

“Their power has been broken, the danger has passed”

Dutch newspaper coverage of the Berbice slave revolt, 1763

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Abstract

In February 1763 one of the largest and longest slave revolts erupted in the Dutch colony of Berbice. As the majority of the white population fled, colonial authorities were left behind with few, and mostly ill soldiers, and in no time the insurgents controlled the colony almost completely. This rebellion did not only shake the colonial government to the core, but also made a significant (media) impact in the Dutch Republic. For the duration of the Berbice rebellion substantial reports on the revolt appeared in the Dutch press, and other print media, such as pamphlets and news digests, also devoted attention to the issue. This article studies the rebellion through newspaper reports and provides a glimpse of the reception of the Berbice revolt in the Dutch Republic. It shows that slavery was already a public affair around the middle of the eighteenth century and not, as it is often presented, a limited, mostly scholarly debate. It will explore whether the extensive coverage affected the public perception of slavery in the Dutch Republic. Did it reinforce support for the institution of slavery or did it raise awareness of the problems surrounding it, breaking ground for the later abolitionist movement?

Keywords: Berbice, slave revolts, slavery, newspapers, Dutch Republic

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On 21 May 1763, the very last bulletin of the *Amsterdamsche Courant* brought news from the Dutch colony of Berbice (in modern-day Guyana) relaying that in February ‘a revolt of the Negroes had taken place’. Due to the absence of any further particularities, however, it was unclear how severe the situation was.² As it turned out, a group of enslaved labourers, led by former house slave Coffij and his second-in-command Accarra, revolted in late February in protest against their harsh and inhumane treatment. Within days Dutch colonial authority completely collapsed and the rebellion was joined by the majority of the enslaved population. The colonists, well aware that they were outnumbered ten to one, panicked after the insurgents killed around thirty Europeans on the Peereboom plantation, one of the major Dutch sugar plantations about seventy miles upstream from the coast, and fled north rather than make a stand against the insurgency. With the help of reinforcements from Suriname, directly to the east of Berbice, the Dutch managed to regain control of the Dageraad plantation, about ten miles downriver from Fort Nassau, in early April (fig. 1).

A stalemate developed, lasting throughout the summer and autumn – with the colonists largely confined to the plantations while the insurgents controlled the hinterland. Neither of the warring parties was able to mount a decisive offensive. The Dutch were plagued by disease and the threat of mutiny, while the insurgents were dealing with internal strife, and lack of food and other supplies. The arrival of reinforcements from the Dutch Republic in the autumn of 1763 set the conflict in motion again and eventually the revolt was broken in July 1764, thanks to further reinforcements from the Dutch Republic and assistance from Amerindian allies, the Arawak and Waraos – referred to as ‘our Indians’ by Dutch colonists – and the Caribs and Akawaio.³

¹ This article is part of the nwo-financed project *Covering the Ocean*. I am grateful to nwo for their financial support.

² *Amsterdamsche Courant*, 21 May 1763, printed by Hendrik Linsen, Amsterdam: ‘Amsterdam den 20 May. “Men heeft hier over St Eustatius berigt gekregen [...] dat in die Colonie een Opstand onder de Negers was voorgevallen; zonder dat men, tot nog toe, met zekerheid weet van hoe veel gewigt of van wat gevolg dezelve geweest is”.

³ There are two published accounts about the Berbice rebellion: Hartsinck, *Beschryving van Guiana*; Netscher, *Geschiedenis van de koloniën*. See also: Velzing, ‘De Berbice Slavenopstand, 1763’; Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean*. More recently also the work of Marjoleine Kars: Kars, ‘Dodging Rebellion’; Kars, ‘Cleansing the Land’; Kars, “‘Wij beleeven hier droevige tyden”.

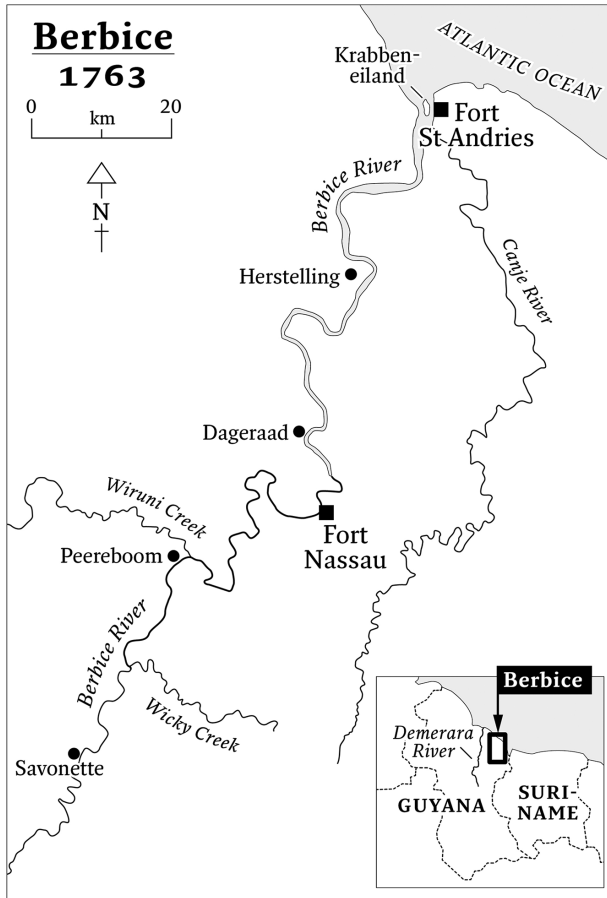


Fig. 1 Berbice, 1763. Map produced by UvA Kaartenmakers.

The slave revolt in Berbice was unprecedented in its size and duration. For this reason, it received extensive coverage in the Dutch press. By 1760 ten vernacular newspapers appeared throughout the Dutch Republic and together these newspapers reached a considerable audience.⁴ The *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant* and the *Leydse Courant* boasted a national readership, with a print run of around 5,000 issues, while the *Amsterdamsche*

⁴ The four largest Dutch-language newspapers resided in Amsterdam, Haarlem, Leiden and The Hague; smaller, regional newspapers existed in Rotterdam, Delft, Utrecht, Middelburg, Groningen and Leeuwarden. For the purpose of this article I have looked at the coverage of the rebellion in six of these newspapers, namely those of Amsterdam, Leiden, Haarlem, Middelburg, Groningen, and Leeuwarden. I have made use of Delpher, the newspaper database of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, which contains mostly complete runs of these newspapers for the period 1755-1765. There are some exceptions: there are no issues of the *Amsterdamsche Courant* in 1755, no issues of the *Leeuwarder Courant* in 1762; relatively few issues of the *Leydse Courant* in 1763; and no issues of the *Opregte Groninger Courant* in 1765.

Courant sold a similar number mostly within the city (fig. 2).⁵ The smaller, regional papers had a more modest scope, but served their respective local news markets efficiently. Even though none of these newspapers appeared on a daily basis, their complementary publication schemes meant that at least one issue was published in the Dutch Republic on every working day.⁶ For the duration of the Berbice rebellion substantial reports on the revolt appeared in the Dutch press, and when there was little news from across the ocean, the story (temporarily) moved from the newspapers to other print media, such as pamphlets and news digests. The amount of public attention offers an enticing new perspective on a major slave revolt in the Atlantic world.

