Chapter

# 9. Dutch Politics and Slavery in the Nineteenth Century

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During the Batavian Revolution in 1795, slavery and the slave trade were put on the national political agenda.[1] Moral critiques of slavery had already been widely published in the press and in philosophical writings through much of the latter half of the eighteenth century, but nothing had changed as a result. This chapter focuses on how Dutch politics dealt with slavery after 1795, how historians have written about it, and the questions that remain unanswered.

## Revolution and Restoration, 1795–1840

In April 1797, the radical representative Pieter Vreede called on the National Assembly, the new Dutch Parliament created during the revolution, to include a ban on slavery and the slave trade in the new constitution.[2] A committee set up by the same National Assembly studied this issue but advised against it, as a ban would make it very difficult to preserve the remaining colonies—particularly Suriname, Curaçao, the Gold Coast, and parts of the Dutch East Indies—due to a lack of colonists to maintain order and cultivate the land after abolition. Besides, the unrest in Santo Domingo that had followed the French abolition of slavery (1794) was still fresh in everyone's mind. The newly established Batavian Republic could not afford any adverse economic consequences. These practical concerns outweighed any moral objections to slavery and the Batavian Republic's draft constitution did not mention the topic at all. In 1798, a year after his appeal for abolition, Vreede took part in a successful campaign to reject the new constitution. In January 1798, he staged a coup, enabling the radicals to draft a new constitution themselves. However, even in that draft, slavery

remained unaddressed. Clearly, the issue was no longer a political priority for Vreede and his supporters. Though they frequently used the phrase "liberty, equality, and fraternity," they apparently did not apply those ideals to the enslaved people in the Batavian overseas territories.

After the revolution, when the Netherlands became the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1815, the new constitution stipulated that it was no longer the States General, but King William I who had supreme authority over the colonies.[3] He had grand plans for these regions, backed up by the power granted to him by the constitution and the rapid recovery of the Dutch slave colonies and slavery-related industries after the Napoleonic Wars. After losing much of its colonial empire, the Netherlands was no longer among the world's largest slaveholding states at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but the slaveholding plantations still held economic significance for the state and private enterprise. Recent research into the founding of De Nederlandsche Bank, for example, revealed that part of the capital used to establish the Dutch central bank was put up by entrepreneurs with direct interests in plantation slavery. Also, the consumption of cotton, indigo, sugar, and coffee increased, even though public opinion was turning against slavery. William I wanted the state treasury to benefit from this and sent bills to the Second Chamber of parliament proposing an increase in excise taxes on coffee and sugar. Despite attempts by Amsterdam trading houses to thwart the bill because it would affect their profits, both the Second Chamber and the First Chamber (Senate) approved the increase. British-led international pressure had imposed the abolition of the slave trade. Slaveholders realized that they could pay lip service to the abolitionist cause by quietly accepting the abolition of the slave trade; it did not hinder the use of slavery as a mode of production.[4]

As the supreme governor of the colonies, William I found a kindred spirit and loyal servant in military officer Johannes van den Bosch. Together, the men developed an all-encompassing vision of a colonial administration that sealed the fate of many enslaved people and local farmers.[5] Van den Bosch, who had served in the Dutch East Indies, was appointed commissioner-general of Suriname and the Antilles in 1827 and tasked with overhauling the administration. Part of Van den Bosch's policy was to introduce a significant change in the colonial regulations (1828), whereby enslaved people were henceforth legally considered persons instead of property.

Plantation owners and investors in the Netherlands were opposed to this. They managed to convince the Ministry of Colonies to delete the relevant article when the Regulation was revised in 1833.

Consequently, enslaved people could once again be treated as property. This had far-reaching consequences for the political debate on the abolition of slavery. In his new role as governor-general of the Dutch East Indies (1830–1833), Van den Bosch introduced the Cultivation System to make the colony more profitable. Slavery thus gradually gave way to forced labor by villagers in rural areas, who had to cultivate part of their land to deliver set quantities of crops to the government at fixed low prices.

View of the Ministry of Colonies housed in the former Huygens House in The Hague.

