

Patriots, privateers and international politics:  
The myth of the conspiracy of Jean Baptiste Tierce Cadet

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In September 1799, two French agents from Saint-Domingue, Urbain Devaux and Isaac Sasportas, together with a resident French merchant, Jean Baptiste Tierce Cadet, were arrested in Curaçao for conspiring to overthrow the island's government and to liberate the slaves. They were deported without trial. Allegedly this conspiracy, of which Tierce Cadet was accused of being the local ringleader, was part of a much wider scheme initiated in Saint-Domingue: the liberation of the slaves in all the colonies of the Caribbean Basin. A year later an expeditionary force from Guadeloupe tried to take over Curaçao militarily, supported by most of the island's slaves and other segments of the local population.

Roberto Palacios sees a connection between the slave revolt that erupted in Curaçao in 1795 and the events of 1799-1800 (Palacios 1983). From mainly primary sources he construes a revolutionary movement of Jacobin signature, centred around Tierce and actively supported by forces from the French colonies. David Geggus and Anne Pérotin-Dumon, in contrast, both have doubted the existence of any proselytizing efforts to establish a region-wide liberation of the slaves during this period, instigated from either Saint-Domingue or Guadeloupe (Geggus 1987; Pérotin-Dumon 1988). Who is right? To understand the (alleged) conspiracy of 1799 and the Guadeloupean expedition of 1800, these events should be understood against the background of international political developments, especially the undeclared Quasi-War between the United States and France (1798-1800), and the commercial and military interests of the respective actors.

In this paper the focus will be on the development of Franco-Curaçaoan relations and the complicated situation that emerged when French privateers started to seize American ships on a large scale, using the port of Curaçao as an operational base and provoking an American naval response. The Curaçao government was

caught between conflicting international political and commercial interests, between heavy American diplomatic pressure and the fears of the French ally of losing the island as a privateering base. It will be argued that the existence of a conspiracy, initiated in either Saint-Domingue or Guadeloupe, to liberate the slaves in Curaçao is not very likely, let alone the existence of a plan for the liberation of the slaves in the whole region, as acting Curaçao Governor Johann Rudolf Lauffer later asserted. Nor is there any solid documentary proof for the occurrence of a multi-class rising with similar objectives in the wake of, and purposely supported by, the Guadeloupean expedition in 1800.

At the same time Governor Lauffer might have had good reasons to capitalize on the fear entertained both in Curaçao and in the mother country, of a violent local attempt to follow the example of the French Caribbean colonies of freeing and emancipating the non-white masses. Clearly he had an interest in destroying any ambitions for emancipation among the island's free non-white population. But Lauffer may also have had a more personal interest, that is, diverting the attention of his metropolitan superiors from serious American accusations regarding the involvement of Curaçao's government in privateering against American shipping.

#### THE EVENTS OF 1799 AND 1800

On 8 September 1799, Acting Governor Lauffer of Curaçao summoned an extraordinary session of the island's council in which he disclosed the existence of a conspiracy. The French agent, General Devaux, sent to Curaçao from Saint-Domingue as *receveur* of the proceeds from the sale of prizes brought into the Curaçao harbour by French privateers, was accused by Lauffer of being the leader of a group that plotted to bring down the island's government and to instigate a general revolt among the slaves. With the consent of the council Devaux was invited to join the meeting and apprehended as soon as he passed the gates of Fort Amsterdam. Later that day another French agent from Saint-Domingue, a civilian called Isaac Sasportas, was also arrested (Hamelberg 1985:53-7).

It was reported to Lauffer that on his arrest Sasportas behaved suspiciously and that he tried to hide a document. Lauffer demanded to see this document to which Sasportas reluctantly conceded, and only under the condition that the governor alone would take note of its contents. Lauffer received the document in a sealed envelope and retreated into another room to read it. After

returning into the meeting room he informed the council that he could not disclose the exact contents of the document, but that it contained instructions for a secret expedition to be carried out by Devaux and Sasportas, a mission, according to Lauffer, which could have dangerous consequences for Curaçao. In another council meeting Lauffer declared that after he had given the affair more thought, he had decided that it was no longer justified to leave the council in the dark about the contents of the document. The governor was now convinced of the huge danger that the mission posed not only for Curaçao but for all of the Caribbean. After the councillors had promised strict secrecy the governor showed a copy of the instruction that he had made himself. Together with the council the governor concluded that the document contained ‘insoluble contradictions’ and that the (geographical) names mentioned must be feigned: the expedition was, it was concluded, directly targeted against no other place than Curaçao, and it was clearly the intention of the agents from Saint-Domingue to spread the spirit of general freedom across the entire Gulf of Mexico and to have all of the Caribbean follow the path of Saint-Domingue. Meanwhile, Lauffer had identified Jean Baptiste Tierce as the local ringleader and had him arrested. Governor and councillors went to Tierce’s house to look for evidence, but none was found (Hamelberg 1985:58-60).

Lauffer, however, managed to produce a number of statements to incriminate all three Frenchmen. In a written statement, José Obediente, an officer in the National Guard and confidant of Lauffer,<sup>1</sup> together with Abraham Rodriguez Pimentel disclosed that Devaux had planned to kill Lauffer. Sasportas, after his arrest, stated that he knew that naval Captain Albert Kikkert and a Curaçaoan citizen named Jan Schotborgh were dissatisfied with the colony’s government. A Frenchman called Renaud stated that he had overheard a conversation between Tierce and Devaux in which the first mentioned details regarding his plans for a take-over of the government. Tierce also disclosed the beheading of Lauffer, Obediente, and several others and argued that Kikkert was to take Lauffer’s place as governor.<sup>2</sup> The plan to overthrow the government included the ransoming of the Jews and the confiscation of American ships and other property. In yet another statement it was said that Devaux had advised Schotborgh to sell his plantation and all his slaves and that he had boasted that he had 400 Frenchmen at his disposal (Emmanuel 1970:285; Hamelberg 1985:58).

1 For José Obediente Jr., see the chapter by Ramón Aizpurua.

2 Nationaal Archief, Den Haag (NA), access no. 2.01.28.01, West-Indisch Comité 1795-1800 (WICom), inv. no. 137, no. 22, copy of a statement by Renaud dated 10-9-1799.

Tierce, according to Lauffer, had not only involved himself in the secret expedition of Devaux and Sasportas, but he also had been the leader and instigator of the plan that was only to be executed after the Curaçao government had been toppled by igniting a general revolt. The governor judged it too dangerous to start official criminal judicial procedures against the alleged conspirators because these would include public inquiries that he feared would be perilous to the order and security of the colony. He asked the council to formulate a political resolution. The three men were deported without a trial (Hamelberg 1985:60-2).

The following year, on the morning of 23 July, five ships under French flag and carrying a large number of mainly black soldiers suddenly arrived at Curaçao. The expedition was sent from Guadeloupe, its leader Maurice-Henri Bresseau explained, to help defend the island against the common enemy: according to intelligence received by the Guadeloupe agency, the British were preparing an expedition against Curaçao. Lauffer told them that he did not need any reinforcements and that he was very capable of defending the island with the troops he had at his disposal. The governor was suspicious from the start about the real intentions of this French force and only reluctantly allowed the troops to disembark.

Soon it became clear that the French also had a list of complaints against Curaçao's government, including the arrest and the extradition of Tierce, and the accusation of siding with the Americans regarding the seizure of American prizes by French privateers. A very tense period, which lasted for weeks, followed. The Curaçao defences were kept in a permanent state of alert, with the guns in Fort Amsterdam trimmed at the Guadeloupean ships and troops. Finally, on 3 September, and only after receiving ample supplies and a large sum of money, the Guadeloupeans left.

The next day, however, it was reported that the French ships had anchored in St. Michiel's Bay, just a few miles to the west of Willemstad, and that the troops had landed and taken possession of the local fort. Lauffer prepared for battle, but when the French attacked, his defence collapsed almost immediately; his troops fled in blind panic at the sight of the approaching enemy. Lauffer was forced to hastily retreat across St. Anna Bay, and the French started a siege. The French troops were joined by most of the colony's slaves and soon controlled a large part of the island, while privateers blockaded the harbour. After a week a British frigate appeared before the harbour and broke the French blockade. Being short of supplies governor and council saw no alternative but to ask the British enemy for protection against the French ally. After the arrival of two American warships on 22 September, the

French gave up their siege and evacuated the island during the night; Curaçao came under British rule (Hamelberg 1985:72-86).