Until now the Berbice slave rebellion has mostly been studied from the vantage point of the rebellion itself. Historical scholarship tends to privilege the political and military confrontations between the slave rebels and the planters and soldiers. More recently Marjoleine Kars has widened the focus by studying the co-operation with the indigenous peoples in the suppression of the revolt and by drawing attention to the importance of gender and the role of (enslaved) women in the rebellion and its aftermath. By contrast, the reception of the revolt in the Dutch Republic has received little attention and has only been studied in relation to the debate on slavery. Bert Paasman has suggested that, even though the news of the Berbice revolt shocked Dutch readers, its impact was limited.⁷ Generally, the Dutch debate on slavery is said to be confined to scholarly works, literature, and, occasionally, spectatorial writings, with a broader debate developing only at the turn of the century. Angelie Sens has stated that there ‘was sufficient information at hand on [slavery], but this did not result in fervent public debate’ and even if the notion of slavery appeared in public discourse ‘it was as a political concept to pinpoint the enslavement of citizens by the ruling elite’.⁸

And yet, the Dutch literate public would be exposed to the issue of slavery and the slave trade simply by reading the newspapers, even if the coverage was not particularly elaborate. Whenever the *asiento de negros* changed hands, the press reported it, and throughout the eighteenth century, reports of slave rebellions or (suspected) conspiracies in the Americas occasionally appeared in the newspapers. A short-lived rebellion on Curaçao, for instance, elicited several bulletins in 1750.⁹ Similarly, (small) slave revolts on Surinamese plantations and confrontations with the maroons (*bosch-negers*) received attention, if only intermittently.¹⁰ The newspapers did not confine themselves to domestic

5 Van Goinga, *Alom te bekomen*, 35-84; Haks, ‘War, Government and the News.’

6 For the eighteenth century (Dutch) press, see: Barker and Burrows, *Press, Politics and the Public Sphere*, especially chapter 2; Couvée, ‘The administration of the Oprechte Haarlemse Courant’; Koopmans, ‘The varying lives and layers of mid-eighteenth-century news reports.’; Koopmans, ‘The 1755 Lisbon Earthquake and Tsunami in Dutch News Sources.’; Koopmans, ‘Storehouses of news’; Broersma, *Beschaafde vooruitgang*.

7 Paasman, *Reinhart*, 178. See also: Sens, ‘Dutch antislavery attitudes’ and Priester, ‘De Nederlandse houding ten aanzien van de slavenhandel en slavernij.’

8 Sens, ‘Dutch antislavery attitudes’, 97, 100-101.

9 On the 1750 revolt, see: De Hoog, *Van rebellie tot revolutie*, 38-44 and 61-3; Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean*, 546.

10 On the Tempati revolt, see: Bouwhuijsen, De Bruin, and Horeweg, *Opstand in Tempati*; Hoogbergen, *The Boni Maroon Wars*, 26-29; Dragtenstein, ‘De ondraaglijke stoutheid der wegloopers’, 165-173.

colonial news. Rebellions on both French and English islands in the Caribbean would be mentioned in the longer reports from the colonies and sometimes merited a separate bulletin. In March 1702, for instance, several newspapers reported a conspiracy on Barbados, which had been discovered just in time.¹¹ Only three years before the Berbice rebellion a major slave revolt occurred in the English colony of Jamaica in 1760-61, lasting for over a year and attracting over a thousand insurgents.¹² Nevertheless, the size and duration of this revolt was not reflected in the reporting in the Dutch Republic which was piecemeal and terse. On the whole, newspapers often related the outbreak and the subsequent suppression of rebellion, but offered little in between. Such limited reporting would not befall the slave revolt in Berbice.

A study of the rebellion through newspaper reports can give us a glimpse of the reception of the Berbice revolt in the Dutch Republic. This article will show that slavery was already a public affair around the middle of the eighteenth century and not, as it is usually presented, just a limited, mostly scholarly debate. First, it will discuss the story of the rebellion as it unfolded in the Dutch press, both in the newspapers and in other print media. Second, it will explore whether the extensive coverage affected the public perception of slavery in the Dutch Republic. Did it reinforce support for the institution of slavery or did it raise awareness of the problems surrounding it, breaking ground for the later abolitionist movement? Finally, a short comparison will be made with the public response in Great Britain to the other major slave rebellion of the eighteenth century, Tacky's Revolt.¹³

Tidings of Disaster

The *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant* and the *Amsterdamsche Courant* broke the news of the Berbice revolt on the same day, 21 May 1763, some three months after the first events had occurred. They provided their readers with the same information: a revolt had allegedly broken out in Berbice and many residents had fled. The refugees had apparently been unable to provide any further details about the revolt, leaving considerable room for speculation. A mere ten days after the initial reports, on 31 May, the coverage on the revolt began to diverge. On the one hand, the *Amsterdamsche Courant* openly questioned whether an uprising had taken place at all: the Gentlemen Directors of the Society of Berbice had received no news of an uprising and ‘of all the people, who were said to have fled to the river Demerara, none had sent word to their friends or correspondents here, and, by any other way, no letters arrived in the Fatherland’.¹⁴ The editor of the *Oprechte Haerlemse*

11 See: *Leydse Courant*, 24 March 1702, printed by Anthony de Klopper, Leiden; *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*, 25 March 1702, printed by Johannes Enschedé, Haarlem; *Amsterdamsche Courant*, 25 March 1702.

12 For accounts of Tacky's Rebellion, see: Craton, *Testing the Chains*, chapter 11; Hall, *In Miserable Slavery*, chapter 5; Bollettino, ‘Slavery, War, and Britain's Atlantic Empire’, chapter 5.

13 This has been studied by Maria Alessandra Bollettino in her PhD-thesis: ‘Slavery, War, and Britain's Atlantic Empire. Black Soldiers, Sailors, and Rebels in the Seven Years' War’.

14 *Amsterdamsche Courant*, 31 May 1763: ‘t Komt zeer vreemd voor, dat van alle de Luiden, welke gezegd worden, vlugtende aan de Rivier Temerary te zyn aangekomen, geen één de minster Letter Schrifts aan hunne

Courant, in contrast, printed a report providing confirmation of, and further information on, the revolt, supplied by a certain Captain Cornelis Spruyt, who had sailed from Suriname just as news of the revolt arrived there. When he later called at Barbados, Spruyt received further ‘sad tidings [...] that the entire colony of the Berbice had been pillaged by the Negroes, the fort had been taken over, and the Dutch governor and his family, together with another 22 families, had been killed by them, &c.’¹⁵ As the tidings of rebellion disseminated throughout the Dutch Republic, both versions of the course of events appeared in the regional papers a couple of days later. The *Oprechte Groninger Courant* published the same innocuous bulletin as the *Amsterdamsche Courant*, informing its readers of the growing doubts surrounding the troubles across the ocean whereas the *Middelburgsche Courant* published the alarming account printed by the *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*.

From this point onwards, the reporting diverged from the familiar pattern. Instead of only covering the outbreak of trouble and its eventual suppression, the press consistently covered the rebellion. After the initial confusion surrounding the revolt in Berbice, reporting intensified. The incoming bulletins, which typically lagged three to four months behind actual events, were classified according to place of arrival rather than place of origin.¹⁶ The Holland newspapers took the lead in the reporting and analysis of the revolt, with the regional papers following their cue, copying (most of) their stories. Often the reports on Berbice in the regional papers appeared two or three days after they were published in one of the Holland newspapers and were only modified to a limited extent.¹⁷ Nevertheless, this copying practice showed that the regional press deemed the story relevant to its readers, and in June and July 1763 extensive reports appeared throughout the Dutch Republic, describing developments in Berbice in more and more detail.

