

A Crime Against Humanity: Local Dutch Politicians and Mayors

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On November 20, 2022, The Hague Mayor Jan van Zanen formally apologized for his city's involvement in slavery. Following the example set by Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Utrecht, this now meant that the four biggest cities in the Netherlands had offered apologies for their part in slavery, after historical research had established their role in the practice.

On February 23 of that same year, Utrecht Mayor Sharon Dijksma had offered an apology on behalf of the College of Mayor and Aldermen for Utrecht city council's role in the colonial slave trade, the oppression of enslaved people, and the scars that this left behind. She began her speech in the Utrecht Janskerk—a site chosen because the square outside is a focal point for direct links to colonial slavery—as follows:

Today we reflect on our city's ties to the history of slavery and look to the future to learn lessons from it. I find this immensely important because what we are talking about is nothing less than a crime against humanity. For more than 250 years, a great injustice took place in which the city of Utrecht also played a role. I will illustrate this with the story of a thirteen-year-old boy named "Koenjapen." On July 3, 1774, VOC employee and Utrecht resident Jan Lambertus van Spall bought this boy. From the bill of sale, we know that Koenjapen came from a community of farm laborers and palm wine sellers. He likely would have succeeded his father within a few years, started a family, and taken on an important role within his community. But with a single stroke of a pen, all this was struck through, and his future was determined by

someone else. The employee who recorded the sale wrote down the boy's new name: "Utrecht." And he was not the only one, as we know from the Dutch national archives. Dozens of enslaved people were renamed "Utrecht."¹

Mayor Femke Halsema of Amsterdam had preceded Dijksma on July 1, 2021, the anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the Dutch Caribbean (July 1, 1863), while Rotterdam Mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb had offered apologies on December 10, 2021, international human rights day. Van Zanen and Dijksma both chose dates with no previous symbolic significance. Dijksma's choice of February 23, 2022 created a more generic and open moment, one that was appropriately distanced from the date on which the Utrecht research was published (June 30, 2021), yet not too far removed from it. This meant that the moment could be dedicated entirely to the apologies without having to compete with any other symbolic meaning, which made it all the more special. Likewise, the research on Amsterdam's role in colonial slavery, published on September 30, 2020, had no connection with any pre-existing dates of historical significance. It received heavy media coverage, even making it onto the main evening news on Dutch national TV.

Sometimes choosing a symbolic date is preferred, as we can see from the many negative reactions sparked by the date chosen for Prime Minister Rutte's national apologies (December 19, 2022 instead of July 1, 2023). However, a symbolic date can also overshadow the apology, as we saw when North Holland became the first Dutch provincial government to apologize for slavery. The province did this on July 1, 2021, the very same day that the city of Amsterdam made its own apologies, but the province's gesture went practically unnoticed.

As we see from Dijksma's apologies for Utrecht's role in slavery, it is not only the date that is important, but the process leading up to the apologies, too. As the mayor's apology speech was being prepared, drafted, and refined, she engaged in a series of conversations with stakeholder residents in the city. The event was staged with the help of local migrant communities who were part of the production team, which helped it to gain wide support.

How did it come about that the four major cities in the Netherlands all offered formal apologies for their role in slavery in the span of less than eighteen months? How have Dutch cities and other authorities recently approached the history of slavery and its afterlives? And what role did several key individuals play in this process?

From Remorse to Apologies

On September 2, 2001, Roger van Boxtel, then Dutch minister of Major Cities and Integration Policy, expressed “deep remorse” for the Dutch involvement in slavery. He used these words during an anti-racism conference in Durban, South Africa. Although it was not an apology for his country’s role in slavery, it was a first step. The conference itself was plagued by major conflicts between several nations and was subsequently overshadowed by the September 11 attacks and largely forgotten. Nonetheless, the Durban conference was a historically significant moment. Despite resistance from EU members, its final declaration called slavery “a crime against humanity.” This was partly due to the lobbying efforts of Helen Felter, a feminist activist who was at the conference as a representative of the European Women’s Lobby (the largest coalition of women’s associations in the EU at that time).