#### CURAÇAO AS A CENTRE OF REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVITY?

In his article 'Ansia de libertad', Roberto Palacios paints a heroic and romantic picture of a Curaçaoan revolutionary movement in the late 1790s and the struggle of the slaves and free non-whites for emancipation and equality, connecting the events of 1799 and 1800, and depicting Tierce as a revolutionary hero with Jacobin convictions:

...[H]e believed firmly in the ideals of the French Revolution and its logical extension of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity among all, without distinction according to race. [...] [H]e cherished the ideal to advance the establishment of a truly revolutionary government in Curacao which would decree the most absolute racial equality and freedom and liberate the slaves. (Palacios 1983:22, my translation).

Palacios also attempts to prove Tierce's political conviction by pointing out that he actively supported the seizure of power in the colony by the Patriots in August 1796 and that he offered protection and housing to the leaders of an abortive Republican rebellion in Venezuela in 1797 who had fled to Curaçao: Manuel Gual, José María Espanã, and their inspirator Juan Bautista Picornell.<sup>3</sup>

The attempt in the summer of 1800 of the French expeditionary force to take over the government of the island militarily was actively supported by Curaçaoan slaves and, according to Palacios, the partisans of Tierce: free blacks and coloureds and young white Jacobins among whom was Luis Brion, Simón Bolívar's future admiral and comrade in arms. Palacios states:

Despite the arrest and expulsion of Jean Baptiste Tierce Cadet from Curacao in December 1799 for plotting the abolishment of slavery among other objectives, his partisans did not leave it at revolutionary intentions, and in September of the following year fomented

<sup>3</sup> See the chapter by Ramón Aizpurua. Palacios bases his arguments almost completely on primary sources kept in the national archives of the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (Palacios 1983).

the insurrection of the Curaçaoan blacks with the support of over a thousand black soldiers from Guadeloupe and Haiti, under command of black and some white officers, urged by the Curaçaoan revolutionary followers of Tierce Cadet. (Palacios 1984:23; my translation).

The interpretation of Palacios that ideological motives must have been at the root of the 1799-1800 events is doubted by both David Geggus and Anne Pérotin-Dumon (Geggus 1987; Pérotin-Dumon 1988). Geggus argues that Toussaint Louverture in 1799 certainly had no intention to export the Haitian Revolution. A plan to invade Jamaica actually did exist, but this was initiated by the French government, not by Toussaint. Commissioner Philippe Roume in November 1799 sent spies to Jamaica to prepare the operation, but they were soon arrested by the British: secretly betrayed by Toussaint himself. Toussaint, at this time entangled in an armed struggle with the mulatto leader André Rigaud over the command of the southern part of Saint-Domingue, and depending on Britain and the U.S. for supplying his army, had no interest in a military adventure against Jamaica and opposed the plan (Geggus 1987:287-8).

Together with the British General Thomas Maitland and the U.S. Consul Edward Stevens, Toussaint worked out a three-way treaty in July 1799. Both the British and the Americans were interested in trade with Saint-Domingue, and Toussaint was willing to give them access to the ports in the part of the colony that he controlled. At the same time he demanded that the ports occupied by Rigaud would be excluded; Toussaint would have access to supplies while blockading his opponent. The United States, however, had an additional interest: in 1798 hostilities between the French and the Americans had started that became known as the undeclared Quasi-War (1798-1800), which was fought almost entirely at sea, largely in the Caribbean. Irritation regarding American approaches to their British enemy, culminating in the signing of the Jay Treaty in 1794, which was viewed as a violation of the 1778 Treaty of Alliance between France and the American colonists, prompted the French to allow their navy and privateers to seize American ships trading with British ports. As part of the deal with Toussaint, the Americans demanded protection against attack by privateers in Saint-Domingue's waters.<sup>4</sup>

4 Fick 2004:201-2; see for more detailed information regarding the process of the negotiations between Toussaint and the Americans and the British: 'Letters of Toussaint Louverture', 1910: 64-101.

Toussaint had absolutely nothing to do with the French expedition in 1800, which was initiated from Guadeloupe. The undertaking was organized by the agents Bresseau and Nicolas Georges Jeannet-Oudin who afterwards had to account for their actions to their superiors.<sup>5</sup> According to Anne Pérotin-Dumon, the aims seem to have been primarily military and commercial. No evidence has been found in French sources to support any complicity from Guadeloupe in the execution of a mission to liberate the slaves. During the Quasi-War, Guadeloupean privateers experienced prosperous times hunting and seizing American vessels, and it was important that they could count on all the operational bases at their disposal, including Curaçao. At the same time the Batavian Republic had no dispute with the Americans, and Curaçao always attracted large numbers of American carriers; in fact, it depended largely on supplies brought in by the Americans. The principal objective of the Guadeloupean expedition was, according to Pérotin-Dumon (1988:300-1), to ascertain the loyalty of the Curaçao government and to secure the island's port as a French privateering base. So much for Jacobin ideals.

Furthermore, after 1798 the ideals of general freedom and equality introduced by Victor Hugues were waning. Hugues arrived in Guadeloupe in 1794, leading an expedition to recapture the island from the British and bringing the news that the metropolis had officially abolished slavery in the colonies. But in 1798, Hugues was replaced by Etienne Desfourneaux, who set himself to the task of forcing the ex-slaves back to work on the plantations. Desfourneaux was deposed within a year by a group of insurgents and sent back to France. But at that time three new administrators, sent by the metropolis, were already on their way to the colony. In May 1800, the commissioners, Étienne Lavaux, René-Gaston Baco, and Nicolas Georges Jeannet-Oudin arrived in Guadeloupe with clear orders from Bonaparte to get the plantations operating again and make them generate income. Laurent Dubois makes clear that around 1800, the ex-slaves in Guadeloupe were not optimistic about their future; there was justifiable fear that the days of freedom were numbered (Dubois 2004:327-48). In sum, neither Saint-Domingue nor Guadeloupe was a likely candidate for organizing a revolution in Curaçao.

But what about the idealism of Tierce Cadet? Pérotin-Dumon cites Tierce as stating that it was irrational to think that rich colo-

5 Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France (FR ANOM), 2400 COL127/3, Mémoire de Bresseau et Jeannet en réponse au courrier du ministre de la Marine et des colonies leur demandant des explications sur leur expédition (18-2-1801). See the online inventory: [http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ir?c=FRANOM\\_00092,1.5.6.2.2.3](http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ir?c=FRANOM_00092,1.5.6.2.2.3).

nists like Kikkert and himself had knowingly sacrificed their fortunes and their families, and risked terrible odds by causing a revolt of blacks.<sup>6</sup> Like most well-to-do Curaçaoans, Tierce was a slave-owner himself; only a few months before his arrest he had bought a mulatto boy from the councillor Gerardus Duijckinck.<sup>7</sup> Besides, four years earlier Tierce had actively taken part in the crushing of the slave revolt (Homan 1976:2). Luis Brion, writing from Curaçao to a business partner of his late father's in Amsterdam about Tierce's arrest and expulsion, appeared puzzled: there had been no reason whatsoever to put Tierce, who had been not only his late father's best friend but who was also a cornerstone of the island's community, in criminal detention. Governor Lauffer and the council had designated Tierce as a dangerous man, but he himself was never interrogated. Brion wrote:

He [Tierce] is accused by some people that he would have wanted to liberate the blacks, but this is not true, for in the year 94 [sic], when the negroes rose, he was the man who himself helped to quell the revolt. But time will learn us who is guilty. The man [Tierce] even wanted to litigate, but this was not permitted to him for reason, it was said, that the time and the circumstances as well as the laws of the island did not allow it. And so this man was banned from the island without being able to speak to anyone.<sup>8</sup>

Eight months after being deported from Curaçao, Tierce, en route to France, arrived in the Batavian Republic. He was travelling with an officer of the Batavian navy, Jan Hendrik Quast, who served under Kikkert in Curaçao. Both men were arrested and questioned. The Batavian authorities intended to put Tierce on trial for trying to overthrow the Curaçao government and plotting to liberate the slaves, but it appeared very difficult to produce the necessary evidence against him. All the papers found in the possession of both Tierce and Quast were confiscated and studied, but these contained

6 Pérotin-Dumon 1988:301. Unfortunately Pérotin-Dumon does not mention the source of this citation. See for Tierce's protests against Lauffer: FR ANOM, 2400 COL127/3, Documents produits devant la commission, parmi lesquels une correspondance du capitaine de vaisseau Valteau en faveur du délégué des agents français à Curaçao, Jean-Baptiste Tierce, et les réclamations de celui-ci contre le gouverneur hollandais Lauffer (1800-1801). See online inventory: [http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ir?c=FRANOM\\_00092.1.5.6.2.2.3](http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ir?c=FRANOM_00092.1.5.6.2.2.3).