In June it became clear that the colony had practically been taken over by the insurgents, leaving the colonists with only a single foothold on the Atlantic coast, Fort Andries, at the mouth of the Berbice river. The extent of the chaos first emerged in a report in the *Oprechte Leydse Courant* on 6 June which confirmed that 3,000 ‘Creoles or Negroes’ had conspired to rebel and had besieged the fort which was abandoned and destroyed by Van Hoogenheim after four days, leaving the colony wide open for the insurgents. The report emphasised the ‘ferociousness’ (*verwoedheid*) of the rebels and described how

Vrienden of Correspondenten hier, heeft gezonden, nog dat, langs eenigen anderen Weg Brieven in ’t Vaderland zyn gekomen [...].

¹⁵ *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*, 31 May 1763: ‘Dat de geheele Colonie De Berbice door de Negers was afge-loopen; het Casteel vermeersterd; de Hollandse Gouverneur, en zyne Familie, benevens noch 22 Familien, door hen vermoord waren &c.’

¹⁶ As a result, early reports coming in via London could be found under ‘England’ or ‘Great Britain’ whereas those arriving in Amsterdam would be put under ‘Low Countries’. On four occasions news about Berbice appeared under a separate heading, such as ‘West Indies’ or ‘Amerika’. The *Leeuwarder Courant* used a different organisational principle dividing the newspaper into thematic categories. Reports about the revolt in Berbice were categorized depending on the content of the report under ‘military news’ (*militair nieuws*), ‘shipping news’ (*scheep-vaart*), or ‘particularities’ (*byzonderheeden*).

¹⁷ Such copy-and-paste practices were a common phenomenon in early modern news-gathering, allowing smaller newspapers to print a wide range of news without maintaining an extensive network of correspondents. See for instance: Koopmans, ‘The varying lives and layers’, 354.

‘they did not spare men, women or children, nor plantation slaves who offered any resistance’.¹⁸ Four days later the *Opregte Groninger Courant* stressed the bloodthirstiness and barbarity of the insurgents even more, speaking of a ‘chilling revolt’, ‘indiscriminate’ and ‘inhumane killing’, and of the murdering of families including ‘the most delicate children and infants’.¹⁹

The emphasis on the brutal behaviour of the rebels is a trope that returned time and again. Building on the coverage of earlier rebellions, the newspapers chose to focus on the damage done by the rebel slaves, without paying any attention to the underlying causes of or possible solutions to the violence. The portrayal of the rebels as being extremely violent also appears to have served as a justification for the rapid collapse of the colonial government. The description of massacres was generally coupled with the abandonment and burning of Fort Nassau, the second-largest fort of the colony about fifty-five miles upstream, which left the rest of Berbice wide open for the insurgents. The early coverage of the conflict in the Dutch press was that of total defeat in the face of barbaric violence of the enslaved population.

Tidings of events unfolding in Berbice arrived in the surrounding colonies well before they reached the Dutch Republic and this is clearly reflected in the news coverage. On 18 June the *Middelburgsche Courant*, for instance, iterated that ‘with advises from Essequibo, Suriname, St Eustatius, as well as from Barbados, confirmation of the pillaging of the Colony of Berbice has arrived’.²⁰ Direct communication from Berbice seems to have broken down completely, underlining the exceptional chaos in the wake of the revolt. As a result, the first wave of news about the revolt arriving in the Dutch Republic consisted largely of accounts provided by refugee planters and merchants and not necessarily from institutional sources. In most cases refugees fleeing Berbice transmitted the news as they arrived in other colonies, which acted as the regional ‘first responders’ to the crisis as a result. Governor Van Hoogenheim, in charge of the administration of Berbice, sought help from the Dutch Republic, both from the Society of Berbice and the States General, but realised it would take months to arrive. Immediate action was needed to prevent the colony from collapsing completely.²¹ According to the newspapers in the Dutch Republic, the Barbadian governor, Charles Pinfold, was the first to react by sending a ship to assess the situation. When it returned with confirmation of the revolt, he equipped two barques each with 150 soldiers.²² The governor of St Eustatius, Jan de Windt, too decided to send help – a barque with 120 men – and Suriname, which was closest, dispatched one hundred soldiers. In light of the disaster that unfolded in Berbice, and of which Dutch newspaper

¹⁸ *Leydse Courant*, 6 June 1763: ‘[...] dat zy niemant, het zy Man, Vrouw of Kinderen, ja zelfs de Plantagie-Slaaven, die hun maar eenigen tegenstand deeden, spaarden.’

¹⁹ *Opregte Groninger Courant*, 10 June 1763, printed by Synko Hoitsema, Groningen: ‘[...] massacreerden, zelfs de tederste Kinderen en Zuigelingen niet uytgezondert [...]’.

²⁰ *Middelburgsche Courant*, 18 June 1763, printed by Johannes Jacobus Callenfels, Middelburg: ‘Met de berigten zo van Isequebo, Surinamen, St. Eustatius, als uit Barbados heeft men de confirmatie van de Colonie van Berbice door de Negers.’

²¹ Kars, “Wij beleeven hier droevige tyden”, 198.

²² Reported in: *Leydse Courant*, 6 June 1763; *Opregte Groninger Courant*, 10 June 1763; *Leeuwarder Courant*, 11 June 1763; *Middelburgsche Courant*, 11 June 1763.

readers had been apprised, these reports were reassuring them that something was done to relieve the situation.

As the first reinforcements from the Dutch Republic left for Berbice in the course of July, coverage shifted from recounting events to the achievements of the various regional relief forces, leading to stories more befitting the general pattern of the newspapers: war reports. The *Groninger Courant* was the first Dutch language newspaper to report on the arrival and exploits of the auxiliary troops from Suriname on 8 July. In a rather dry tone the bulletin enumerated that the troops:

[...] having taken up position at the plantation named Dageraad, clashed with the rebels; that the Director of that plantation had been killed; that over there 80 other Europeans were killed, and that 23 others fled aboard the ships; that the troops of the *secours*, after a six-hour fight, forced the Negroes to flee, leaving behind some of their dead and wounded; that the chief of the said rebels proposed a peace to the governor, provided that a general freedom, for all Negroes, and possession of half the colony was granted, but that the governor had rejected the offer completely.²³

This story relayed the essentials efficiently. The *Middelburgsche Courant* provided a more elaborate report which described the dismal conditions of twenty-three Dutch refugees residing at the mouth of the river, emphasising the pressing need for these troops from Suriname, and focused more specifically on the peace proposal of the rebels, which resembled that made by the maroons in Suriname. The day after their defeat, according to the Middelburg newspaper, the leader of the rebels sent ‘a young man from Berbice, who had been severely whipped, [...] with a letter for the governor’ in which he apologised for the violence against the colonists, adding that this took place against his orders, and maintained that he would prefer to make peace, on condition of freedom for all the enslaved and possession of half the colony.²⁴ To prove his sincerity he also sent gifts, which, the newspaper duly noted, were most likely looted from one of the plantations. Although the report did not say anything about the reaction of Van Hoogenheim to the peace proposal, it went on to say that the colonists would do best to stay at their posts while awaiting military assistance from Europe and enter into negotiations to gain time.²⁵

In the wake of this first military success, about forty families were evacuated from Berbice to Curaçao, bringing with them harrowing tales about the revolt. Using these stories

23 *Groninger Courant*, 8 July 1763: ‘[...] dat het bewuste Secours van Surinamen, in de Colonie de Berbice, in de Plantagie genaamt de Dageraad, Post gevat hebbende, met de Rebellen was slaags geweest; dat de Directeur van die Plantagie is geneueveld; dat aldaar 80 andere Europeanen vermoord, en dat 23 andere na boord van de Scheepen zyn gevlugt; dat de Manschap van het Secours, na een gevegt van ses uren, de Negers met agterlatinge van eenige doden en gequeststen, op de vlugt gedreven heeft; dat ’t Opperhoofd van voornoemde Rebellen, aan den Gouverneur een voorslag tot Vreede had laten doen, mits dat eene gemeene vryheid, aan alle de Negers, en aan hen de eigendom van de helfte der Colonie ingewilligd wierd, dog dat de Gouverneur die aanbieding geheel-lyk van de hand gewezen heeft [...]’.