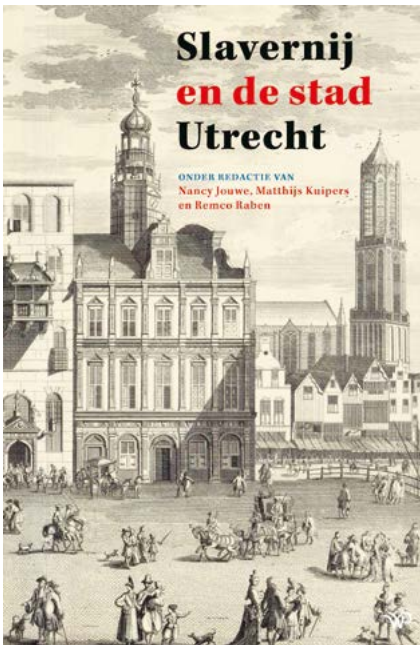
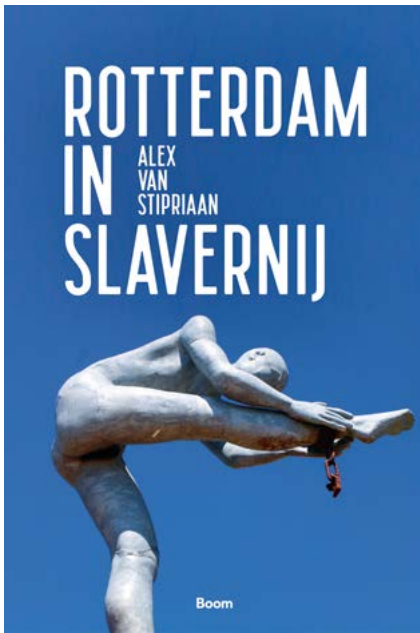
Branding slavery a crime was in line with a broader zeitgeist that the Netherlands could not circumvent. In 2000, then Prime Minister Wim Kok had, albeit reluctantly, apologized to the Jewish, Indonesian, Sinti, and Roma communities for the Dutch government’s role during and after World War II. That same year, Elazar Barkan published his influential *Guilt of Nations* (2000), in which he called for a dialogue between parties (mostly nations) pitted in significant historical conflicts, and appealed to Western nations to address historical injustices. Nine years later, Michael Rothberg published the much-cited work *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009). Rothberg claimed that different groups fighting against historical injustice (whether from WWII or colonialism) actually mutually influence each other. In the process, he also showed that the idea of a limited space in which these groups should jockey for attention is counterproductive. This key insight could be a valuable lesson for the Netherlands today given the difficulties experienced in the slavery debate.² Instead of using competition and strict delineation between different historical injustices as guiding principles, we should be focusing

more on the fluid processes of mutual influence within a slowly evolving culture of remembrance surrounding slavery.

Two recent examples of such competition for public recognition were the debates on whether the National Slavery Museum and the Utrecht Slavery Monument should focus primarily on transatlantic slavery instead of Dutch colonial slavery. In these debates, it was one or the other: a focus on the history of transatlantic slavery and a focus on Dutch slavery in the Indian Ocean were treated as mutually exclusive. There was no room to view Dutch slavery as a global phenomenon, in which the VOC used slavery in the Moluccan Banda Islands as early as 1621. Recognizing this does not take away from the fact that it has been predominantly Afro-Caribbean and especially Afro-Surinamese advocates who worked to establish a Dutch culture of remembrance around slavery.

Since the late 1990s, various groups, such as the women's collective Sophiedela, activist Barryl Biekman, and writer Frank Martinus Arion, have been advocating for more recognition of the history of Dutch slavery and for the establishment of a national slavery monument. When this monument was dedicated in Amsterdam on July 1, 2002, which followed the founding of the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and Its Legacy (NiNsee) on June 24 of the same year, it seemed the history of Dutch slavery was finally being taken more seriously. It was therefore particularly painful when national funding for NiNsee was cut, all the more so because that happened in 2013, on the 150th anniversary of the formal abolition of slavery in the Dutch Caribbean (in parts of the Dutch East Indies, slavery had ended three years earlier, in 1860).