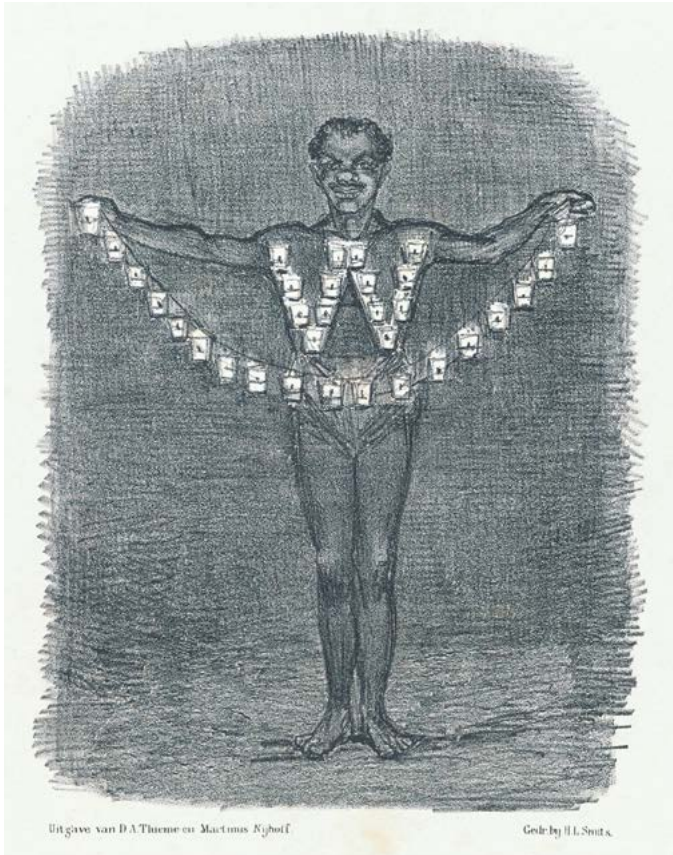
## Abolitionism and Anti-Abolitionism, circa 1840–1850

From 1840 onwards, the political debate on the abolition of slavery focused on the Atlantic territories, particularly Suriname. Although historians have written much more about the plantations in Suriname, there was large-scale slavery in the Dutch Caribbean, too. In Curaçao, for instance, up to 40 percent of the population lived in slavery. However, the Caribbean islands never became full-blown plantation economies like Suriname. The Dutch were most invested in Suriname, hence their objections to abolition there. When ministerial responsibility and the participation of the States General in colonial budgets were introduced in 1840, the Orange monarchy no longer had sole say over the colonies. Disillusioned by the curtailment of his power, King William I abdicated; the throne went to his son, William II. In the Address in Reply to the Speech from the Throne of 1841, the Second and First Chambers alluded to the emancipation of the enslaved. Public opposition to slavery was also growing. Encouraged by British abolitionists, Dutch citizens organized to achieve abolition in the Netherlands as well.[6]

This resurgence of abolitionism prompted Amsterdam trading houses to approach the new king and seek his support to protect their colonial property.[7] In a petition, the stakeholders declared the Dutch government to be responsible for emancipation, making it clear that if the government were to sign off on emancipation, they would demand "adequate compensation." Several signatories had already received compensation from the British government. They also opposed the role that an "Association or Society" for "the emancipation of slaves" wanted to play in the abolition of slavery in Suriname. William II sided with the plantation and slave owners: he refused to support the Society for the Promotion of the Abolition of Slavery, and tasked his Minister of Colonies, Jean Chrétien Baud, with first studying whether abolition was necessary.

Baud's study avoided public scrutiny because the dire financial problems left by William I dominated the political agenda. The reorganization of the national debt created an opportunity to petition for political reforms such as the abolition of slavery, and abolitionists urged parliament to take action.[8] But the fact that part of the Second Chamber had very different priorities became clear when the chamber heard an anti-abolitionist petition from stakeholders in 1845. The signatories claimed that the governor of Suriname's attempts to improve the lot of the enslaved were instead causing unrest. Meanwhile, liberal parliamentarians seized upon the ensuing

debate to try to gain greater influence over colonial policy by questioning the constitutional article dealing with the balance of power between the king, the cabinet, and the Second Chamber. This in turn led a chamber subcommittee to accuse the liberals of having "deliberately cast a veil" over "the defense of unrestricted slavery" hidden in the petition.[9]




Cartoon from 1862 about the abolition of slavery. An enslaved man's chest is decorated with lights in the shape of the letter W (for King William III).