24 *Middelburgsche Courant*, 9 July 1763: ‘Den volgenden Dag wierd een Jong Heer uit de Barbice, welke deerlyk met Zweepen geslagen was door den Bevelhebber van de Muitelingen met een brief aan den Gouverneur afgezonden, waarin die Bevelhebber zyn leedwezen te kennen gaf, dat zyn Volk de Blanken had aangerand, daarby voegende, dat zulks buiten zyn Bevel geschied was; en dat hem wyders niets aangenamer zou zyn dan in Vreede en Vriendschap met den Gouverneur te leven; weshalven hy maar alleenlyk begeerde, dat alle de Rebellen moesten vry verklaard worden, en dat men de helft van de Colonie aan hun wilde afstaan om aldaar te wonen’.

25 *Middelburgsche Courant*, 9 July 1763; Kars, ‘Dodging rebellion’, 48.

as an opportunity for reflection, the *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant* published a long report from Curaçao recounting for the first time in some detail how the revolt had started on 23 February at the Magdalena plantation, along the Canje river, with seventy-three rebels who killed the director and a carpenter. Within days the rebellion had spread west to the Berbice river, where another four plantations fell into the hands of the insurgents. How many colonists died remained unclear, according to the report, for no news had been received from upriver yet. Again there was ample attention for the cruelties inflicted on the colonists by the rebels. Of those who were unable to flee, some ‘had been severely whipped, others were slowly cut to pieces, and still others were mercifully shot’.²⁶ The troops from Suriname had brought some relief, but the fear for the rebels remained, due to their great numbers (estimated in the report between 1,000 and 1,500) and their ‘excessive anger and rage’. The *Leeuwarder Courant* ran practically the same story the next day, only using a more dramatic opening line decrying ‘the tragic fate of that colony’ and the *Groninger Courant* printed a drastically cut version of the same report on 15 July.²⁷

In July several news digests, or *mercuren*, engaged with the news story of the rebellion in a serious fashion for the first time.²⁸ The *Maandelykse Nederlandsche Mercurius*, the *Post-Ryder* and the *Nieuwe Nederlandsche Jaerboeken* evidently saw a market for accounts rehearsing events in Berbice and devoted considerable space to the story. They added to the newspaper coverage by printing hitherto unpublished refugee narratives, further illustrating the violence of the rebels and the dire situation of the colonists. The editors of the *Maandelykse Nederlandsche Mercurius*, for instance, decided that the revolt was of such importance that they ‘could not do better than to convey [...] various letters that have not yet been published, wherewith their inquisitiveness could be satisfied.’²⁹ All these letters discussed a massacre that took place on the Peereboom plantation in the early days of March, which had only been referenced in passing by the *Groninger Courant*. The first author, who eventually fled to Essequibo with his family, learned on 2 March that ‘all citizens from the upper and middle divisions retired [to the Peereboom plantation], leaving over 30 plantations abandoned’. A reconnaissance mission sent out the next day reported that ‘the rebels had already taken position at the *Peereboom* and were very strong and in large numbers’. That night the author had heard ‘terrible shooting’ for an hour on the Peereboom plantation and a few hours later the bad news reached him that ‘the rebels had defeated the civilians [on that plantation], and that most Christians – men, women, and

²⁶ *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*, 12 July 1763: ‘Zommige zyn deerlyk van hen gezweept, andere zeer langzaam van lid tot lid van elkander gekapt, en wederom andere hebben op het genadigst een Kogel door het Lyf gekregen.’

²⁷ *Leeuwarder Courant*, 13 July 1763: ‘Het was den 23ste February laatstleeden toen het droevig Noodlot van die Colonie een begin nam [...]’; *Groninger Courant*, 15 July 1763.

²⁸ These news digests appeared monthly and were meant to be bound together to form a reference work of contemporary history featuring the most important events of the year. According to Donald Haks the issues of the *Nederlandsche Jaerboeken* were usually a month behind, with the issue of January appearing in the course of February, etc. See: Van der Steen, ‘De Europese Mercurius en de Maandelijkse Nederlandse Mercurius’, 223; Koopmans, ‘The varying lives and layers’, 363-365; D. Haks, *Journalistiek in crisistijd*.

²⁹ *Maandelykse Nederlandsche Mercurius*, deel 15, printed by B. Mourik, Amsterdam, 1763, 10-21, here 10: [...] niet beeter te kunnen doen, dan aan de zelve mede te deelen, verscheide echte Brieven, als noch niet in ’t licht gegeven zynde, waaarby hunne weetgierigheid voldoening vinden kan.’

children – had been killed by the rebels'.³⁰ A second letter from a planter slightly north of the Peereboom plantation only confirmed this account, but reinforced the barbaric image of the rebels by describing that the massacre occurred after free passage had been agreed:

‘the treacherous, seeing the Christians leave, possibly regretting letting their quarry escape, opened fire on them in their ships, causing their rowers to jump in the water of fright, and those on the ships were either killed or, partly alive and with their wives and children, fell into the hands of the escapees, who, after several days of harsh torture, miserably killed all of them’³¹

There even was an eye-witness account of the event, provided by Jan Abraham Charbon – the same young colonist who had been selected to present the governor with the peace proposal of the insurgents. According to him ‘the riff-raff started to shoot with much fierceness’ as soon as the colonists boarded the vessels on the river.³² Charbon himself was hit by no less than three bullets and had to jump into the river to save himself. His trials did not end there, for he recounted that eventually rebels on another plantation captured him and whipped him severely for days, before using him as an envoy. With these retrospective reports in the *mercuren* and the newspapers, which once again emphasised the brutality of the insurgents, the first phase of reporting on the dramatic collapse of Berbice came to an end.

A Period of Suspense

After almost two months of regular reporting on the events in Berbice, the months of August through December 1763 passed without any notable bulletins. Occasionally a short report would appear concerning the departure of ships and soldiers to the ailing colony. Reports had mostly been coming through auxiliary troops from Suriname, St Eustatius, and Barbados rather than from Berbice itself. In the first two months thirty-four reports appeared in newspapers published in Amsterdam, Haarlem, Leiden, Middelburg, Leeuwarden and Groningen, six of which counted more than fifteen lines. Between August and December, the number of stories dropped markedly: just four bulletins brought news from Berbice and only one of them was longer than a couple of lines. Another seven reports about sending troops to the colony brings the total to twelve reports in four months against thirty-four bulletins in the space of little over two months in the summer. So, as the conflict developed into a stalemate, the supply of information from the surrounding colonies dried up, but the demand did not. Advertisements for a variety of new publications about Berbice appeared regularly in different newspapers. At first, they were mostly for maps and descriptions of the colony, and later on also for news pamphlets with eye-witness accounts

³⁰ *Maandelykse Nederlandsche Mercurius*, deel 15, 10-21, here 11: ‘dat de rebellen de burgers overwonnen hadden, end at meest alle Christenen zo Mannen Vrouwen als Kinderen door de rebellen vermoord waren’.