7 NA, 1.05.12.01, Curaçao to 1828 (OAC), protocol of notarial deeds, inv. no. 1001, no. 249, deed of conveyance of a slave dated 12-6-1799.

8 NA, 2.01.28.02, Raad der Amerikaanse Bezittingen, 1795-1806 (RAB), inv. no. 189, Documents regarding the case of J.B. Tierce Cadet in Curaçao, 1796-1804, fol. 62vo., extract of a letter from T.L. Brion in Curaçao to Messrs. Tonella and Comp. in Amsterdam.

no information that could be used against them. Although the attorney-general pointed to the fact that from his confiscated correspondence it had become clear that as maritime agent Tierce had been in contact with well known people like Victor Hugues, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, Philippe Roume, and Toussaint, who had played a 'dubious role' in the French colonies, the Court of Holland judged that there was absolutely no evidence for the accusations against him and that both Tierce and Quast were to be released from criminal arrest. This happened, but on the orders of the Executive Directory (Uitvoerend Bewind), Tierce was now placed under civil arrest.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, there was only Lauffer's story without any substantial supporting documentary proof. Lauffer had reported extensively to the authorities in the Batavian Republic about the conspiracy, and although he stated that he was in the possession of irrefutable evidence, his superiors for the time being had to believe him on his word. For, according to the governor, the nature of the document in his possession was such that it was too dangerous to send it over. If it would fall into the hands of the British, they would most certainly have a reason to attack Curaçao. Still, the West Indian Committee (West-Indisch Comité), the governmental body for the administration of the Caribbean colonies and possessions in Africa established by the States-General in 1795, urgently requested him to send authorized copies of all the documentary proof in his possession as soon as possible. But this request, dated 1 August 1800, probably never reached Lauffer, for two months later Curaçao was occupied by the British and communications were severed.<sup>10</sup>

In the end Lauffer's most important evidence, the instructions for Devaux and Sasportas drawn up by Roume, did fall into British hands. Lauffer probably handed it to them after the capitulation of Curaçao. A copy is kept in The National Archives in Kew.<sup>11</sup> In these instructions, however, no mention is made about starting a

9 NA, 3.03.01.01, Hof van Holland 1428-1811 (HvH); inv. no. 360, minutes of the Court of Holland, 15, 24, 29 and 31-7-1800; inv. no. 5608, Criminal papers, process files of criminal cases, file no. 34, marked M, 1800. Among Tierce's papers, copies can be found of his correspondence with officials in Saint-Domingue, including Philippe Roume, General Thomas Hédouville, and Julien Raimond. These were made and officially authenticated by Kikkert after Tierce's arrest and sent to him in Saint-Domingue during his stay there. Copies of these documents can also be found in NA, access no. 2.01.28.02, RAB, inv. no 189, file regarding the case J.B. Tierce Cadet.

10 NA, 2.01.28.02, RAB, inv. no. 189, West-Indische Comité to governor and councillors of Curaçao, 1-8-1800, fol. 84.

11 The National Archives, Kew (TNA), War Office (WO), 1/98, Correspondence from Curaçao, 126r-127v., 'Instruction donné par l'Agent du Directoire Exécutif à St. Domingue aux Citoyens Sasportas, negociant du Cap, et Devaux, adjudant général dans les armées françaises, actuellement à l'isle de Curaçao'. A contemporary English translation can be found in fols. 123-124vo.

region-wide slave revolt and using Curaçao as an operational base for this purpose. After a long and bombastic introduction that boils down to a flood of abuse against the British and their ‘imbécile monarque’, the agents are instructed, according to the contemporary English translation of their commission, to ‘lett [sic] your ideas fall entirely on Jamaica’, to ‘Electrify the heads & enflame the hearts of the Africans with the [...] fire of liberty’ and to ‘Promise them in the name of the agent of [the] directory in St. Domingo, that as soon as they have compleated [sic] the insurrection the liberty of our new brethren the Jamaicans is to be proclaimed in the name of the French people’.<sup>12</sup>

Toussaint Louverture would then, it was promised, come to their assistance. Sasportas was to go to Jamaica as soon as possible; Devaux was to stay in Curaçao to make preparations to support the insurrection in Jamaica. He was to join Sasportas the moment that he heard of the ‘explosion’, that is, the Jamaican slave revolt.<sup>13</sup>

The chance for the operation to succeed was apparently considered great. For it was also stated that when during future peace negotiations it would be decided that Jamaica was to be returned to Great Britain, it would only be under the condition that general liberty was to be guaranteed. Devaux and Sasportas were held responsible for any unnecessary harm caused by their orders, but at the same time they were entrusted with power to take any measures they thought necessary.<sup>14</sup>

Lauffer never showed the original commission that he received from Sasportas but only a copy that he had fabricated himself. No copy of this document, however, has been found in the Curaçao governmental archives. It is striking that when in 1803, shortly after the British returned the colony to the Batavian Republic, the French commissioner Duny was sent to Curaçao to investigate the events of 1799-1800, and the council could not answer his questions regarding the alleged conspiracy led by Tierce; they had to refer to Lauffer because he was the only one who had the information.<sup>15</sup>

12 Ibid, fol. 123vo. The transcription of the same passage in the original French document (fol. 126vo) reads in full: ‘Occupez vous uniquement de la Jamaïque, car chacune des isles du vent offrirait autant de difficulté à vaincre et vous n’y trouveriez pas les [moyens] d’attaque et de defenses qu’offre la Jamaïque. Electrisez toutes les têtes, enflammez tous les cœurs africaines du feu de la liberté, promettez au nom de l’agence du Directoire à St Domingue qui, qu’elle apprendre l’insurrection, elle fera proclamée au nom du Peuple français la liberté de nos nouveaux frères les jamaïcains...’. Part from the same fragment is also cited in a Spanish translation by Palacios; see Palacios 1983:23

13 TNA, WO 1/98, fol. 126vo-127r.

14 Ibid. 127r-127v.

15 NA, 2.01.28.02, RAB, inv. no 189, 247r-247v., copy of a letter by the Commissioners C. Berch and A de Veer to former governor Lauffer, 15-8-1803.

Lauffer at that time no longer held any public office. He left for the metropolis in May 1804 to appear before a Batavian court martial to account for the capitulation of the colony to the British, but was acquitted of all the charges brought against him (Van Meeteren 1944:14).

Of course, during his interrogations Tierce Cadet denied any involvement in a conspiracy to bring down the government and to liberate the slaves.<sup>16</sup> He was kept in custody in The Hague for several months, causing a lot of diplomatic activity. The French ambassador claimed that Tierce, as a French citizen who also had been employed in an official Republican function at Curaçao, was entitled to French protection. But this was contested by the Batavian government with the argument that Tierce by his long residence in Curaçao (1784-1799) and his service as an officer in the island's National Guard had become a Dutch citizen, while his official functions of *receveur* and consul were never recognized. The Spanish ambassador pleaded for prolongation of Tierce's detention until Spanish authorities could question him on his possible complicity with the Gual and España conspiracy.<sup>17</sup>

In October 1800, Tierce 'escaped' while being transferred from one prison to another. According to G.H. Homan the escape was very probably staged; Tierce had become more and more of an embarrassment to the Batavian authorities. He went to Paris where he circulated a printed pamphlet in December 1800, titled 'Au gouvernement batave', in which he vindicated himself and asked permission to return to Curaçao in order to attend to his trading and shipping business. The Batavian government refused. One year later Tierce Cadet returned to the Batavian Republic, possibly in another attempt to obtain permission to return to Curaçao. He was arrested again, however, and immediately deported. He returned to his native France and never saw Curaçao again (Homan 1976:8-9). These efforts of Tierce to restore his reputation and the risks he took by going to the Batavian Republic suggest that he was innocent.

