
DE GROENE AMSTERDAMMER

THE GROENE AMSTERDAMMER • March 26, 2026

Available Online at: <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/vijftig-graden-verschil-hetzelfde-lot>

For the Virgin Islands, Greenland is déjà vu.

Fifty degrees difference, the same fate



Sugarcane farmers cultivate the land in the Virgin Islands as part of the American New Deal program. Bethlehem, Saint Croix, 1941 | Jack Delano / Heritage Images / Getty Images

Leendert van der Valk



There is a precedent for Trump's plans to own Greenland. In 1917, the US purchased the Danish Virgin Islands. Greenland was also part of that deal. Now, the islands are an American colony without self-governance.

Sugarcane farmers cultivate the land in the Virgin Islands as part of the American New Deal program. Bethlehem, Saint Croix, 1941 | Jack Delano / Heritage Images / Getty Images

The difference between Greenland and the Virgin Islands is on average fifty degrees Celsius and northern latitude. The difference is also two million square kilometers. Greenland is by a distortion on the standard world map over-depicted large, while Virgin Islanders are used to their island group in the Caribbean — the sea isn't even marked on the map.

Yet they are bound to each other. 'I am probably one of the few Virgin Islanders who has ever been to Denmark and Greenland,' says artist La Vaughn Belle. She felt the similarities around the Arctic Circle. 'But even those who never go there know that we are connected,' she says from sun-drenched Christiansted on Saint Croix via video link.

Belle conducted research into the shared past in Greenland. It was cold there, but in an uncomfortable way, it also felt familiar. She recognized the Danish in the street and place names on the Virgin Islands, in archives and forts, and the red-and-white flag that sometimes still waves nostalgically on Saint Croix.

But she saw similarities primarily in the way the landscape was shaped. The traces of colonialism. She felt it at the large statue on the coast of the capital, Nuuk. There stands Hans Egede, the Lutheran missionary who came to Greenland in 1728 and laid Denmark's first claim to the

island. "Along the Greenlandic coast there are beautiful horizons, just like ours, but then suddenly there is a statue like this. A colonial eyesore." She thought of the truncated old sugar mills on her island. Pepper shakers that remind us of slavery and Danish whips. Our daily life takes place in locations that used to be work-camps, as I prefer to call the plantations.

In recent months, more Virgin Islanders became aware of their shared destiny with that almost imaginary country far away. That land of ice and stone that suddenly wanted 'their president' (whom they never voted for). They laughed scornfully when they read that Danish politicians snapped at Donald Trump that you 'cannot buy people and countries.' Wasn't that exactly what had happened to the US Virgin Islands (USVI)? Had Denmark forgotten that?

While the whole world watched Trump's threats to annex Greenland and blow-up NATO, the Virgin Islanders thought of 1917. That year, their land, upon which their ancestors lived, was bought by America for 25 million dollars in gold. That gold went to Denmark. "What is happening in Greenland feels like a kind of upside-down déjà vu to us," says Belle. "In 1917, decisions about the Virgin Islands were made without the inhabitants having a say in the matter. Suddenly, they were Americans. Well, a sort of Americans, anyway, still without a voice."

In practice, only the colonial administration had changed. To this day, the islanders have no political control over themselves. They do fall under the jurisdiction of the United States, but they do not have voting rights in Congress. They share that status with Puerto Rico, but the status of USVI is even more precarious; the island group also lacks its own constitution. Partly for this reason, USVI is on a United Nations list of seventeen countries 'whose inhabitants still do not have full self-government.' It is de facto

an American colony. Danish Greenland was once on that list as well, but it has since achieved a relatively large degree of autonomy.

The debate surrounding Greenland is stirring something up on the islands. It is bringing the injustice of 1917 back to light. For the 'transfer,' as it is popularly known, was not merely a treaty concerning the US Virgin Islands. An important part was the agreement that Americans would no longer object to the Danish 'expansion of political and economic interests in all of Greenland.' Until then, the US had still laid claim to northern parts of the Arctic island. The sale of the Virgin Islands thus also sealed the fate of Greenland as a Danish colony.