³¹ *Maandelykse Nederlandsche Mercurius*, deel 15, 10-21, here 17: ‘dat die ontrouwe, ziende de Christenen vertrekken, en mogelyk berouw krygende, de buyt dus te laten ontsnappen, op hen in de Vaartuigen vuur hadden gegeven, waar door hunne roeyers verschrikt in het water gesprongen zyn, en zy in de Vaartuigen of gedood wierden, of gedeeltelyk levendig met hun Vrouwen en Kinderen in de handen der weglopers vervielen, die hen naar eenige dagen overharde quellingen aangedaan te hebben, allen elendig om het leeven gebragt hadden [...]’.

³² *Maandelykse Nederlandsche Mercurius*, deel 15, 10-21, here 18-20.

of the revolt and additional pieces in the news digests.³³ Overseeing the amount and variety of these publications, it is clear that the Berbice rebellion was not just another newspaper story, but that there was demand for news and information beyond this medium as well, especially when there was little fresh news at hand. Moreover, there was more room for debate in the adjacent print media than in the newspapers.

The arrival of news from the Atlantic was often infrequent due to the long and hazardous crossing. As a consequence, there were prolonged periods without information in which rumour and speculation flourished.³⁴ Sure enough, shortly after the Berbice revolt disappeared from the periodical press, publishers supplied the market with descriptive material, providing (much needed) background information to the story. As early as June 1763 an advertisement announced the publication of a map of Berbice, originally commissioned by the Directors of the Society of Berbice around 1742.³⁵ Apparently, this twenty-year-old map did not meet the demands of the public, for it was replaced in September by a new one produced by the brothers Reinier and Josua Ottens in Amsterdam, which was specifically tailored to the Berbice revolt (fig. 3). This map did not just show the colony, but depicted (and numbered) all the affected plantations, and also included a short narrative in the upper left corner recounting the revolt up to the recapture of Dageraad plantation.³⁶

In addition to the visual information provided by these maps, a *Kortbondige Beschrijvinge van de Colonie de Berbice* (Short Description of the Colony of Berbice) appeared in Amsterdam in August.³⁷ The *Beschrijvinge* added to the reporting of the revolt in the newspapers in the previous months. This description of the Dutch colony was enriched with a map and

with strange and accurate accounts, owing to the recently arisen and persisting revolt by the Negroes and the situation there. Accompanied by some thoughts as to how to restore complete order in the colony, and the means necessary to secure it henceforth.³⁸

33 Unfortunately, I have not been able to trace all the advertised publications. For example, a pamphlet advertised in the last week of June in the *Opregte Groninger Courant*, containing a letter about the pillaging of the colony, appears not to have survived. The notice appeared several more times in Groningen, but the pamphlet does not seem to have been sold elsewhere, so it may only have been printed in Groningen or perhaps never appeared in print at all. Several letters from Berbice featured in the *mercuren*, but it is difficult to ascertain whether or not the letters printed in, for instance, the *Maandelijke Nederlandsche Mercurius* might have been the subject of this pamphlet.

34 See for instance: Van Groesen, *Amsterdam's Atlantic*; Van Groesen, '(No) news from the Western Front'.

35 In the first half of the year no advertisements for this map appeared, so it is likely that it was purposefully reprinted in reaction to news about the revolt. *Oprechte Haarlemse Courant*, 16 June 1763: '[...] Alsmede een naauwkeurige Kaart van den Staat en den Loop van Rio de Berbice, met dezelve Plantagien, in de Geotrojeerde Colonie der Berbice gelegen: gemeeten en getekend door Last en op Kosten van de Ed. Achtb. Heeren Directeuren van de Colonie, door den Ingenieur J.D. Knapp, gr. 2 Bladen.'

36 *Leydse Courant*, 5 September 1763: 'By Reinier and Josua Ottens, Kaart- en Boekverkoopers tot Amsterdam, word op Heden uitgegeeven: Nieuwe Verbeterde Kaarte van de Colonie de Berbice, met een Berigt van het Inkomen en de Dieptens der Rivier, alsoek een Relas van de aldaer ontstaane Rebelle, waar in alle de Plantagien, in het Relas genoemt, gevonden en met Letters worden aangewezen.'

37 *Kortbondige Beschrijvinge van de Colonie de Berbice*, printed by S.J. Baalde, Amsterdam, 1763, Vyfde en Zesde Hoofdstuk. The *Kortbondige Beschrijvinge* proved to be a popular item, for already in October the *Leeuwarder Courant* advertised a second edition.

38 *Opregte Groninger Courant*, 9 August 1763: 'Verrykt met merkwaardige en nauwkeurige berigten, wegens de onlangs ontstaane en nog aanhoudende opstand door de Negers en gesteldheid aldaar; Verzeld met eenige



Fig. 3 Map of Berbice by Reinier and Josua Ottens, c. 1763. Coloured, copper engraving; 95.5 × 49 cm, blad 102 × 52.5 cm. (Zeeuws Archief, *Zeelandia Illustrata* 1, inv. nr. 1625).

These ‘strange and accurate accounts’ consisted of several printed letters and an assessment of those by the editor of the *Beschrijvinge*. One letter, from an unnamed planter, was quoted at length. It used stories of refugees arriving in Curaçao to outline the spread of the revolt in Berbice, emphasising the ‘gruesome’ character of the revolt and the acts of violence perpetrated by ‘unhuman Negroes’ against the colonists.³⁹ This account was then juxtaposed with others, mostly previously published, which apparently confirmed the narrative of the unnamed planter. To further reinforce the image of the barbarity of the rebels, the editor included part of the eye-witness account of Jan Abraham Charbon which had also appeared in the news digests of July. It seems that the editor did not only aim to inform his readers of what happened in Berbice, but also used the printed accounts to show ‘with which inhumanity many Europeans have been killed by the Negroes, what torture others have had to endure, and what fright and fear many who remained alive experienced as a result of the revolt’.⁴⁰

At this point the coverage took an interesting turn, as controversy arose about who was responsible for the rapid collapse of colonial government. In the second week of September a pamphlet appeared in Amsterdam and Middelburg criticising the civilian population of the colony.⁴¹ The author, most likely Government Councillor Adriaan

bedenkingen om de Colonie weder in vollen rust te herstellen, en de middelen om ze in ’t vervolg daar voor te beveiligen’. This text also appears on the title page of the *Kortbondige Beschrijvinge* itself.

³⁹ *Kortbondige Beschrijvinge van de Colonie de Berbice*, 35: ‘[...] de ontmenschte Negers’.

⁴⁰ *Kortbondige Beschrijvinge van de Colonie de Berbice*, 44: ‘[...] met welk een onmenschelykheid veele Europeaanen door de Negers het leven benomen is, wat tormenten wederom andere hebben moeten uitstaan, en welke schrik en vrees veele die hun leven noch gelukkig behouden hebben, door die opstand is aangebracht [...]’.