During the Ketu Koti commemoration on July 1, 2013, in Amsterdam, which was attended by King Willem-Alexander and Queen Máxima, then Deputy Prime Minister Lodewijk Asscher expressed regret and remorse on behalf of the cabinet for the Dutch role in slavery. Asscher's words were partly a response to pressure from organizations such as Collectief Broki. However, he still did not use the word "apology." A year earlier, Prime Minister Rutte had stated that slavery was "dehumanizing," but took no further action as a result of this acknowledgment.



The four major Dutch cities—Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, and The Hague—each commissioned research into their own role in slavery.

Rotterdam Mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb, whose own perspective had changed after reading about research into his city's history, called for apologies during his Ketu Koti speech at the Rotterdam Slavery Monument in 2018. "Asscher expressed deep remorse," Aboutaleb said. "That was a fine gesture that matched the spirit of the times. The next step is to offer apologies. I call on the cabinet to do so."³ Mayor Jan Hamming of Zaanstad supported this appeal in a speech of his own.⁴ Shortly after the 2020 Black Lives Matter demonstrations, Dutch parliamentary party leaders Rob Jetten (D66) and Jesse Klaver (GroenLinks), both of whom are of Indonesian descent, submitted a motion for national apologies. Their motion received sixty-nine votes, seven votes short of a majority. Apparently, it was still too early.

In 2022, the mayors of Rotterdam, Utrecht, and Middelburg jointly called for national apologies. Meanwhile, something seemed to be budging at the national level. A research group had been established, roundtable discussions with stakeholder groups organized, and it appeared that additional financial resources might be made available. Could it be happening at last?

Local Pressure

The mayors of the four major Dutch cities performed their roles with gusto, publicly making apologies in substantial and meaningful speeches. By doing so, they proved to be a crucial cog in a machine set in motion by other players. Often, it was local activists and politicians who played a key role in putting the issue of slavery on the local agenda. This created greater societal pressure and, in some cases, a response from the local authorities which ultimately led to apologies.

Below, I will quote a few local initiators, such as the Rotterdam trailblazer Peggy Wijntuin. She was a journalist at regional broadcasting company RTV Rijnmond, and then served on the Rotterdam City Council for the PvdA, the Dutch Labor Party, from 2006 to 2018. During her term on the council, she noted that there was a need for a place of remembrance:

Commemoration usually took place in churches, such as the Moravian church where many Surinamese people gathered, and the Catholic church. People said it would be nice if there was a dedicated place to gather. In 2008, I was given the honorary title of Patroness of Ketu Koti. I wanted to infuse that title with the knowledge I had about the need for a memorial place. I used my

position as Patroness to start lobbying for a monument, which was unveiled in 2013. And even though I was on the council at the time, I did this as a citizen, not as a council member. I kept politics out of it; I didn't want it to be a polarized forum, which the council was at that time. I didn't want there to be divisive discussions about something that was meant to bring people together. I worked on it for four years, and during that time, I was asked questions like "Who says we need such a monument in Rotterdam?" I faced racist abuse due to my black skin. And even a few death threats. It triggered people.⁵

The racism she encountered and her fellow city folk's ignorance made Wijntuin realize that Rotterdam was unaware of its own history of slavery. She felt that the city needed to investigate its past.

On November 14, 2017, the Wijntuin motion was adopted. It called for research into the history of colonialism and slavery in Rotterdam and for sharing this knowledge in schools and with the "man in the street." For Wijntuin, it was about showing "why Rotterdam is the city it is." Unlike Amsterdam, there were very few studies on Rotterdam's ties to slavery. The city had some catching up to do, and the research that took place from 2018 to 2020 resulted in three substantial publications.