Trump's current interest in Greenland means that '1917' is once again on shaky ground. At least, that is the reasoning of Shelley Moorhead, chair of the African-Caribbean Reparations and Resettlement Alliance. He is seizing this opportunity to argue, among others at the UN and the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, that 'if Trump is going to reshape the world order anyway, USVI should finally get a voice.'

The old treaty shows how the Danes sold a country and a population they had exploited for two centuries. Moorhead suspects that Denmark would prefer to keep this out of this debate, because it brings up the history of slavery. America remains silent about the treaty because it had promised to leave Greenland alone.

'But a generation is coming that won't put up with it anymore. Now that Greenland is in the news, young people here are saying: "Scroll up." Just scroll up, as if history were an Instagram post, and see how we got here. Then you see how the Virgin Islands were bargaining chips for Greenland.'

If you then scroll up to 1917, the similarities stand out. Just like Trump's current interest in Greenland, back then it was largely about military interests and access to trade. The USV lay on the route to the newly opened Panama Canal, and while the First World War raged, the US feared a German takeover of Denmark and the islands. The first proposals were rejected by Denmark, and for a time the US even threatened to occupy the archipelago. Sounds familiar.

Ultimately, the Danes accepted 25 million dollars in gold. It was the largest land purchase by the US. In 1803, it had bought fifteen million North American land from France in the Louisiana Purchase, and in 1867, Alaska went from Russia to the US for 7.2 million. For the Danes, the assurance that Greenland was Danish was crucial. For the Virgin Islanders, who were not consulted, it meant that they changed 'owners' for the seventh time in history. They had once been Spanish, briefly fell under the Knights of Malta, then were French, English, Danish, and for a significant period Dutch (more on that later).

Although we are quick to think of tropical places like the USVI when it comes to colonies, the status of Greenland was no different. The Inuit, too, were not consulted and were pawns of money. And although we usually think of European countries when it comes to colonial powers, the US was (and is) no different. That country, too, occupied Caribbean islands such as Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti in the early twentieth century and annexed Hawaii in 1898.

The old treaty shows how the Danes sold a land and population that they had exploited for two centuries.

Two young men, one shared fate

To understand, we scroll through to the lives of two young men who did not know each other in 1917, but were in the same boat. Both had been taken from their native soil and exhibited as colonial exotics. One from Greenland to America, the other from the Virgin Islands to Denmark.

Minik was about seven years old when, probably under false pretenses, he was taken with his father and four other Inughuit to the American Museum of Natural History in New York in 1897 by explorer Robert Peary. The Inughuit are Inuit from the northernmost part of Greenland, a region where the Danes did not

go at the time and which America was attempting to claim. The group was housed in the basement of the museum. New Yorkers paid to see them and shake their hands. Within two months, all six Inughuit had tuberculosis.

The first to die was Minik's father. Minik wanted him to be buried according to Inughuit traditions. The museum staff staged a charade with a fake body under a cloth and a coffin filled with stones for weight. In reality, his father's body went to the home laboratory of museum curator William Wallace. He stripped it of organs and flesh and later put the skeleton on display.

In the museum, Minik knew nothing of any of this. Three other Inughuit died in the months that followed. One survivor returned to Greenland, but Minik stayed in New York. He was adopted by Wallace, the man who had stolen his father's body. Minik Wallace went to school; sometimes journalists would stop by for his story. Through the press, at the age of sixteen, he finally heard about Wallace's deception and tried to obtain the remains of his father and the three other Inughuit for a traditional funeral, without success.

In 1907, he returned to Greenland, where he became a skilled hunter and worked as a guide and interpreter for American expeditions that were still ongoing on the officially Danish island. But Minik could not settle there. In 1917, he was living in the US again and applied for American citizenship. That very year, the US purchased the Virgin Islands from Denmark, on the condition that they leave Greenland alone.