It is therefore unlikely that Tierce was the Jacobin zealot convinced of the ideal of slave liberation and realizing full racial equality, as depicted by Palacios. But he might still have been involved with a group of people who, discontented with Lauffer's administration, were planning to bring him down. During his interrogations he stated that many people in Curaçao were unhappy with

16 NA, 2.01.12, Binnenlandse Zaken (BZ), inv. no. 222, interrogations J.B. Tierce, 22 and 29-5-1800, pp. 100-8 and 122-33.

17 See the chapter by Ramón Aizpurua.

Lauffer's regime, which they labelled despotic.<sup>18</sup> During the 1790s there was almost continuous social unrest in the colony, surfacing in the form of riots, fights between adherents of opposing political factions, and mutinous behaviour within the defence forces. Most of the unrest was concentrated in and around the port of Willemstad. Was there a group that can be identified as Tierce's partisans? Palacios mentions a number of young whites, among whom was Luis Brion. But this was apparently only a small group compared to the roughly 300 prisoners who were taken after the Guadeloupeans gave up their siege and left (Palacios 1983:26). If there was such a large group of followers of Tierce, they were most likely to be found among the free coloureds.

#### THE PORT, THE FREE COLOURED, AND THE 'FRENCH CONNECTION'

At the end of the eighteenth century, Curaçao had a relatively large free non-white community. In 1789 over 20,000 people lived on the island, including nearly 13,000 slaves, about 3,600 whites, and approximately 3,700 free blacks and coloureds. A little over half of the population lived in Willemstad and its immediate surroundings: 40 % of the slaves, 95 % of the whites, and 95 % of the free non-whites. Many, if not most of those living in Willemstad and its suburbs, were directly or indirectly involved in the commercial and maritime branches of the colony's economy (Klooster 1994:286, 289).

Similar to the American colonies of other European powers, Curaçao's free blacks and coloureds were regarded by whites with a mixture of suspicion and fear and subject to repressive and discriminatory treatment. The general idea among the white population was that the free blacks and coloureds had to be kept in strict control. This resulted in a series of locally issued laws, mainly for the purpose of maintaining law and order, in which the free non-whites were usually bracketed together with the slaves. Officially, according to the laws declared applicable in the colony by the States-General, the free non-whites, unlike the slaves, did not form a distinct legal category. But in daily practice free non-whites were treated like they were. For instance, testimony of a free non-white against a white was not accepted in court. On the other hand, unlike many of the neighbouring colonies, there were almost no legal impediments to their economic development (Jordaan 2010).

18 NA, 2.01.12, BZ, inv. no. 222, interrogations J.B. Tierce, 22 and 29-5-1800, pp. 100-8 and 122-33.

Apart from a symbiotic relationship with the Spanish colonies on the nearby mainland, Curaçao also had long established close ties with the French colonies in the northern and north-eastern Caribbean, especially with the southern part of Saint-Domingue. With their coloured and black crews of freedmen and slaves, Curaçaoan vessels regularly attended ports like Aquin, Les Cayes, and St. Louis. During the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), Curaçaoan merchants were the most important suppliers of provisions. A commodity from Saint-Domingue that was much in demand by Curaçao merchants was indigo. Especially well suited for the cultivation of this crop was the southern part of Saint-Domingue, where many free coloureds became successful indigo planters. Among them was Julien Raimond, political pamphletist and prominent advocate in the fight for racial reform during the 1780s and early 1790s, who, as an indigo planter, had extensive commercial relations with Curaçao. Business contacts were strengthened by the forging of family networks, locally and inter-colonial: there was intermarriage between the well-to-do coloured families of both colonies (Garrigus 1993:244-5, 246, 250, 253-4; Garrigus 2007:4)

Also residing in Curaçao, from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, was a sizable French colonial community consisting of both whites and free coloureds. Around 1790 the number of Frenchmen was estimated to be 400 (Homan 1976:1). Many if not most of the French were Roman Catholics, as was the majority of the Curaçao non-white population. As a result, the Roman Catholic Church, unlike the almost exclusively white Protestant Church, was racially mixed. This must have played a role in bringing French and Curaçaoans, whites and coloureds, into close contact. Tierce Cadet, as a well-to-do and prominent member of society, was a church warden of the Catholic church, and he was also living with a mulatto woman called Dorothea, with whom he had children.<sup>19</sup>

Close ties with the French colonies are also noticeable through the relatively high incidence of manumissions by French slave-owners registered in Curaçao. There was a peak of French manumissions during the 1790s, which should be attributed to the many refugees from Saint-Domingue that came to Curaçao after 1791, often together with their slaves.<sup>20</sup>

After the outbreak of the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue, the continuing relations with that colony and the growing number of refugees arriving from there apparently did not immediately alarm the Curaçao government. The fiscal (public prosecutor) P.Th. van

19 NA, 2.01.28.02, RAB, inv. No. 189, Lauffer to Duny, 9-11-1803, 237v.

20 See for an overview of manumissions in Curaçao: Van der Lee 1998.

Teijlingen seemed to be the only official who was worried about the growing number of people coming from Saint-Domingue, and he repeatedly asked the council for clear orders on how to deal with them. Van Teijlingen feared that their numbers would rise significantly as soon as one of the contesting parties in Saint-Domingue would gain the upper hand. He expected that especially free non-whites would come to Curaçao since these would not be admitted in the British or any of the other of the neighbouring colonies.<sup>21</sup> After the news arrived in 1793 that war had broken out between France and the United Provinces, the only measure that was taken was to order the French on the island to report to the fiscal within four days to be registered. An earlier decision to order all the French to leave Curaçao within three weeks was reversed by the governor.<sup>22</sup>

In 1795 the French Republic and the newly proclaimed Batavian Republic signed a pact of friendship and alliance, and in early July of that year the first French privateer appeared in the Willemstad harbour, soon to be followed by more.<sup>23</sup> Earlier, in January 1793, the French National Convention had passed a decree in which citizens were invited to arm privateers. In France as well as in its colonial ports ships were fitted out and commissioned with letters of marque. Victor Hugues started to arm corsairs not long after his re-conquest of Guadeloupe in 1794. The number of Guadeloupean privateers grew from 21 at the end of 1795 to 121 at the end of Hugues' regime in 1798. To illustrate the importance of privateering for this colony: during this four year period 1,800 ships were either seized or destroyed by Guadeloupean privateers (Dubois 2004:241-2).

The crews of the corsairs consisted predominately of non-white sailors, many of them ex-slaves. The multiracial crews of these privateers, according to Laurent Dubois, became 'a symbol as clear as the Republican tricolor'. Many captains were also men of African descent, drawn from the free coloured class. Privateers were armed by the Republican administration as well as by private individuals. Between 1794 and 1796 the latter were still a minority, but in 1798 there were 114 privately owned corsairs against only seven directly fitted out by the Republican authorities. Most of the ship owners and investors were whites. Hugues himself invested in privateers. It was lucrative business for both ship owners and crews

21 NA, 2.05.12.01, OAC 233, 'Representatie ... aan Gouverneur en Raden gedaan ... 19 januari 1792', pp. 4; no. 14, copy of a note of Van Teijlingen, 28-2-1792; no. 30, Van Teijlingen to the council, 5-6-1792.

22 J.A. Schiltkamp and J.Th. De Smidt 1978., no. 414, pp. 491, no. 2, publication 5/8-4-1793; No. 415, publication 12-4-1793.

23 NA, 2.01.29.03, Departement van Marine, 1795-1813, Aanhangsel II (DvM II), inv. no. 73, Journal of the frigate *Ceres*, kept by A. Kikkert, 1795-1799, 8-7-1795; 23-3,1-7-1795.

and it became an important branch of the Guadeloupean economy (Dubois 2004:242-6).