The constitutional revision of 1848 made the States General, as co-legislators, responsible for colonial affairs again. However, the government had deliberately passed up the opportunity to abolish slavery during this revision because of the high costs involved. France had abolished slavery that year and the Dutch ministers were aware that this had cost the French

state dearly in compensation for slave owners, so they deemed it ill-advised to address the issue in the revised constitution. As long as the government refused to recognize the owners' demand for compensation, the owners would continue to question the need for abolition. The deadlock lasted until 1852. Only then did the owners grudgingly acknowledge that continuing slavery was undesirable and did the Second Chamber realize that attempting to abolish slavery without compensation was doomed to fail.

## The State Commission and the Emancipation Act, 1853–1863

In November 1853, a State Commission led by former cabinet minister Baud began preparing for abolition. Parliamentary support turned out to be slim, however. Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer resigned from the commission because of Baud's cumbersome approach and the considerable influence that the stakeholders in slavery had on the commission. Groen, who represented the Society for the Promotion of the Abolition of Slavery, was seen as the Dutch counterpart of William Wilberforce, the eighteenth-century British abolitionist. However, fellow commission member and plantation owner A. P. Brugmans was bitterly disappointed by Groen's resignation and his criticism of the State Commission in his role as an MP. Instead of "enlightening the State Commission from within," Groen had "abandoned the banner," Brugmans felt.[10] Groen's decision not to champion the abolitionist cause in the State Commission gave stakeholders the opportunity to influence the commission's reports and the bills based on them.

There were various reasons why the run-up to abolition in the Netherlands took a long time. A study of the Ministry of Colonies' archives reveals that the ministry devoted most of its time to the Dutch East Indies. Another factor slowing down the process was the individual involvement of administrators like Minister Baud and his successors, including Jan Jacob Rochussen. As a former governor-general, Rochussen had received a petition for the abolition of slavery in the Dutch East Indies but had ignored it. Still, in his role as the minister of colonies, Rochussen was the one who ushered the Emancipation Act for the Dutch East Indies through parliament. The law took effect in 1860.[11] He also wrote to the governor in Suriname that he hoped to "bring about the great measure of Emancipation—whatever one may think of it in the abstract … in the next session [of the States General]."[12] After three failed attempts and a rejected

budget, Rochussen resigned. The progress of the bill was not only hindered by disinterest but also by the high turnover rate of ministers holding the Colonies portfolio. Between 1855 and the Atlantic Emancipation Act of 1862, parliament received six emancipation proposals, defended by four different ministers.

Moreover, it was usually an old hand from the Dutch East Indies who headed the Department of Colonies and who—in terms of West Indies affairs—was completely dependent on (his staff's) dossier knowledge and the information that he received from stakeholders in the region.

On July 1, 1863, the Emancipation Act came into effect in the Atlantic region. Slaveholders in Suriname received 300 guilders per enslaved person and 60 guilders if the emancipated had previously acquired the right to "manumission" (release by the owner). On Curaçao, Bonaire, Aruba, Saint Eustatius, and Saba, owners received 200 guilders and on Saint Martin 100 guilders per enslaved person. These different amounts were based on the difference in market value of the goods produced in the individual colonies. In total, the Dutch government paid out 9,864,360 guilders in compensation, amounting to over a third of the national budget for the year 1863. The Dutch government was able to pay this out of the budget surplus obtained from forced labor in the Dutch East Indies under the Cultivation System.[13]

Many historians have described the long-drawn-out legislative process from 1853 to 1862 that led up to the Emancipation Act. Most studies approach slavery as a socioeconomic and cultural phenomenon and were written by Dutch historians under the auspices of the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) in Leiden.

The historiography of the Dutch Caribbean received a significant impetus when scholars started responding to a groundbreaking article by Seymour Drescher, a British historian who focused on the causal relationship between capitalism and the abolition of slavery. In his response, historian Gert Oostindie provided an alternative explanation for the late abolition in the Netherlands: the modest economic importance of slavery-based production in the Atlantic region meant that the issue had been given no political priority.[14] Renewed interest in the importance of slavery in the Atlantic system might lead to the conclusion that this explanation is less than plausible, and the time seems ripe to seek answers in another direction. In 1979, Surinamese historian Joseph Siwpersad wrote a standard work on the Dutch government and the abolition of slavery in Suriname.[15]

Rather than a cultural or social issue, he considered slavery primarily a political issue. From that angle, he argued that economically motivated owners delayed the decision-making process on the abolition of slavery.