With his signature, the Greenlander Minik renounced Denmark, a country he had never been to, and became a resident of the country that viewed him as a museum piece. He was the exception; the other Greenlanders had not been asked anything; they became Danish with a stroke of the pen.

In that same year, a Virgin Islander faced a similar choice. Victor Cornelins was born on Saint Croix but had been taken to Denmark in 1905 at the age of seven, along with his four-year-old half-sister Alberta. There, they became part of an exhibition of the Danish colonies at Tivoli amusement park in Copenhagen. The dark-skinned children attracted a lot of attention.

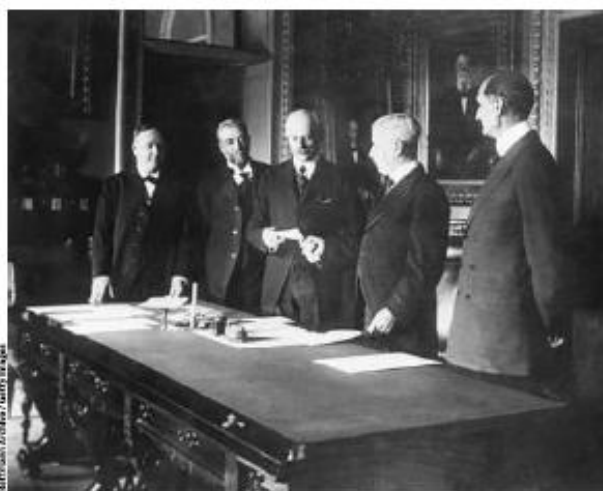
But Victor kept walking away. He liked it better at the Greenland pavilion; there were friendly Inuit, canoes, stuffed bears, and igloos there. Consequently, the organizers closed off the West Indies section. Later, Victor would call it a cage. From his cage, he spat at visitors to show his displeasure.

After the exhibition, Victor and Alberta did not return to Saint Croix, as their family had been promised. They went to an orphanage and received a Danish schooling. In 1917, Alberta died of tuberculosis. When their native island was sold to the US that year, there was briefly talk of the then nineteen-year-old Victor having to return, but he chose Danish nationality. Like Minik, he was an exception; other Virgin Islanders became Americans.

'Part of the same colonial structure,' says Daniela Agostinho, curator and Associate Professor of Communication and Culture at Aarhus University. It is a structure that still exists, she knows from her work with artists from Denmark, Greenland, USVI, and Ghana in projects to decolonize narratives.

From the US Virgin Islands, there is sometimes a degree of jealousy regarding the Danish welfare state, which also operates in Greenland. 'But that obscures the colonial practices. Only last summer did Denmark apologize for the thousands of women and girls in Greenland who had IUDs inserted against their will to curb population growth. That practice began in 1966 and continued at least until 1991.'

Agostinho also points to the 'parenting competence test,' banned only a few months ago, which resulted in hundreds of Greenlandic parents having their children taken away to be placed with Danish adoptive parents. Sometimes this happened immediately after birth, while the mother was still in the maternity ward. The controversial test was administered to parents suspected of being unable to properly care for their child. The test was full of cultural assumptions to which Greenlandic parents often did not meet the requirements and could not be administered in Kalaalli-sut, the Greenlandic language. The Danish Center



Parade in 'Frederiksted', Saint Croix, Deense Maagdeneilanden, november 1916

De Amerikaanse minister Robert Lansing koopt de Deense Maagdeneilanden met een bankcheque ter waarde van 25 miljoen dollar overhandigd aan de Deense minister Brun, 31 maart 1917

De haven van Christianstad op Saint Croix rond 1842, Lithografie, 28,5 x 40,6 cm



international chessboard. The kidnapping of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela was coordinated from an aircraft carrier docked in Saint Croix. For the first time in a long time, thousands of troops were back on the islands. Governor Albert Bryan Jr. had welcomed the economic boost with cheers.