⁴¹ Even though the Zeeland publisher Pieter Gillissen claimed in the foreword to provide a truthful story, guaranteed by the fact that the author of the letter was not anonymous, his name was omitted. Nevertheless,

Gillissen, described the ‘gruesome scenes’ unfolding in the colony and claimed that, when he heard of the situation at Peereboom plantation, he urged a ship that anchored near his plantations to sail further upriver to relieve the colonists there, but stated that its captain had refused to do so.⁴² Moreover, Gillissen found that the disheartened civilians took flight ‘at the first grim rumours’, while he himself ‘could not resolve to do so, even though the rebels were only two plantations away’.⁴³ When he eventually retired to Fort Nassau, he found the fort in a deplorable state, manned only by around thirty militia and more ‘apathetic civilians’, who petitioned the Council to evacuate rather than making a stand. As a result, according to Gillissen, the colonial government decided to destroy the fort and head for the coast.⁴⁴

This account was soon challenged by two pieces chronicling the response to the Berbice rebellion from the perspective of civilians. The *Nederlandsche Jaerboeken* of August, which probably would have appeared around the end of September, included an exposé, based on ‘various credible reports’, and the *Post-Ryder* of November printed a highly critical letter of a ‘private party’ written in late June. These two pieces disputed Gillissen’s account on two counts. First, they maintained that the slaver sent by Van Hoogenheim to relieve the Peereboom plantation ‘had hardly reached the Plantation *Geertruid* when it was held up by three Councillors, who decided that [the ship] should remain around their plantation’, instead of aiding the colonists.⁴⁵ As this plantation belonged to Adriaan Gillissen, it is likely that he was one of the three Councillors accused of cowardice. Second, they accused the Council of Government of being indecisive and more concerned for their own property than for the defence of the colony. In burning Fort Nassau, the Council disregarded the wishes of the civilian population who believed it to be ‘strong enough against the Blacks who did not have Canons.’⁴⁶ The decision to burn the fort was attributed to the fact that the governor and the Councillors had brought their property aboard the ships, meaning that the fort was now less valuable to them. In the end, according to the author

the author of the pamphlet can be identified to be, most likely, Adriaan Gillissen, a member of the Council of Government and owner of Zubli’s Lust and Geertruid plantations, a short distance upriver from Fort Nassau. See also: Hartsinck, *Beschryving van Guiana*, 373; Netscher, *Geschiedenis van de koloniën*, 197; Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean*, 469.

⁴² His account here is at odds with that of Van Hoogenheim who noted in his *Dagverhaal* that he was surprised that the ship had anchored near Zubli’s Lust plantation to take in valuable goods and had sent word to Gillissen to put an end to this. See also Hartsinck, *Beschryving van Guiana*, 373 and Netscher, *Geschiedenis van de koloniën*, 197.

⁴³ *Kort dog waarachtig verhaal van de rebellie en opstand der Negers in de colonie de Berbice*, printed by Pieter Gillissen, Middelburg 1763 and S.J. Baalde, Amsterdam 1763, 8.

⁴⁴ *Kort dog waarachtig verhaal van de rebellie en opstand der Negers in de colonie de Berbice*, 10. In a *post scriptum*, added five days later, Gillissen suggested that bad treatment of enslaved workers was a cause for the revolt and identified Coffij and Accara as its leaders.

⁴⁵ *Nederlandsche Jaerboeken*, deel 17-2, printed by F. Houttuyn, te Amsterdam, 1763, 586-604, here 590: ‘Dit Schip [...] was nauwelyks omtrent de Plantagie *de Geertruid* gekomen, of het wierdt, door drie Heeren Raden, opgehouden, die aldaer een besluit namen dat het zelve voor hunne Plantagie moest blyven liggen’. See also: *Nederlandsche Post-ryder*, printed by K. van Tongerlo en F. Houttuyn te Amsterdam, 1763, 525-537, here 530.

⁴⁶ *Nederlandsche Jaerboeken*, 1763, 601: ‘zommige wilden dat het sterk genoeg was tegen de Zwartten, die geen Kanon voeren en zich alleen met Snaphanen moeten behelpen’. See also: *Nederlandsche Post-ryder*, 533.

in the *Post-Ryder*, ‘the Governor and the Councillors [...] blamed the Citizens, as if they had been uncooperative’.⁴⁷

So, in a period of relatively little reporting, the discord between the colonists about how to respond to the rebellion made its way into the print media of the Dutch Republic. In the face of the accusations levelled against him, it appears, Gillissen was actively trying to reshape the narrative in his favour, emphasising his willingness to stand his ground against the rebels, as opposed to the resigned attitude of the other colonists, shifting blame for the Peereboom massacre from himself to the apathy of his fellow colonists, and the inhumanity of the slaves. It is unclear if one version was preferred, but it is telling that the parties involved saw a need to defend their actions publicly or express their grievances, and thus create a debate about Berbice in the public realm.

Reporting the Turning Tide

In January 1764 the *Amsterdamsche Courant* reintroduced the story of the Berbice revolt to the Dutch newspapers. After months of brief notices about troop movements and refugees, the revolt was recounted in a ‘news digest’ of the previous year printed in January. In the third week of January two consecutive issues opened with a detailed account of the revolt until October 1763, when promised reinforcements had left the Dutch Republic for Berbice.⁴⁸ Apart from some details, this recapitulation did not contain any new information, but it did bring back the revolt to the forefront of readers’ minds, at the very least in Amsterdam. So, when by the end of January reports announced the arrival of the Dutch warship *Maartensdyk* in Berbice, readers could easily place the event in the wider narrative of the rebellion. In the months to come the newspapers would keep their audience apprised of the military efforts to finally suppress the revolt, reporting extensively on each mission, while the *mercuren* sometimes reprinted the newspaper reports. Having recovered from the initial chaos in which communication was largely left to refugees and merchants, official reports now also made their way to the Dutch newspapers, shifting the focus from the actions of the rebel slaves to the military accomplishments of the newly arrived troops.

At the same time the tone of the reporting turned from emphasising victimhood to seeking vengeance. As reports about military operations appeared, a tentative victorious note seeped in. On 21 February 1764, three weeks after the arrival of the first Dutch reinforcements in Berbice was made public in various papers, the *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant* was able to report on its first military expedition led by Captain Maarten Haringman. It covered a mission up the river Canje and essentially described the rebels applying a scorched earth strategy: as Haringman advanced, they retreated, setting fire to plantations and Fort Nassau.⁴⁹ A more revealing bulletin appeared in Leeuwarden in the first issue of

⁴⁷ *Nederlandsche Post-ryder*, 1763, 535: ‘de Gouverneur en de Raden [...] gaven den Burgeren de schuld, als of zy hier of daar in weigerig geweest waren.’

⁴⁸ *Amsterdamsche Courant*, 19 January 1764 and 21 January 1764.

⁴⁹ *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*, 21 February 1764. The same bulletin appeared in *Groninger Courant*, 24 February 1764.