## State Supervision and Immigration, circa 1863–1900

For many enslaved people, the formal abolition of slavery did not mean immediate freedom. In Suriname, a period of state supervision, instituted by the Dutch government, began on October 1, 1863. More than 33,000 emancipated enslaved individuals were required to work under state supervision for an employer of their choice for a maximum of ten years. Furthermore, the government subsidized the immigration of contract laborers to the Caribbean. Despite abolition, Dutch officials remained convinced that the formerly enslaved had to be governed with a firm hand, and that Suriname, in particular, needed additional labor. In 1871, Nicolaas G. Pierson, Director of the Surinamese Immigration Society (1865–1870) and later Prime Minister, wrote: "The Emancipation Act has always been a failure in my eyes. … I would have wanted: fifty years of state supervision and mandatory education … while also importing foreign workers—because Suriname still needs more labor, even if all the Negroes work."[16] A year after this letter was written, the Second Chamber of parliament approved a treaty between the Dutch and British governments on the migration of Hindustani contract workers from British India to Suriname. After 1890, the Dutch also started bringing in Javanese contract workers. Thus, while the slave trade had been abolished in 1814 and slavery in 1860/1863, the Dutch government became ever more deeply involved in the recruitment and financing of immigrants from Asia, resulting in Suriname's current demographic composition.

In addition, the powers of administrators and institutions in the colonies remained limited. The inhabitants' dissatisfaction with this clearly showed during the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Colonial States of Suriname in May 1891. Riots broke out, resulting in one death and leading to the departure of the governor, M.A. de Savornin Lohman. Parliamentary chronicler Frans Netscher succinctly summarized the influence of the De Savornin Lohman family in both the colonies and The Hague: "Members of this family govern the darkies in the West Indies and the blacks in our Parliament on a Christian-historical basis!"[17] Prime Minister Mackay then sounded out former Minister of Colonies Willem de Brauw for the governorship of Suriname. De Brauw was not keen to assume

a role in Suriname that would effectively be tightly controlled by the government in The Hague. After all, the governor represented the Crown and administered the colony based on decisions made by the Dutch government. De Brauw knew "exactly how much needed to be done in Suriname" because the government "had already ruined things in Suriname during the slave emancipation." At the same time, the former minister noted "how woefully little a governor can do … as long as political circles in the Netherlands remain completely indifferent to the fate of the colony, which they regard as a burden that they want to hear as little as possible about."[18]

The most notable aspect of De Brauw's statement is his observation about the Hague's indifference towards the fate of the colony and its inhabitants, even though they held full political responsibility. De Brauw thus confirmed the existing view of how administrators and politicians handled the political responsibility for slavery in the nineteenth century. However, current research suggests that we should question the status of this disinterest as an explanation for the late abolition of slavery in the Netherlands. Slavery, both its abolition and its aftermath, did not completely pass politicians by, but they prioritized domestic reforms, the economic interests of the colonial metropole, and maintaining the colonies as profit-making territories. Consequently, they did not use their political authority over the colony to expedite the emancipation of enslaved people.

## Conclusion

To do justice to their role in the history of slavery, several Dutch cities, provinces, and institutions have conducted research into the part they played. First of all, the outcomes of this growing body of histories need to be synthesized. In addition, three lines in the political history of slavery need further investigation.

First, the 1815 constitution regarded the colonies as the domain of the Orange monarchy. Hence, supreme control was in the hands of King William I until 1840. A study of the House of Orange's involvement in slavery and colonialism is therefore in order, and has been underway since December 2022.

Second, we need to study the influence of administrators with a colonial background. William I and William II relied on men like Johannes van den Bosch and Jean C. Baud, who began their careers in the Dutch East Indies. Frits de Kock, a childhood friend of William III, became his private secre-

tary and director of the King's Cabinet. He was born in Amboina (present-day Ambon), and his father was Hendrik de Kock, the commander in the Java War (1825–1830) and Minister of the Interior under William I.

Third, we need to study the period following the Emancipation Act. Upon the abolition of slavery, slave owners received compensation. We know not only where this money came from—from forced labor in Asia—but also how much each owner and investor received. Now we should investigate what the recipients of the compensation did with this money.

Researchers studying the labor history of the British Empire have argued that the abolition of slavery led to intensified colonization and a shift to a production system based on unfree contract labor. In her study on labor migration from British India and Java to Suriname, Rosemarijn Hoefte has already shown that this shift was driven more by the legal instruments to control cheap labor than the migrants' economic motives and the theoretical safeguarding of their welfare. Historian Ulbe Bosma has also pointed out similarities in the treatment of workers by colonial powers in the second half of the nineteenth century. But unlike other countries, the Netherlands did not grant the formerly enslaved people Dutch citizenship after their emancipation. We need to clarify the political decision making underlying this decision and the alternative forms of citizenship that later emerged. Only then will we better understand the long-term impact of the history of slavery.