'It is also good for the economy,' Belle agrees, 'but meanwhile, chaos reigns in our waters. Our neighbors in Trinidad are afraid to go fishing because they could be bombed. It feels frightening that we have no control over our own harbor. We could become pawns in an international game again at any moment.'

That fear became particularly palpable in January due to a remarkable incident. Near Frederiksted, a woman was bitten to death by a shark. It had been fifty years since something like that had happened. Belle: 'Many people make the connection with the navy ships, which attract sharks because they chase schools of fish and sometimes kill them. For me, it is also a symbolic reminder of the slave ships that used to dock here. They attracted sharks because they threw bodies overboard.'

for Social Research calculated in 2022 that Greenlandic parents were 5.6 times more likely to have their baby taken away than Danish parents.

The competency test was only banned in May 2025 following fierce protests by Greenlanders. Nevertheless, another baby was taken away in August, and parents are still fighting to get their children back. Moreover, it evokes memories of the 'Little Danes' experiment of 1951, in which 22 Inuit children were taken away to give them a Danish upbringing. It was not until 2020 that Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen offered an official apology for it.

These protests and the Inuit struggle for more control was brutally overtaken around the turn of the year by Trump's aggressive Greenland campaign. Over the past ten years, Greenland has become increasingly autonomous, but those movements seemed for a moment to be on hold. The relationship with Denmark is complex. With a powerful and unpredictable pirate on the Atlantic coast that could lash out too fiercely, the position of Denmark can be undermined, while Greenland also needs Danish and European support.

And so the dependency remains. It sounds familiar to Virgin Islanders. 'When I walk outside later, a large American aircraft carrier or submarine could very well be lying in our harbor,' says La Vaughn Belle. In recent months, they were suddenly back, whereas previously they had been absent for years. That has everything to do with Trump's other move on the

Denmark has never apologized

Denmark has never offered an apology to the US Virgin Islands for that past. Although the country likes to present itself as just and social, Belle notes that there is only movement when the pressure becomes too great or money can be made. 'In the documents from around 1917, you see that Denmark demanded a referendum be held among the inhabitants of USVI regarding their fate. Not because they really wanted it, but to have bargaining chips. The Black population in the US was suffering under racist laws at that time, so the US would never agree, or so the thinking went. And indeed, eventually they were able to trade that demand for the agreements regarding Greenland.' The referendum did take place eventually, however, namely among the Danes. They voted for the sale. The islanders had no vote.

It is a pattern, observes Hadiya Sewer, who is in the same video call as Belle. They often work together. Sewer is a philosopher and fellow at Right to Democracy, an organization that deals with American colonialism. 'Denmark and America do not see themselves as classic colonial powers like England or France. In the public debate here on USVI, you often see an ambivalent stance regarding colonial relations. Every year there is a national holiday here on March 31, Transfer Day, the day the 1917 treaty went into effect. For many, that is simply a holiday. But others commemorate, or even mourn. More than a hundred years later, we are still constantly wrestling with the meaning of that day. You regularly even see a hint of nostalgia for the Danish colonial era.'

Belle calls this the 'un-remembering' of the colonial era. 'It is a way of dealing with trauma. An active process of not remembering painful matters.' In doing so, the logic of colonialism is internalized, Sewer adds. 'Virgin Islanders, too, are susceptible to the American fantasy of exceptionalism, the gravitas of the American empire. While in reality, we are American property. A domestic foreign country.' Belle summarizes this constitutional limbo position of the Virgin Islanders as 'neither subject nor citizen.'

Activist Shelley Moorhead is looking for ways to change that position. Perhaps the crisis surrounding Greenland also offers an opportunity, he reasons. Moorhead appeared behind the webcam in Christiansted at five o'clock in the morning to speak to the European journalist. He tosses his dreadlocks back with a languid gesture. "I have always been up early to check the European news." He has been doing that since 1993.