The importance of the momentum in Rotterdam was not lost on Amsterdam politicians. But in their city, something else happened first. In December 2017, the council unanimously adopted a proposal to establish a national slavery museum. The initiator was Simion Blom, former city councilor in Amsterdam for GroenLinks, a progressive political party, and like Wijntuin, of Afro-Surinamese descent. Research into local ties to slavery and apologies to the descendants of the enslaved were also on the agenda, but the politicians in power moved slowly. It took until June 2019 for a proposal to be submitted in Amsterdam, eighteen months after Rotterdam had adopted Wijntuin's motion.

Mahmut Sungur lives in Utrecht and is a member of the city council for DENK, a party with a minority-rights platform. In July 2019, he and Rachel Streefland, councilwoman for the Christian Union party, made a motion for the city to investigate its involvement in slavery. In an interview, he explains why.

I more or less grew up in Lombok [an Utrecht neighborhood where the streets are named after Indonesian islands and key figures in Dutch colonial history] because my grandparents lived there. By then, the neighborhood housed a large number of immigrants [mainly with a Turkish background]. I grew up with those street names. When I was young, they didn't mean much to me, but when I entered politics, I became much more aware of them.... I saw that when parties negotiated, the interests of migrants were the first to be sacrificed. But I also saw that a lot was happening and that changes were made much faster than fifty years ago. The Zwarte Piet debate, for example. I submitted a motion against people wearing blackface. Why would you continue to spread racism over time? If something is racist, then it should not be tolerated. Period. The motion was adopted. That's where my fight for the Black community began.⁶

The quote shows that Sungur, of Turkish descent, found it important to embrace the connections between different migrant communities and the issues that they faced. He had often heard that the history of slavery was just a thing from the distant past. The Black community in Amsterdam was an inspiration for him: "They're a strong presence. They are well organized and often the drivers in this area." When he heard that the city of Amsterdam was going to commission research into its connections to slavery, he wanted Utrecht to do the same, because little was known about it and "Utrecht had a small Black community." The motion was based on the findings of the research and work carried out in an earlier project called "Traces of Slavery in Utrecht." Sungur was surprised by its findings and called them "pretty intense."

Because the province of Utrecht was also mentioned in the research report about the city, the provincial government organized a few sessions with the researchers and other scholars. The idea was to bring the provincial administrators and politicians up to speed about the topic and help them take a position. The fact that the province was involved in slavery must have come as a total surprise to them.

In smaller cities like Vlissingen and Delft, (former) city councilors also lobbied to get similar research projects off the ground, such as Angelique Duijndam and Cheraldine Osepa. This did not come easy; these cities turned out to be tough nuts to crack. Osepa did find allies in Delft, but

was unable to rally a majority until the fall of 2022, when suddenly a motion was passed requesting a study. No doubt the momentum created by national developments and the upcoming anniversary of abolition in 2023 helped cities like Delft over the hump. Other cities like Zaanstad, Hoorn, Leiden, Zwolle, Tilburg, and Eindhoven followed suit and adopted motions or started projects that showed their interest in the history of slavery and its impact.

Whose History?

Conversations with the three (former) local politicians, Wijntuin, Blom, and Sungur, reveal a clear common denominator: their own family history or experiences with migration and racial discrimination strongly influenced their ideas about what needed to be put on the political agenda. They linked the history of slavery to contemporary societal issues, including racism, partly because the conclusions of the studies about their cities' past pointed out these links.

Blom and Sungur were surprised by the amount of information that the studies unearthed. Based on these initial findings, several cities want to fund follow-up research projects, sometimes in response to motions and proposals from city councilors. These kinds of processes may appear to be very well organized and sequential, with all kinds of feedback loops, but the reality often turns out to be more disjointed. This disjointedness is also apparent in the initiatives taken by various institutions in these cities. In Rotterdam, the World Museum put the spotlight on slavery in 2023; the University of Utrecht released an advisory report in February 2022 led by James Kennedy. And the Utrecht Central Museum is in the midst of tracing the provenance of its permanent collection to check for connections to Utrecht administrators with ties to colonialism.