## Notes

1 An anti-authoritarian revolution against the stadtholders, the princes of Orange, by a combination of Dutch revolutionaries who espoused democratic ideals and their French allies who later occupied the Netherlands. The Batavian Revolution marks the end of the Dutch Republic.

2 Dirk Alkemade, "Why was Slavery not Abolished in 1798? Humanity and Human Rights in the Batavian Revolution," *BMGN-LCHR* online first (2024): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.12807.

3 The United Kingdom of the Netherlands was the unofficial name of the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg during the period of 1815–1830.

4 Pepijn Brandon and Karen Lurvink, "'Shrewd Sirens of Humanity': The Changing Shape of Pro-Slavery Arguments in the Netherlands (1789–1814)," *Revista Almanack* 14 (2016): 3–26,. http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2236-463320161402.

5 Angelie Sens, *De kolonieman: Johannes van den Bosch (1780–1844), volksverheffer in naam van de koning* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2019), 222–26, 237, 241–45.

6 Maartje Janse, *De afschaffers: Publieke opinie, organisatie en politiek in Nederland 1840–1880* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2007).

7 Lauren Lauret, "No Emancipation without Compensation: Slave Owners' Petitions and the End of Slavery in the Netherlands, c. 1833–1873," *BMGN-LCHR* online first (2024): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.12783.

8 Joseph Siwpersad, *De Nederlandse regering en de afschaffing van de Surinaamse slavernij, 1833–1863* (Groningen: Bouma's Boekhuis 1979).

9 M. Kuitenbrouwer, "De Nederlandse afschaffing van de slavernij in vergelijkend perspectief," *BMGN-LCHR* 93, no. 1 (1978): 96.

10 Baud Collection, National Archives (NA), Inv. no. 930, Brugmans to Baud, May 5, 1856.

11 Reggie Baay, "De stille afschaffing van de slavernij in Nederlands-Indië," in *De slavernij in Oost en West: Het Amsterdam onderzoek*, ed. Pepijn Brandon et al. (Amsterdam: Spectrum, 2020), 329–32.

12 Cited in Karwan Fatah-Black, Lauren Lauret and Joris van den Tol, *Serving the Chain? De Nederlandsche Bank and the Last Decades of Slavery, 1814–1863* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2023).

13 Janny de Jong, "Van batig slot naar ereschuld: De discussie over de financiële verhouding tussen Nederland en Indië en de hervorming van de Nederlandse koloniale politiek, 1860–1900," (PhD diss., University of Groningen, 1989).

14 Gert Oostindie, "Explaining Dutch Abolition," in *Fifty Years Later: Antislavery, Capitalism and Modernity in the Dutch Orbit*, ed. Gert Oostindie (Leiden: KITLV Uitgeverij, 1995), 14.

15 Siwpersad, *De Nederlandse regering en de afschaffing van de Surinaamse slavernij.*

16 J.G.S.J. van Maarseveen, *Briefwisseling van Nicolaas Gerard Pierson 1839–1909,* Pierson to Van Houten, November 30, 1871 (Amsterdam: De Nederlandse Bank, 1993), 309.

17 Frans Netscher, *In en om de Tweede Kamer: Parlementaire portretten en schetsen* (Amsterdam: Warendorf 1889), 55–56. "The blacks" were members of the Anti-Revolutionary Party: conservative, often orthodox Protestant politicians who were opposed to liberal and secular changes in society.

18 NA, Mackay van Ophemert archives, 2.21.115, Inv. no. 622, W.M. de Brauw to AE. Mackay, March 27, 1891.

## Abstract

After the slave trade was formally abolished in Dutch colonial territories in 1814, it continued illegally. In Elmina, Suriname, and the Caribbean islands, the trade persisted for decades under the watch of the Dutch authorities. In Indonesia, there was widespread enslavement and slave raiding, which the colonial authorities could not have suppressed even if they had tried to, for lack of resources. These practices continued until the very end of the nineteenth century. Little attention has been paid to the massive scale of slavery in the Indonesian archipelago in the nineteenth century, and in Southeast Asia in general.

***Keywords:*** slave trade; slave raiding; Indonesia; Africa; Dutch Antilles; Suriname