In Curaçao the presence of the privateers and their black and coloured crews had an enormous effect on the island's non-white population. In early August 1795, only two weeks before the outbreak of the slave revolt, naval captain Albert Kikkert, commanding the frigate *Ceres* anchored in the harbour, noted in his journal: '[Since] the negroes here, because of the presence of the many French free negroes or citoijens, now also are committing mischief, we loaded our guns with balls and grapeshot and erected two small batteries...'<sup>24</sup> 'Negroes and mulattoes' reportedly held gatherings in Otrobanda and sang provocative songs. There was recurrent fighting between the French sailors and the garrison's Orangist soldiers.<sup>25</sup>

After the crushing of the slave revolt and the execution of its leaders, social unrest remained and the government became increasingly unhappy with the French privateers who were now calling on a regular basis. In December there was fear for a new slave revolt.<sup>26</sup> As a consequence, crews of the privateers were ordered not to have contact with the island's blacks.<sup>27</sup> But this had hardly any effect. A day before Christmas, sailors of the French privateers provocatively paraded through the streets with banners and drawn sabres, and with hundreds of Curaçaoan blacks in their wake.<sup>28</sup>

#### THE 1796 COUP AND ITS AFTERMATH

The change of power in the metropolis did not immediately lead to changes in the local colonial administration and military command; the civil and military personnel commissioned under the old regime remained in function. At the same time political strife between the stadholder's supporters and the pro-French Patriots intensified immediately after the crushing of the slave revolt and plunged Curaçao into a state of near chaos. Not only the population and the members of the colonial administration were divided, also within the defence force, formed by the navy, the militia, and the garrison, there were political controversies. This regularly led to severe clashes and riots involving the local population, sailors, soldiers, and the crews of the French privateers.

24 NA, 2.01.29.03, DvM II, inv. no. 731, 6-8-1795.

25 NA, 2.01.28.01, WICom, 139, Governor's journal, 4, 5 en 1/2-8-1795, 3-8-1795.

26 NA, 2.01.28.01, WICom, 139, Governor's journal, 4, 5 en 1/2-8-1795, 9-12-1795.

27 NA, 2.01.28.01, WICom, 139, Governor's journal, 4, 5 en 1/2-8-1795, 12-12-1795.

28 NA, 2.01.28.01, WICom, 139, Governor's journal, 4, 5 en 1/2-8-1795, 24-12-1795.

Only in early August 1796 was word received that all civil and military personnel were relieved from the allegiance to the stadholder and order was given that a new oath had to be taken. Some of the civil servants, the captain of the militia, and most of the officers of the garrison refused, while Governor De Veer requested his resignation because of his bad health. He was succeeded by bookkeeper-general Jan Jacob Beaujon as acting governor. To cope with the unrest among the soldiers the garrison was dismissed, while the militia under the newly-elected Captain Johann Rudolph Lauffer took possession of Fort Amsterdam. After mediation by Jean Baptiste Tierce the crews of the Dutch warships were reinforced with men from the French privateers. The Orangist officers left the island the following day.<sup>29</sup> The transition from a colonial government of the old regime to a Batavian government was realized without any bloodshed, but the situation was far from stable.

French naval presence would further contribute to the consolidation of the new regime. Since Guadeloupe as well as Saint-Domingue had an interest in securing Curaçao as a naval base, warships were sent from both colonies (Pérotin-Dumon 1988:295-296). Victor Hugues, informed that Curaçao was still in danger of surrendering to the British, sent a letter in which he offered military assistance and at the same time threatened with armed intervention in case the governor and councillors would not behave like 'good patriots'. A few days after the receipt of this letter the French warships arrived (Hamelberg 1985:31-2).

At the same time Hugues had given explicit instructions that it should be communicated to the governor and councillors that the French did not have any intent whatsoever to interfere with the existing social order. Still, Acting Governor Beaujon remained deeply suspicious. While the French warships were moored in the harbour, the fifth anniversary of the French constitution of 1791 was celebrated. On this occasion the commanding officer from Saint-Domingue, much to the horror of Beaujon, drank, sang, and danced with free coloureds, and even embraced some of them. But what worried the Curaçao authorities most was that he appeared to be sympathetic to a petition from a delegation of free coloureds, in which they asked for his support in gaining equality to the whites in all regards.<sup>30</sup>

29 Hamelberg 1985: 28-29; NA, 2.01.28.01, WICom, inv. no. 136, no. 12, Beaujon to West Indisch Comité, 9-9-1796, f 93r-94r; ; inv. no. 141A, undated anonymous document titled 'Relatie'; DvM II, inv. no. 73, Journal Kikkert, 15-8-1796; WIPC, II, no. 448.

30 NA, 2.01.28.01, WICom, inv. no. 136, nr. 13, 113-115, Beaujon to West-Indisch Comité, 17-10-1796; Pérotin-Dumon 1988: 296-7.

Rumours regarding French attempts to change the social order in Curaçao surfaced again in August 1797, when a former military commander of Curaçao, Abraham Perret Gentil, who was now engaged as an officer in Saint-Domingue, returned to the island. Soon a story circulated that Perret had written a letter to Saint-Domingue asking for troops to help liberate the slaves in Curaçao.<sup>31</sup>

Lauffer, who had succeeded Beaujon in December 1796 as acting governor, seemed to have followed a deliberate policy aimed to control the free blacks and coloureds by incorporating them into the restructured defence forces. He maintained the two existing segregated companies of free blacks and free mulattoes, respectively 260 and 157 men strong, which were directly under his command. The former white militia was renamed the National Guard and greatly extended, now comprising about 1,100 officers and men, organized in six companies of infantry, three companies of cavalry, and four companies of artillery.<sup>32</sup> The latter largely consisted of free blacks and coloureds. Under pressure of time and the need to man the cannons in the forts with experienced gunners, Lauffer decided to recruit men among the coloured and black seafaring population of the island. Sailors were usually familiar with the handling of the canons aboard the ships. In order to stimulate the Curaçao mariners to join the National Guard, ship's captains, who were often light coloured 'musters', were given officer's ranks. It was hoped that these men would stimulate their crews to join the National Guard.<sup>33</sup> According to Lauffer, by dispersing a large number of free non-whites over various units, he had effectively reduced the influence and the power of the respective captains of the 'free negroes' and the 'free mulattoes'.<sup>34</sup>

Lauffer reported these changes to his superiors and asked for their approval. At the same time he warned the authorities in the metropolis to be extremely cautious when issuing laws or regulations with any reference to general freedom and equality. The introduction of general equality to the free coloured people or the granting of political influence to them was extremely dangerous and could ultimately lead to the total destruction of the colony. Lauffer at that time – late August 1797 – was already convinced of the existence of a 'cabale' consisting of people who, 'hiding behind the mask of patriotism', were only out to overthrow the existing

31 NA, 2.01.28.01, WICom, inv. no. 139, 19-8-1797.

32 NA, 2.01.28.01, WICom, inv. no. 136, Lauffer to West Indisch Comité, 15-9-1797, enclosure no. 29.

33 NA, 2.01.28.01, WICom, inv. no. 136, Lauffer to West Indisch Comité, 21-8-1797, nr. 27, 168-169.

34 NA, 2.01.28.01, WICom, inv. no. 136, 171-172.

order and play one population group against another in order to attain their own goals.<sup>35</sup>

Only a few weeks later Lauffer had to report on a potentially dangerous situation when a large number of free coloured militiamen from the artillery companies of the National Guard, during a formal parade, suddenly drew their sabres and, cursing and shouting wildly, stormed forward in an apparent attempt to provoke a reaction from the infantry units. Thanks to the fact that the militia men in the infantry were too astonished to react, the event did not end in a bloodbath. The immediate cause was the reading of a court martial sentence against a captain of the infantry for disobedience.<sup>36</sup>

Lauffer was vague about the causes of this near mutiny. He stated, however, that the free coloureds should not be blamed. They had been misled by false rumours; they should be seen rather as victims that were used as an instrument by malicious elements to cause unrest. Still, the coloured officers held responsible for the incident were dishonourably discharged. One was banished from the colony; he immediately departed for Les Cayes.<sup>37</sup> The real cause may have had to do with the presence in Curaçao of Gual and España, the leaders of the failed revolt in Caracas.<sup>38</sup>

Although after this incident no further serious disturbances occurred, this did not mean that there was no discontent. Just a few months before Lauffer had accused Tierce, Devaux, and Sasportas, a placard was issued against the circulation of pamphlets that criticized the government.<sup>39</sup> But at the same time Lauffer seemed to

35 NA, 2.01.28.01, WICom, inv. no. 136, 172-174.

36 NA, 2.01.28.01, WICom, inv. no. 13., 30-9-1797; inv. no. 136, no 32, fol. 190-197, Lauffer to West-Indisch Comité, 22-10-1797; no. 33, fol. 229, Lauffer to West-Indisch Comité, 30-11-1797.