March. With the arrival of six new warships from the Dutch Republic under the command of Colonel Jan Marius de Salve, there was no doubt ‘that affairs would soon take a new turn’.⁵⁰ The remainder of the reports was more an exposé of strategy than genuine news reports. The rebels, driven out of the Canje region, had convened along the Berbice river, giving the Dutch an opportunity to close in from different sides. Nevertheless, they were not expected to be defeated with ease, ‘because they are not only numerous, but also desperate’.⁵¹ The plan was for De Salve to come in from Demerara in the west, closing off the mountains and forests in the south-west, while other troops were to sail upriver to cut off the rebels from the north. The *Leeuwarder Courant*, however, warned that perfect coordination and patience were paramount:

if one acted too hastily, and attacked before one could march towards Demerara, to secure the highlands of Berbice, the rebels [...] could hide out in the mountains and in the inaccessible forests, and it would take many years and costly attempts [...] to remove the refugees from there.⁵²

The execution of this strategic plan provided the copy for reports in the last week of March in the form of a ‘narrative of events in Rio Berbice and Demerara in December 1763’, appearing first in the *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant* and subsequently, with small changes, in Leeuwarden and Middelburg, as well as in the *Maandelykse Nederlandsche Mercurius* of March. The perspective of the story is martial and follows the band of soldiers led by De Salve, later joined by Barbadian troops under the command of a captain named Smith, as they moved towards the most northern plantation, Savonette, ‘where the rebels feel secure’.⁵³ According to later reports based on a personal letter from Berbice, around three hundred indigenous forces joined the Demerara expedition as well.⁵⁴ When the troops reached the plantation after five days of marching, it transpired that the indigenous population was also involved in the expedition, for ‘two trusted Indians [were sent] to reconnoitre the land’.⁵⁵ Based on their information Captain Smith formulated his battle plan and executed it successfully. The bulletins stressed the ‘outstanding courage and regularity’ with which the mission was carried out, contrasting it with the fierce but disorderly resistance of the rebels. In short, the expedition was presented as a success. After

50 *Leeuwarder Courant*, 3 March 1764: ‘[...] zulks men niet twijffelt, of de zaaken zullen eerstdaags een anderen keer neemen.’

51 *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*, 21 February 1764. This also appeared in the *Leeuwarder Courant*, 3 March 1764.

52 *Leeuwarder Courant*, 3 March 1764: ‘[...] dog ingevalle men zig te zeer verhaast, en dezelve attacqueerd, eer en altoorens men van de kant van Demerary opbreken kan, om zig van ’t hoge Land der Berbices te verzekeeren, zo zullende Rebellen, verjaagt wordende, den wyk neemen op ’t gebergte en in ontoeganklyke Bosschen, en men zou alsdan veele Jaaren en zware pogingen, die groote Geldzommen zouden vereischen, moeten aanwenden, om te Vlugtelingen van daar te doen verhuizen.’

53 *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*, 27 March 1764: ‘[...] om een Corps Manschappen te detacheeeren na Demerary, om van daar Landwaards in, na de Plantagie la Savonette, in Berbice, alwaar de Rebellen zig zeker achten, te marcheeren, zig van dezelve Meester te maaken, en dus de Negers tusschen twee vuuren te zetten.’

54 *Opregte Groninger Courant*, 17 April 1764. For a discussion of Amerindian military support see: Kars, “‘Cleansing the land’”.

55 *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant*, 27 March 1764: ‘[...] quaamen zy aan de Limiten van de Plantagie la Savonette, alwaar Capt. Smith, halte deed houden, en twee vertrouwde Indiaanen uytzond om het Land te recognosceeren, hen Ordres geevende, wel op hunne hoede te zyn, en tegelyk zodanig gedetailleerd rapport te doen als mogelyk zoude zyn.’

describing the achievements of the mission, the report also expressed the expectation that the governor would, according to plan, sail upriver with about three hundred troops to the Peereboom plantation, one of the last strongholds of the insurgents. No specific accounts of this second phase of the offensive appeared in the newspapers. Instead, the *Leydse Courant* printed a letter from an unnamed plantation owner, who described the damage and, more importantly, maintained that a great influx of slaves was required to avoid 'being ruined and excluded forever'.

The end of April 1764, finally, brought news 'that the colony Berbice [was] cleared of rebelling Negroes'.⁵⁶ On 27 April the *Leydse Courant* printed extracts from two missives from governor Van Hoogenheim and Captain Haringman, dated 10 and 15 January respectively, both recounting the denouement of the conflict at Wikkie Creek, about half-way between the Peereboom and Savonette plantations, where the rebels had been surrounded. As Amerindian troops closed off the creek, the rebels had to choose between surrender or certain death. The newspapers published little about how the situation at Wikkie Creek resolved itself, but it is implied that when the situation became hopeless for the remaining insurgents they turned themselves over in great numbers. Before long several of the enslaved labourers returned to their plantations voluntarily, while 'their leaders had been killed, either by their own hand or by those of others, or had been captured'.⁵⁷ After the news broke in Leiden, it spread to the regional newspapers in the first week of May. Definitive confirmation of the hard-won victory over the rebels appeared in June, as the *Leeuwarder Courant* put it: 'Their power has been broken, the danger has passed'.⁵⁸

After this understated declaration of victory, the story disappeared from the Holland newspapers without further comment. Only the regional newspapers reported on the aftermath of the conflict. Short reports about sentences appeared in Groningen, Leeuwarden, and Middelburg. Of the 2,600 rebels who had surrendered, 53 were sentenced to death by various means ranging from hanging and breaking on the wheel to slow burning.⁵⁹ With these bulletins the coverage of the Berbice revolt came to an end. Or so it seemed, for after two months of silence on Berbice, the *Leeuwarder Courant* printed a remarkable report on 19 September 1764: an extract from a personal letter relaying the news of the execution of some rebels in excruciating detail. While awaiting his eagerly anticipated return to the Dutch Republic, the anonymous informant had witnessed the second round of executions that took place at the end of April. He described the breaking on the wheel of a woman accused of 'gruesomely killing' Christian women and drinking their blood afterwards: 'this beast lived for over two hours on the wheel, after all her bones [...] had been broken'.⁶⁰ He also recounted a botched hanging, with the rebel in question returning voluntary to be hanged after yelling at one of

⁵⁶ *Leydse Courant*, 27 April 1764: 'Dat de Colonie de Berbice van de rebelleerende Negers gezuiverd is [...]'.
⁵⁷ *Amsterdamsche Courant*, 28 April 1764: 'hunne voorn. Opperhoofden zyn, of, door zig zelf, of door anderen om 't leven geraakt, of in onze handen gevallen [...]'.
⁵⁸ *Leeuwarder Courant*, 23 June 1764: 'Hun magt was nu gebroken, en het gevaar voorby, enz.' Also in: *Middelburgsche Courant*, 23 June 1764.
⁵⁹ *Opregte Groninger Courant*, 22 June 1764; *Leeuwarder Courant*, 23 June 1764; *Middelburgsche Courant*, 23 June 1764.
⁶⁰ *Leeuwarder Courant*, 17 September 1764: 'Dit ondiër bleef ruim twee uren lang op 't Rad leeven, na dat haar alle de Beenderen door den Mooker waaren in stukken geslaagen, dewyl geen genade-slag gegeven wierd.'

his comrades. Most importantly he reported on the sentencing of one of the leaders of the rebellion, named Atta, who was first chained to a pole to be tortured and then slowly burned at the stake, on a separate pyre. To the surprise of the witness all the condemned had endured their punishment silently, but, according to the report, Atta cried out: ‘My God, what have I done? The governor is right; I suffer what I have earned; I thank him’.⁶¹ Such a confirmation of the subservient nature of the enslaved is highly unlikely, but it is a fitting end to the reporting of the longest and most destructive slave revolt in Dutch colonial history.

Questioning Slavery?