All these different initiatives—investigating the past for evidence of complicity in slavery; erecting a monument as a tangible reference point in a remembrance culture; making official apologies to take responsibility for involvement in slavery—are crucial steps in a lengthy process that instigates and solidifies greater awareness and understanding of the history of the Dutch nation. This history was long ignored because of the complicity that it implied, but also out of a lack of understanding, knowledge, and empathy regarding the ways that this history resonates in contemporary cultural and social practices. Commemorating and investigating the history

of Dutch slavery also sparks resistance and even polarization, according to Prime Minister Rutte. But as political philosopher Chantal Mouffe advised us: there is nothing to fear in polarization. Holding space for political opponents is what allows society to grow and develop.

Studies into the local and national history of slavery make it harder to argue its insignificance with the usual arguments, such as “it was all so long ago; the state didn’t profit that much from slavery; you have to see it in its historical context; why focus on slavery, and not on present-day injustices?” and so on. Such studies counteract trivializing claims about the historical and contemporary impact of slavery. Mayors who make apologies show moral and political leadership and thereby lend weight to the subject. Monuments are focal points on which stakeholders can center activities and project emotions to generate a tangible remembrance of their history.

The combination of research, monuments, and apologies creates leverage—especially if these processes go hand in hand. Rotterdam and Amsterdam are good examples. Utrecht unveiled its slavery monument on June 30, 2023. Unfortunately, the monument does not reflect the insights from the study on the city’s ties to slavery. Its focus is on transatlantic slavery while the research laid bare the global reach of Utrecht’s colonial past and involvement in slavery, as the mayor also said in her speech. The Hague decided on a location for its slavery monument in 2023 and in the spring of 2024 selected a South African artist to create the monument commemorating transatlantic slavery.

In Conclusion

Dutch local politicians and mayors have shown political courage in taking responsibility for historical injustices. They could only do so thanks to the work of activists and researchers who lobbied and provided the necessary knowledge for this. It is safe to say that pressure from local politicians and officials has had an impact on national politics. And the change in attitude at the national level has in turn led more local politicians to follow suit.

It is crucial that more historical and interdisciplinary research be conducted into the history of slavery. We should look into the role of big institutions like the church and academia, for example, but also study the impact of slavery on every part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The local politicians I interviewed about their active and catalytic role were not only motivated by personal experience, such as discrimination and racism,

but also by silences in the mainstream. From an intellectual perspective, it is interesting that Amsterdam, Utrecht, and The Hague all characterized colonial slavery as a global rather than a transatlantic phenomenon. The mayors of these cities explicitly apologized not only for transatlantic slavery and the slave trade, but also for slavery's global colonial aspect, linking it to the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the West India Company (WIC). This is an important development, which is far from complete. The South African researchers, artists, and activists I interviewed in November 2022 deplored the fact that the Netherlands has not fully included the history of the VOC and the Cape Colony in its reckoning with Dutch involvement in slavery. There is more work to be done in that area as well.

Notes

- 1 Sharon Dijksma, speech Janskerk, Utrecht, February 23, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njiifo4o5ls>.
- 2 Nancy Jouwe, "Van wie is de Nederlandse slavernijgeschiedenis?" in *De slavernij in Oost en West: Het Amsterdam onderzoek*, ed. Pepijn Brandon et al. (Amsterdam: Spectrum, 2020), 373–81.
- 3 "Aboutaleb: kabinet moet excuses aanbieden voor slavernijverleden" NOS, June 30, 2018, nos.nl/artikel/2239224aboutaleb-kabinetmoetexcusesaanbiedenvoor-slavernijverleden.
- 4 "Burgemeester Zaanstad roept kabinet op tot 'excuses' voor slavernijverleden," *NH Nieuws*, July 1, 2018: <https://www.nhnieuws.nl/nieuws/227253/burgemeester-zaanstad-roept-kabinet-op-tot-excuses-voor-slavernijverleden>.
- 5 Peggy Wijntuin, interview with the author, November 4, 2022.
- 6 Mahmut Sungur, interview with the author, November 17, 2022.