37 NA, 2.01.28.01, WICom, inv. no. 139, Governor's journal, 30-9-1797; *ibid.*, inv. no. 136, no. 32, fol. 190-197, Lauffer to West-Indisch Comité, 22-10-1797; *ibid.*, no. 33, fol. 229, Lauffer to West-Indisch Comité, 30-11-1797.

38 See for the Gual and España conspiracy the chapter by Ramón Aizpurua. The Spanish authorities knew that Gual and España were in Curaçao. They even knew in what house they were staying. Apparently part of the Curaçao population felt sympathy for the Spanish revolutionaries. The arrival of a representative from the Spanish colonial authorities who demanded their arrest and extradition caused much unrest among the population; there were even stones and dirt thrown at him. See for a report on these events: NA, 3.03.01.01, HvH, inv. no. 5608, copy of a statement in Spanish by Don Raphael Diego Merida, 30-9-1799, with Dutch translation of 30-4-1800. The officer of the National Guard who was convicted for disobedience, Anthony Leopold Lange, later reproached Lauffer for deliberately not complying with the Spanish demands and the risk of a breach in the relations with Venezuela that he thereby took. See Archivo General de Indias, Estado 71 4 (17b), translation from a letter in Dutch by A.L. Lange and J.P. Amalry to the Spanish ambassador in The Hague, dated 16-4-1798 (I am grateful to Ramón Aizpurua for supplying me with this information).

39 NA, 1.05.12.01, OAC, inv. no. 110, minutes of the meetings of the council, 30-5-1799, pp. 274-8.

be totally confident that he was in control and clearly did not fear the free blacks and coloureds. Only weeks before the arrest of the alleged conspirators, Lauffer had allowed a drill with the artillery in Fort Amsterdam by principally black and coloured troops, while only a handful of white soldiers from the garrison were present: an ideal opportunity for the non-whites, it was feared by Kikkert and others who witnessed this, to take command of the fortress. When criticized for this by some of his officers, Lauffer replied that he knew these people and that he trusted them, adding that the officers were ignorant and that the situation in Curaçao could not be compared to that in Saint-Domingue (Milo 1936:488).

#### CURAÇAO AND THE REPERCUSSIONS OF THE QUASI-WAR

From 1797 onwards, French privateers started to hunt and seize American ships on an increasing scale. Of the 29 prizes brought into Curaçao's port during that year, 19 were American ships. The Americans of course complained, and fewer American ships started calling at Curaçao. At the same time the number of French privateers arriving steadily rose. Captain Kikkert recorded in his journal the arrival of six French privateers in 1796, 11 in 1797, 23 in 1798, and 30 in 1800 (Milo 1936:336, 484).

Curaçao's government found itself in a difficult situation. On the one hand, the island benefitted from the privateering business, as did of course the French ally, officially represented by the maritime agent and *receveur* Tierce Cadet. On the other hand, the Americans were long-time and valued customers – in fact the island depended considerably on the supply of provisions from North America – while there was no conflict between the Batavian Republic and the United States. From early 1799 onwards, more and more incidents occurred regarding American ships seized by privateers in the direct vicinity of Curaçao. This forced the government to undertake action. At the end of January 1799, an American schooner was seized by a French privateer under the reach of the canons of the fort at Fuikbaai. The latter had left the harbour of Curaçao a day earlier for Guadeloupe, but stayed in the neighbourhood to prey on American ships. The seizure was considered to be against the treaty of friendship between the United States and the Batavian Republic, so an armed vessel was sent by the governor with orders to recapture the American ship, which succeeded. The council decided to file a complaint with the Guadeloupean authorities, and the privateer was ordered to sail to Guadeloupe without any

further delay.<sup>40</sup> In February 1799, a provisional regulation regarding the sale of ships seized by French and Batavian privateers was issued, which supplemented a regulation dating from August 1798, enacted by the Intermediary Executive Authority (Intermediar Uitvoerend Bewind) of the Batavian Republic. It mainly contained instructions for procedures that were to be followed after a prize was brought into port.<sup>41</sup>

Early July, the American ship *Nautilus* was seized after a battle in the vicinity of Bonaire by the French privateer *Trois Amis*, and taken to Curaçao, a seizure that would have serious repercussions. Despite suspicion that irregularities had been committed by the privateer, the council decided that the seizure could not be disputed; it was impossible, it was stated, to determine whether or not the *Nautilus* was attacked within the colony's jurisdictional limits, for it was impossible to say how far off the coast of Bonaire the incident had taken place.<sup>42</sup>

In August 1799, U.S. Secretary of State Timothy Pickering, informed the Batavian diplomatic representative in the United States, R.G. van Polanen, 'There is ground to suspect that the Administration at Curaçao is interested in the privateers fitted out there with French commissions; and hence the countenance & protection yielded to the pirates'.<sup>43</sup> The privateer *Trois Amis*, responsible for the seizure of the schooner *Nautilus*, according to the Americans, was fitted out in Curaçao. The incident was taken very seriously because on the occasion of the seizure the American captain and four of his crew had been murdered. The privateer was, according to the secretary of state, protected by the island's government. It was said to have sailed under a pirate's flag with skull and crossbones painted on a dark background, 'and what is most extraordinary, with this piratical, murderous ensign hoisted, was saluted by the Dutch frigate *Ceres*, Captain Albert Kickert!'<sup>44</sup> The American consul in Curaçao, B.H. Philips, had already addressed himself in a letter of 21 June to the governor and council of Curaçao, but never received any answer.<sup>45</sup>

40 NA, 2.05.12.01, OAC, inv. no. 110, nos. 1-2, minutes of the meetings of the council, 30 and 31-1-1799.

41 WIPC, II, no. 485, pp. 573-7 publication 28-2-1799, articles 24-25.

42 WIPC, II, no. 485, minutes 10-7-1799, pp. 311-6; see also Van Meeteren 1944: 39-40.

43 Claude A. Swanson and Dudley W. Knox, 1935-1938, (further referred to as ND), Operations August-December 1799, 83, Secretary of State Timothy Pickering to Minister Resident from the Batavian Republic Van Polanen, 16-8-1799.

44 ND, Operations August-December 1799, 83, Secretary of State Timothy Pickering to Minister Resident from the Batavian Republic Van Polanen, 16-8-1799.

45 ND, Operations August-December 1799, 83, Secretary of State Timothy Pickering to Minister Resident from the Batavian Republic Van Polanen, 16-8-1799.

Van Polanen answered Pickering that ‘as early as the beginning of the year 1797, I had received sufficient proof that the government of that Island was in improper hands, the Governor being a low bred and illiterate German as also are the majority of the Council’.<sup>46</sup> He immediately also wrote a letter to Lauffer in which he bluntly stated that the conduct of Curaçao’s administration during the war, and especially during the past two years with regard to the arming of privateers, the seizing and condemning of American ships, and the condoning of illegal practices by privateers gave ample ground to suspect that the government officials themselves were directly interested. And if there were any doubts, these had certainly been removed after the receipt of ‘certain reports’ from Curaçao and after the affair with the *Nautilus*. Curaçao’s government would be held responsible, and the governor could be certain that complaints would be filed with the Batavian government. Consequently, an official inquiry was to be expected, and those officials who would be found guilty of neglecting their duties for personal gain could at the least expect to be liable to pay extensive damages. Van Polanen asserted that he was in the possession of documents sent by informants in Curaçao, and that he was certain that there would still be ‘decent people’ on the island who would be willing to testify.<sup>47</sup> Van Polanen also informed the authorities in the Batavian Republic about the matter.<sup>48</sup> It is interesting to note that not a single reference regarding these serious American claims and accusations is to be found in the minutes of the council. That the Americans were taking the incidents very seriously is underlined by the fact that President John Adams informed the secretary of state that ‘if any legal evidence can be produced to prove that Governor and Council are, more or less, concerned in the privateers, it would be a ground for Serious representations to their Superiors’.<sup>49</sup>

Little is known about the involvement of Curaçao’s seafaring population and local investors in French privateers. It is certain that privateers were locally armed and that they sailed with both French and Batavian letters of marque, but it is not clear on what scale (Milo1936:487; Van Meeteren 1944:29, 36-37). Already in 1797 and 1798 there were reports of direct Curaçaoan involvement in the seizure of the American ships.<sup>50</sup>

46 NA, 2.01.08, Buitenlandse Zaken, 1795-1813 (BuZa), inv. no. 358, Van Polanen to Pickering, 16-8-1799.

47 NA, 2.01.08, BuZa, inv. no. 358, Van Polanen to Lauffer, 17-8-1799.

48 NA, 2.01.08, BuZa, inv. no. 358, Van Polanen to the Agent for Foreign Affairs (Agent tot de Buitenlandse Betrekkingen), 18-8-1799.