The extensive coverage of the Berbice rebellion meant that the Dutch reading public was confronted consistently with the possible side effects of the institution of slavery for the first time. The reporting in the course of 1763-64 juxtaposed the brutality of the rebels with the helplessness of the colonists in the face of a violent rebel majority. Especially in the first months, an image of complete chaos dominated the coverage of the Berbice rebellion and the accounts that appeared in late summer 1763 only reinforced this image. Only with the arrival of reinforcements did the story turn from victimhood to vengeance, as the Dutch slowly gained the upper hand. Throughout, there was very little reflection on the origins of the revolt. The narrative centred around the experiences of the colonists and their suffering, both physical and economical. Once or twice it was suggested in news pamphlets and *mercuren* that the harsh and cruel treatment of the enslaved had provoked the revolt, but this was never explored further and certainly was not considered sufficient cause for the violence that ensued. To the contrary, it functioned as a means to allocate or deflect blame, rather than as a starting point to reflect on the treatment of the enslaved.⁶² The *Beschrijvinge* was the only publication to explicitly discuss the nature of the revolt and to propose measures to prevent future uprisings. Its regard for the rebels was not very high, referring to them as ‘a bunch of senseless mutineers, of which possibly less than a quarter know what they are undertaking’.⁶³ To prevent further troubles unruly slaves were to be sold and replaced by more willing ones; a standing military presence was advised to quell unrest at an early stage; and the general welfare of the enslaved had to be safeguarded. These were, in fact, quite pragmatic proposals, but they do not indicate any critical engagement with the issue of slavery.

In fact, there is hardly any indication, both in the newspapers and in other publications, that the dramatic storyline of the slave revolt affected public opinion regarding the institution of slavery. Even though there was an apparent interest in the story, the only

61 *Leeuwarder Courant*, 17 September 1764: ‘Het eenige, ’t geen Atta sprak, was jeegens den Gouverneur, roepende hy dikwyls in zyne Neegertaal, Myn Goed, wat heb Ik gedaan? De Gouverneur heeft gelyk; ik lyde ’t geen ik verdient heb; Ik dank hem.’

62 For instance: *Kort dog waarachtig verhaal van de rebellie en opstand der Negers in de colonie de Berbice*, 8 and 15; *Maandelykse Nederlandsche Mercurius*, deel 15, 11-12; *Nederlandsche Post-ryder*, 1763, 525-537.

63 *Kortbondige Beschrijvinge van de Colonie de Berbice*, 46: ‘Het is een hoop onzinnige muiltelingen, waar van mogelyk geen vierde deel weeten wat zy onderneemen [...]’.

public differences in opinion during the revolt concerned the shifting of blame for the rapid collapse of colonial government. No one opined in print as to the roots of the revolt and whether the violence could have been prevented. To the contrary, the coverage itself, with its focus on the enslaved Africans as dangerous and inhuman, may have reinforced support for slavery rather than encourage questioning it.

The most notable, critical publication in the aftermath of the revolt appeared in the course of 1764 in the spectator *De Denker* (The Thinker), probably edited by the Mennonite Cornelis van Engelen. It published a fictional letter from a former slave named Kakera Akotie, who described in great detail the middle passage, the inhumane treatment of the enslaved and the terrible conditions on the plantations. This was followed by a translation of Montesquieu's (satirical) fifth chapter of the fifteenth book of *De l'esprit des lois*, amounting to a severe condemnation of slavery.⁶⁴ The same Van Engelen printed the 1766 poem 'de Negerslaaf' in another spectator *De Filosoof* (the Philosopher) which, again, presented the reader with the image of an African suffering at the hand of Christians.⁶⁵ Neither text referred directly to the Berbice revolt and it is hard to say if there is a connection, especially as Van Engelen was a Mennonite – a member of a religious minority that was opposed to slavery in general. Yet it took until 1784 for another critical text to be published and, in general, the Dutch discussion of the institution of slavery remained haphazard and largely disconnected from contemporary events.

This lack of response was not as self-evident as it may seem. Across the channel the Seven Years' War and Tacky's rebellion engendered a public debate in Britain about the merits of slavery. Both the war and the rebellion were widely covered by the English and North American press and, according to Bollettino, the coverage caused some to see slavery as a liability rather than an asset of colonial empire. She maintains that 'published representations of Blacks' actions [as soldiers, sailors and rebels] during the Seven Years' War caused Britons to reconsider the imperial value of the institution of slavery [...]'.⁶⁶ It was not so much a moral rejection as a pragmatic one: to secure the future of the British colonial empire, slavery had to be curbed. Several publications highlighted the pivotal role enslaved and free Blacks played during the war and in the suppression of the rebellion. As the English were increasingly dependent on the military prowess of their African labourers, it was argued, more could be accomplished if they were free. Not only could black soldiers fight on behalf of the British, they could also be used to keep the remaining slave population in check.⁶⁷

No similar sentiments are to be found in the Dutch context. In this regard it is significant that the newspapers gave very little attention to the assistance the colonists received from the native population and loyal slaves, even though they played an important role. Whereas British audiences were confronted with narratives in which both free and enslaved Blacks fought in service of the British, Dutch readers only caught glimpses of their involvement, if at all. Even though the rebellion in Berbice did expose the weakness

64 *De Denker*, vertoog 82-82 (1764); Paasman, *Reinhart*, 116-119.

65 'De Negerslaaf', in *De Filosoof* 19 (1766).

66 Bollettino, 'Slavery, War, and Britain's Atlantic Empire', 260.

67 Bollettino, 'Slavery, War, and Britain's Atlantic Empire', 23-24.

of the colonial government, it was represented by the press to be quelled by the Dutch themselves, with limited support of the indigenous population. The reporting of the revolt focused on slaves as rebels, or at best as loyal workers, and not as possible (military) allies, leaving little room for an anti-slavery moment.

Conclusion

The Berbice rebellion was a regular feature in Dutch newspapers from May 1763 to November 1764. From the end of May to mid-July 1763 a first round of reports appeared, confirming the astonishing successes of the insurgents and the initial attempts to crush the rebellion with the help of troops sent by neighbouring colonies. As the revolt developed into a stalemate, the amount of newspaper reports dwindled. Except for updates about the departure of troops to Berbice and an occasional report about refugees arriving in Curaçao, no new bulletins appeared. The story was taken up again in February 1764 when accounts of the military expeditions, which had begun in the course of November 1763, reached the Dutch Republic. In between these surges of exposure, publishers found other ways to capitalize on the increased attention for the colony by printing maps and descriptions of Berbice as well as topical news pamphlets. So even when there was little news, besides intermittent reports about sending troops to the beleaguered colony, a range of publications related to the rebellion in Berbice was available, keeping the story fresh.

The extensive coverage of the revolt shows that even though most of the scholarship describes the representation of slavery in the Dutch Republic as piecemeal – characterised by intermittent publications – there was considerable interest from the press for an extensive (and persistent) story about a slave revolt. This story was delivered by Dutch newspapers to a wide readership, presenting the havoc rebelling slaves could wreak. This, of course, is not the same as a discussion of the institution of slavery itself, for the coverage of the revolt in Berbice was in no way critical of that, but it does show that the issue of slavery was visibly present in the public realm. The reporting presented the revolt as an illegitimate and extremely violent uprising against colonial rule, emphasising the plight of the colonists rather than that of the enslaved. In contrast to the anti-slavery reaction to Tacky’s revolt in Great Britain, the Berbice rebellion, with few exceptions, did not provoke a debate on the institution of slavery itself. It took the age of revolution and another major slave rebellion in 1795, this time on Curaçao, for the Dutch abolitionist moment to arrive.

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