Research Method: Digital Humanities

The study of slavery and its afterlives is benefiting greatly from the use of digital resources and methods. It is now much easier for researchers to effectively trace the people affected by slavery, their locations, interrelationships, organizational structures, and movements. The first big steps in this field were taken fifteen to twenty years ago when comprehensive digitization projects started to make existing registers of the people who were enslaved and traded accessible for desktop research. Some of the best-known projects are: **mappingslavery.nl**, which maps the traces of slavery in Dutch cities, **slavevoyages.org** (big databases created from ships' logs), and **ru.nl/slavenregisters/**, which digitized the slave registers of Suriname and Curaçao.

These and similar projects have proven their usefulness to a broad audience, but they also present us with an important consideration. In a digital environment, the complexity of colonial slavery is reduced to a seemingly orderly whole. A key challenge for research and education in this field lies in addressing the complexity underlying that (apparent) order. A shared digital platform can help researchers and students to uncover particular viewpoints and practices. This is important because these have long determined the balance of power in society and have facilitated the perpetuation of inequality to this day. Another essential component of inclusive research is the opportunity to add previously unheard voices to the digital archives. One way that this can be achieved is by recording oral histories, and digitizing diaries and memoirs from private archives.

Innovative research tools in the field of genealogy are not only essential for researchers but can also contribute to the well-being and healing of the descendants of the enslaved by finally providing insight into their origins and the fate of their ancestors. Research into the repercussions of slavery is about insight into, and theory building about, the lived experience of the

enslaved in terms of work, family relations, health, religion, and violence. Digital technology can be of great significance in this respect. Researchers who have access to large amounts of textual source material can use new digital methods to significantly accelerate, improve, and enrich the data processing and analysis process. Text and Data Mining (TDM) platforms offer user-friendly options for analyzing corpora or large datasets. One example of this is **ianalyzer.hum.uu.nl**, which now includes the Delpher newspaper database. Topic modeling software can be used to filter large amounts of text for hidden thematic structures and connections. Modern software can also perform analyses aimed at chronologies, or time stamps, and other intersections and associations. Such research methods promote a better understanding of complex situations and relationships.

Digital Humanities aimed at a broad audience is not necessarily very complicated to use. Anyone can create an interesting visualization simply by entering data correctly in an Excel sheet, or by using online tools for generating maps or timelines.

There are also platforms that provide a free web environment with a database in which researchers can share their collections and projects at no cost. One example is Digital Grainger, a British Caribbean project, in which anyone can add information and references (annotations) to a colonial text using the **Hypothes.is** tool.

Methods and tools like these can make a big difference in how the past is interpreted and discussed in education, research, and the cultural sector. However, there are some hurdles to take, particularly in research into the Dutch colonial past and the history of slavery. Many of the most relevant corpora are not digitally available and therefore cannot be added to TDM platforms. Additionally, systems and software products for large-scale analyses are often still unable to read lesser-known languages and manuscripts, including Papiamentu, Sranan Tongo, and Southeast Asian languages. These barriers need to be taken away if we are to conduct large-scale inclusive historical research into the afterlives of slavery.

Abstract

In the textbooks that guide Dutch history education, the history of slavery has never been concealed. Yet the topic is usually limited in scope and treated from an economic perspective. In recent decades, changes in society, education policy, pedagogy, and historiography have led to more, and better, discussions of slavery in textbooks, with greater attention to social and cultural aspects of the topic from multiple perspectives. In this development, some textbooks led the way, while others were more likely to follow or lag behind. As all textbooks are periodically reviewed, their quality can be expected to continuously improve. However, differences in quality will persist.

Keywords: history; textbooks; slavery; Dutch; education; didactic