49 ND, Operations August-December 1799, 121, John Adams to secretary of state, 24-8-1799.

50 ND, Operations February 1797-October 1798, 22, Consular letters by B.H. Philips, 21-6- and 3-8-1797; 241, Declaration of Thomas Smith, master of Schooner Lemmon, 24-9-1798.

Since a large part of the population, especially the free non-white segment, was directly or indirectly involved in the maritime branch of the island's economy, and since privateering could be a very profitable business, it may be expected that many tried to benefit from it. In the beginning of 1797 Captain Kikkert appeared to have invested money in two privateers (Milo 1936:332). Historian Van Meeteren mentions the issuing of a Dutch letter of marque on 28 June 1799 to the captain of the privateer *Drie Vrienden*, which, he suggests, is possibly the same ship as the *Trois Amis* (Van Meeteren 1944:36). It is not unlikely that the privateer sailed with both a French and a Batavian commission. The name of the ship suggests that there were three ship-owners or investors. One could be retrieved from the notarial archives of Curaçao: it was Tierce.<sup>51</sup>

The American accusations with regard to the incident with the *Nautilus* must have made Lauffer feel very uncomfortable. And at the same time the authorities in Saint-Domingue were also putting pressure on the Curaçao government but regarding a different matter. In the minutes of 5 September 1799, the receipt of a letter from Commissioner Roume is mentioned, with a request to prohibit the trade between Curaçao and the ports controlled by André Rigaud. Devaux, who had just arrived, and soon afterwards requested the council to issue a ban on the export of provisions to the southern part of Saint-Domingue. The council decided not to become involved in the dispute between Toussaint and Rigaud. Devaux also asked for the payment of 12.5% duties on the sale of the American prize *Cleopatra*. He informed the council that he needed the money for the execution of an operation, but the council was not willing to honour this request.<sup>52</sup> Then Devaux asked the council for a loan of 5,000 pesos, which request was also declined since there were insufficient funds.<sup>53</sup> The next day, Lauffer informed the council of the existence of a conspiracy, followed by the arrests of Devaux and Sasportas.<sup>54</sup>

On 17 September 1799, just a few days after the arrest of Tierce, the American consul again addressed himself to governor Lauffer regarding the capture of the *Nautilus*:

I am now under the necessity to enlarge, & in the name of the United States of America to call on you as Commander in chief & Governor of this Island & its dependencies & for the reasons which

51 NA, 1.05.12.01, OAC, inv. no. 1001, protocol of notarial deeds, no. 259, fol. 777r-778r, guarantee for the sum of 10,000 guilders by Pierre Martin in favor of Jean Baptiste Tierce, owner of the privateer *Drie Vrienden*, 26-6-1799.

52 NA, 1.05.12.01, OAC inv. no. 110, minutes council meeting 5-9-1799, pp. 356; 356-7; 357-60.

53 NA, 1.05.12.01, OAC inv. no. 110, minutes 6-9-1799, pp. 370-1; 372; 374-5.

54 NA, 1.05.12.01, OAC inv. no. 110, minutes 8-9-1799, pp. 376-378; 391-392.

I will state to you to demand *immediate* restitution & indemnification for the property so illegally siezed [sic] & taken, & competent satisfaction on the Persons of the Officers & Crew who committed the Murders of Captain Dixon, his mate, Boatswain & Two of his Sailors and also for maiming, stabling [sic] & plundering Four others of his Sailors.<sup>55</sup>

Once again it was made clear that the complaints against Curaçao's government were very serious: the *Trois Amis* had sailed from Curaçao flying a flag that not only was 'indicative to its bloody intentions' but was not allowed to be carried by the laws of any nation. The seized *Nautilus* had been taken to Curaçao, and the privateer had on its return officially been saluted by the Dutch man-of-war moored in the port. The seizure was a violation of the treaty between the United States and the Dutch. The cargo of the *Nautilus* had been sold before a prize court pronounced a sentence. Philips added that he had received orders 'to make the demand [...] not *Only* for the *Nautilus*, the property & Lives lost, but for redress of *every injury* wh. has been permitted under the direction of your Government'. The United States Government was to be respected and required that the rights of its citizens would not again be violated.<sup>56</sup> Again, nothing regarding this letter is recorded in the minutes. But a day later Lauffer communicated to the Council in an extraordinary meeting that he was convinced of the existence of a plan to make Curaçao the centre of a region-wide attempt to free all the slaves.<sup>57</sup>

Shortly after the arrest of Devaux, the U.S. consul urgently requested two American warships. This was necessary, he explained, to protect the lives and property of U.S. citizens in Curaçao. The secretary of the navy thereupon ordered two warships be sent to Curaçao, not only to secure the safety of American citizens, but also with orders to apprehend the captain and crew of the *Trois Amis* and take them to the United States to be tried for piracy. The secretary of state informed the American consul of this. He expected that, since the discovery of the conspiracy, Lauffer might be more willing to hand over the captain and crew of the *Trois Amis*. If the island's government wished, Pickering wrote, the American warships were allowed to assist to counter the machinations of the French, provided it would not be too inconvenient or hazardous to the immediate object of sending them there. The ships arrived at

55 ND, Operations August-September 1799, B.H. Philips to J.R. Lauffer, 17-9-1799, 199-200.

56 ND, Operations August-September 1799, B.H. Philips to J.R. Lauffer, 17-9-1799, 200.

57 NA, 1.05.12.01, OAC, inv. no. 110, minutes council meeting 18-9-1799, 410-5.

Curaçao in November 1799 and stayed until they were recalled in April 1800.<sup>58</sup>

A few months later, soon after the arrival of the expeditionary force from Guadeloupe, a letter was received from the Batavian Republic communicating the American complaints regarding Curaçao. The Batavian government ordered a complete ban on the admitting privateers to the port of Willemstad. The reaction of council, as recorded in the minutes, was that the American complaints were based on 'false and mendacious reports' regarding 'certain events', supplied by 'hot headed' persons. The complaints would be disproved as soon as possible. Banning privateers from the harbour was not feasible because of the presence of the expedition from Guadeloupe.<sup>59</sup>

On 6 September, immediately after the French landed at St. Michiel's Bay, Philips sent out an emergency call for U.S. naval assistance. It was feared that the Americans and their property were in great danger: 'I am well assured that in case of success on the part of the Guadeloupe Adventurers, that our persons & property *will be sacrificed*. I conceive a frigate and a Ship of 20 Guns or two frigates wou'd relieve us in 14 days & might make many prizes, but they must come speedily *or we are lost*'.<sup>60</sup>

From their station at St. Kitts the American warships *Merri-mack* and *Patapsco* were sent, which arrived at Curaçao on 22 September. On their arrival the Americans found the British frigate *Nereide* anchored just outside the harbour, and they learned that the island's government had already capitulated to the British. The situation on the island was still precarious. Many of the Americans staying at Curaçao had volunteered to man the fortresses to help defend the colony against a French take-over. Since the British had landed only twenty marines and refused to undertake any further action until reinforcements arrived, it was decided that the *Patapsco* would sail into port in an attempt to break the French siege. The action succeeded, and seventy American troops were landed. It was expected that the French would try to undertake an assault during the night, but instead they evacuated the island. After hearing the news of the French

58 ND, Operations August-December 1799, 187, B.H. Hammel to Secretary of State, 14-9-1799; 287, Navy Department to Captain Richard V. Morris, Commanding officer on the Guadeloupe Station, 15-10-1799; 288, Secretary of State to B.H. Philips, 15-10-1799; 403, B.H. Philips to the Secretary of State, 15-11-1799; Operations January-May 1800, 379, Secretary of the Navy to Captain Stephen Decatur, 3-4-1800.

