



Wim Klooster, Gert Oostindie (eds.), ***Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions, 1795-1800***

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The Dutch, who had diminished colonial holdings and waning commerce in the Americas by the nineteenth-century, are generally relegated to the peripheries of Age of Revolutions historiography. Nevertheless, in the 1790s Curaçao offered a key entrepôt for the circulation of goods, information, and people. Recent studies on the myriad transcolonial social upheavals across Caribbean slave-holding societies during this period have revealed exponential impacts of the intertwined French and Haitian Revolutions, circuits of resistance within the Black Atlantic, and extensive popular agency. However, even with a massive rebellion in 1795 and sociopolitical unrest through 1800 Curaçao has remained conspicuously marginal to these conversations. This edited volume, compiled by Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie and with essays from notable scholars, strives to rectify this deficiency and instate Curaçao to its merited position in scholarship on the Age of Revolutions. Following a preface the first four chapters frame Curaçao in its temporal, regional, and thematic contexts and trace its multiplicity of connections therein. The final three chapters then unveil specific local outcomes from Curaçao's fermentation within the Age of Revolutions.

Oostindie introduces Willemstad as a free port and active hub of exchange that acquainted enslaved and free Curaçaoans with Atlantic radicalism through their exposure to transients and seafarers with news and ideas from afar. On Curaçao slaves were manumitted more frequently and were more urban than in neighbouring Caribbean colonies, while free people of colour had greater upward mobility through the militia and commerce. The years of Curaçaoan tumult from 1795-1800 were in synchronisation with broader Atlantic trends of revolution, metropolitan disarray, and reaction of this age. David Geggus provides a background on slave rebellions in the Americas and concludes that the uprisings of 1795 and 1800, which he categorises as slave revolts, were actually two of the eight or nine largest slave insurgencies in the Americas. He attributes the greatest influence on revolutionary Curaçao not to the slaves of Saint-Domingue, but to French republicans for their destabilisation of the Dutch overseas governance and social order, disruptive presence, radical ideas, and influence on local dissidence.

Building on Geggus' essay, Klooster qualifies how European concepts informed Caribbean popular resistance. While some slaves appropriated flourishing French discourses of equality, Klooster maintains that such rhetoric was more aggressively used by free people of colour to attain unconditional citizenship rights. Instead, unfounded rumours of emancipation by benevolent monarchs often spread amongst Caribbean slaves and stimulated agitation. Though these trends were less evident on Curaçao, he does demonstrate the power of French thought to insurgent Curaçaoans. Linda Rupert then magnifies conduits between the island and the mainland. She shows the multiplicity of longstanding trade, maroonage, and Catholic relations between Curaçaoans and Spanish neighbours, and argues that there was a community of African descendants between Curaçao and Coro. In 1795 Coro itself witnessed a massive slave revolt, though Rupert stresses that relationships were deeper between Curaçao and Coro than only the possible momentary coordination between the two revolts of that year.

Ramón Aizpurua examines specific political outcomes produced by these ties, including a former Curaçaoan slave turned Coro rebel leader, mainland intrigues in unsuccessful Curaçaoan conspiracies from 1797-1800, and unofficial reinforcement between Spanish and Dutch administrators against mutual threats. Karwan Fatah-Black reveals that the coup executed in 1796 was a part of longer, multi-class conflicts on Curaçao. Metropolitan rule of the French-affiliated Batavian Republic, while receptive to change at home, proved inflexible toward Curaçaoan disaffection. Though leaders seized upon hegemonic fissures and decreed 'Freedom, Equality, Fraternity', Fatah-Black stresses the local particularities of the coup and island partisanship. Han Jordaan debunks a 1799 conspiracy, and shows that though French Atlantic radicalism influenced Curaçaoan discontentment and panicked Dutch administrators, actual French Caribbean forces merely sought to use Curaçao in their own geopolitical manoeuvres against the British and United States despite the Curaçaoan slave uprising in favour of the French expedition of 1800.

Ultimately, the ferment of 1795-1800 failed to realise emancipation or independence, as the British began a lengthy occupation of the island in 1800 and stifled unrest. Perhaps this is another reason why Curaçao has been underrepresented in scholarship on this era. This book firmly establishes that Curaçao was not simply peripheral to the processes nor contagion of the Age of Revolutions in the Caribbean. Overall, it is tightly-organised with complementary chapters. The latter chapters drift toward recovery of political narratives to the exclusion of cultural analysis or comparisons with parallel regional processes. Also, the book omits a concluding survey on Curaçao's specific contribution to and distinctiveness in the Age of Revolutions, and does not offer much conjecture as to how this turbulent time effected Curaçao's longer trajectory. Nevertheless, Klooster and Oostindie have compiled a much needed contribution that integrates Curaçao into literature on resistance in the Black Atlantic, legacies of the French and Haitian Revolutions in the Caribbean, and the Age of Revolutions more broadly, and this book should certainly be consulted by scholars in those fields.

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