lower-deck mariners were Orangist by definition.

The ships under the command of the navy were crucial in staging the endgame of the attempted slave revolt. Maritime power provided the crucial advantage that the slave army could not match with perseverance and numbers alone. The ships supplied seasoned fighters and ammunition and made sure that the land forces were resupplied; the *Ceres* ensured that the rebellious actions by free blacks in the city were stopped. The ships later became the holding place of the rebels who were caught, as well as the stage for the dramatic hangings and scenes of terror.

While within the Dutch Republic and in its army and navy the terms "Patriot" and "Orangist" did not necessarily connote skin colour (and the Patriots had no colonial vision to speak of), in the colonial context of Curaçao those terms certainly did. Curaçao's connectedness to places such as southern Saint-Domingue and Guadeloupe, where the French Revolution was also contributing to the fall of the aristocracy of colour, profoundly changed what it meant to identify oneself as Orangist or Patriot. The founding of the Batavian Republic therefore had an unintended impact on the entitlement felt by non-whites in the colony, as well as the threat felt by some white people for whom Orangism became a flag to rally round. On the island the movement for autonomy was not especially explicit in its aims, but the reorganizing of the defences without that troublesome and volatile element of the Dutch naval ships and their crews speaks volumes.