59 NA, 2.05.12.01, OAC inv. no. 111, minutes extra ordinary meeting of the council on 14-8-1800, 437-438. The letter from the Batavian Republic was dated 18-3-1800.

60 ND, Operations June-November 1800, 322-323, B.H. Philips to the Commander in Chief of the U.S. squadron on the Guadeloupe station, or to ship commanders, 6-9-1800.

departure, the British captain Watkins sailed into port and took possession of the island.<sup>61</sup>

After the French departure, a few hundred prisoners were taken. The majority were considered prisoners of war and handed over to the British. Curaçaoan citizens suspected of treason and collaborating with the French were interrogated. The problem was that in most cases it was hard to prove that a person had actually sided with the French. Because of the fast collapse of Lauffer's defence and the hasty retreat on Willemstad, many people suddenly found themselves in the French-controlled part of the island without any possibility of reaching the other side of the St. Anna Bay. Most of the people interrogated appeared to have had convincing arguments why they remained on the French side, while it could not be proven that they had actually taken up arms. The original accusations appeared to have been founded largely on hearsay. Nowhere in the judicial records can any proof be found for the existence of a massive pro-French movement of Jacobin persuasion coming to the assistance of the Guadeloupeans. All those suspected of siding with the French were released except for one person: a French mulatto by the name of Joseph Rigaud, who was found guilty of treason and sentenced to be hanged. The sentence was carried out immediately after it was pronounced.<sup>62</sup>

In the Curaçaoan archives, no references were found to the identity of Joseph Rigaud and whether he was related to André Rigaud, but from other sources it can be gleaned that he most likely was one of André's brothers. Two of André Rigaud's brothers were even on Curaçao in September 1800. The other one, François, was also arrested, but considered a prisoner of war.<sup>63</sup> Although the judi-

61 ND, Operations June-November 1800, 337-341, William D. Robinson to Secretary of State, 10-9-1800; 341-342, Letter to a merchant in New York concerning surrender of Curaçao to Great Britain, 18-10-1800; Extract from a letter from an officer on board U.S. Sloop Patapsco, to his friend in Philadelphia, 23-9-1800, published in the Connecticut Journal, 26-11-1800; 423-424, Captain Thomas Truxtun to Secretary of the Navy, 2-10-1800; 451-452, B.H. Philips to the commander of the U.S. Squadron, Guadeloupe, dated 10-10-1800; 481-482, B.H. Philips to the Secretary of State, 18-10-1800; 508-509, Captain Thomas Truxtun to William Patterson, merchant in Baltimore, Md., 28-10-1800.

62 NA, 01.05.12.01, OAC inv. no. 111, minutes extra ordinary meeting 21-11-1800, 603-5; extra ordinary meeting 9-12-1800, 645-6; inv. no. 127, resolution no. 36 and attachments, fols. 277-283; attachment La A, undated document from fiscal Spencer, fol. 284v; Spencer to Van Starckenborg, 9-11-1800, fols. 189-90v.

63 Joseph Rigaud was probably already on the island in August 1800. In a deed of conveyance of a ship, dated 25-8-1800, a Joseph Rigaud from Les Cayes is mentioned as the selling party. See: NA, 01.05.12.01, OAC inv. no. 1004, no. 45, fo. 110r-110v. See also: Alejandro Enrique Gómez Pernía, *Le Syndrome de Saint-Domingue. Perceptions et représentations de la Révolution haïtienne dans le Monde Atlantique, 1790-1886*, unpublished doctoral thesis, 2010, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Ecole Doctorale d'Histoire et Civilisations, pp. 302; AGI, Caracas 486, no. 4, 'Diario de lo acaecido en Curazao...' (Diary regarding what happened in Curaçao...); AGI, Caracas 486, attachment to a document No. 1, 'Noticia comunicada de Paraguaná' (News from Paraguaná). I am grateful to Ramón Aizpurua for supplying me with this information.

cial papers regarding all the other suspects have been preserved, almost no documents pertaining to Rigaud's trial were found. It was recorded only that he had served in a French cavalry unit. He was left behind when the Guadeloupeans evacuated the island, but together with two companions he managed to flee to Aruba where he was apprehended.<sup>64</sup>

The British, for intelligence purposes, had all the letters that were sent from Curaçao to Europe in early October 1800 opened, copied, and translated. Of the 31 letters investigated only five contained information regarding people who allegedly joined the French, information that again was mainly based on rumours and that was also contradictory. While according to one letter all the blacks and the greatest part of the people of colour defected to the side of the Guadeloupean invaders, another letter mentions that the free blacks and free coloureds sided with the inhabitants and fought well. Only Luis Brion and a Jan Smit are explicitly mentioned as having joined the French, allegedly as interpreters. One of the letters states somewhat vaguely that 'many of the inhabitants' sided with the French. The letters confirm that most of the slaves did support the French, and some of the slaves were said to still be armed and hiding in the countryside. Finally, mention is made of the hanging of 'a mulatto named Joseph Rigo'.<sup>65</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It is unlikely that the alleged 1799 conspiracy and the Guadeloupean expedition in 1800 are related to any region-wide scheme to liberate the slaves and establish racial equality. A plan did exist in 1799 to invade Jamaica and ignite a slave revolt in that colony in preparation for a French attack, and indeed the French agents Devaux and Sasportas were commissioned to carry it out. But this plan was not supported by Toussaint Louverture, who at that time had just concluded a treaty with the British and the Americans and was fighting André Rigaud; it was initiated in France. Neither is there indication that Tierce had any radical Jacobin ideas regard-

64 NA, 01.05.12.01, OAC inv. no. 167, minutes of the meetings of the councillors commissioned to facilitate judicial procedures (*raden-commissarissen tot het houden der dingtalen*), 6-10-1800, 337-8.

65 TNA, Records of the Admiralty, Adm 1/250, Letters from senior officers, Jamaica, 1800.

ing liberty and equality, nor that the Guadeloupean expedition in 1800 was sent with the purpose of freeing the slaves.

Tierce was a rich slave owner, who was actively involved in the crushing of the 1795 revolt, and who after his extradition tried to have his good reputation and his fortune restored. Curaçao became an object of international politics. The Guadeloupeans were interested in securing Curaçao as an important privateering base and were no doubt alarmed by signs that by late 1799 the attitude of the Curaçao government towards French privateering seemed to be changing in favour of the Americans. Lauffer was under enormous pressure from the United States. The American accusations after the incident with the *Nautilus* that the island government had a direct interest in the arming of privateers cannot be proven, but it is likely that there was at least some truth in the allegations. By creating the myth of the Tierce Cadet conspiracy, Lauffer at once could divert the attention of his superiors away from this embarrassing matter, pacify the Americans, and get rid of the French and especially of Tierce as one of the owners of the privateer *Trois Amis/Drie Vrienden*. The general atmosphere of fear for revolt and subversion, both in Curaçao and in the mother country, as related by the spectre of the events in Saint-Domingue made Lauffer's accusations convincing. This in turn provoked the reaction from Guadeloupe a year later, an intervention with a geopolitical rather than an idealistic agenda. The Guadeloupeans were actively supported by Curaçaoan slaves who may well have hoped for liberation, but there is no evidence whatsoever for the existence of a radical revolutionary movement among the slave population, nor among free blacks and coloureds, nor among the whites.

The Curaçaoan free non-whites, however, must have welcomed the principles of the French Revolution. There is proof that they actively sought French support for their emancipatory ambitions, but in the end they remained loyal to the island's government, even if the latter was not inclined to give in to any ideas regarding full equality. But then again, a slave revolt and the chaos that would almost certainly result from it were not in the interest of free population either. The Curaçaoan free blacks and coloureds, due to the close relations many of them had with the southern part of Saint-Domingue, probably felt more affiliation with André Rigaud than with Toussaint Louverture. The hanging of the 'free mulatto' Joseph Rigaud in the aftermath of the events of 1800 might have served, whether or not intentionally, as a governmental warning to them not to indulge in subversive ideas.

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