That year, he wrote to The Hague, the Danish Parliament, the US Congress, and the UN for the first time. He pointed them to the port of Charlotte Amalie, the capital of the Virgin Islands on Saint Thomas. For something very strange happened there in 1993. As if the Virgin Islanders hadn't been screwed over enough earlier, in 1917 — 'we got no rights, no privileges, none, zero, zilch!' Moorhead exclaims — there was one piece of the Virgin Islands that had remained outside the deal at the time: that extremely lucrative port. It had remained the property of a Danish private company that had been founded just before the sale with the rather colonial name West Indian Company. Over the years, it has grown into the largest enterprise on the island, the profits of which for eighty years went to the Danish owner — money had flowed. In 1993, it went up for sale.

The port cost 54 million dollars, more than twice the amount for which the islands had previously been sold to the US. The Danish owners initially threatened to sell it to a foreign company. Ultimately, USVI itself paid the amount for its own port. Shelley Moorhead: 'We bought our own port, which we had built, for which we had worked, for which we had received nothing.' Moorhead's pleas in courts and at Congress remained unanswered.

The same thing is happening now regarding Greenland, he notes. At the first allusions by Donald Trump in March 2025, Moorhead again sent petitions to The Hague and the US Congress, but received no response. While America apparently wants to revise the treaty and the agreements with Denmark regarding Greenland, it has no interest whatsoever in reconsidering the position of the Virgin Islands—enshrined in the same deal.



Victor Cornelius (7) en zijn halfzusje Alberta (4) werden in 1905 van Saint Croix meegenomen naar Denemarken om te worden tentoongesteld

Minik Wallace (7) werd samen met zijn vader en vier andere Inughuit meegenomen naar het American Museum of Natural History in New York door ontdekkingsreiziger Robert Peary. Vlnr: onbekend, Weocupsu, Minik, Kusus. New York, 1897



Victor Cornelius (7) and his half-sister Alberta (4) were taken from Saint Croix to Denmark in 1905 to be exhibited | Ritzaus Scanpix / ANP

Minik Wallace (7) was taken along with his father and four other Inughuit to the American Museum of Natural History in New York by explorer Robert Peary. Vlnr: unknown, Weocupsu, Minik, Kusus. New York, 1897 | Courtesy of The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University

The 1917 treaty and legal standing

Legally speaking, the 1917 treaty should still stand, experts in The New York Times also say regarding the matter. They confirm Moorhead's position that the position of the US Virgin Islands must also be renegotiated if America breaks with 1917. But Trump has indicated more than once that international treaties mean nothing to him and that he only follows his own compass.

Shelley Moorhead noticed that the first remark about 1917 in the international Greenland debate came from none other than Vladimir Putin. In January 2026, he subtly reminded Denmark and the US of the historic deal. Moorhead is not surprised that the Danes prefer to keep the treaty secret from the heated debate. 'Otherwise, everyone would see how people and land were sold for gold. And how the human rights of Virgin Islanders and Greenlanders have been violated. That is not the story that likes to be told by happy Denmark, prosperous Denmark, human rights Denmark.'

1917 has been Denmark's getaway car from the colonial and slavery past, Moorhead argues. 'If you commit a crime, you don't want the getaway car to be found, with all those Danish fingerprints and DNA in it.' By continuing to point this out, he hopes to rectify something that has gone historically wrong: the total 'voicelessness' of Virgin Islanders, as he calls it.

The Greenlanders are already further along in their process of independence than we are in the US Virgin Islands.

‘Maybe I’ll manage to get a seat at the table again after all.’

Because right now we are simply an American colony. It is not for nothing that we are on that UN list of territories without self-governance. We are not allowed to vote in the American presidential elections; we do elect a representative to Congress, but that representative has no voting rights in the House of Representatives. We have a separate tax rate, and if a disaster strikes here, national aid does not arrive or arrives very late. Less than thirty percent of the American Constitution applies to us. To top it all off, five proposals for our own constitution have already failed in recent decades. It is reviewed by the US Congress, the representative body in which USVI has no vote. The sixth rejection is imminent. Under Trump, there is not a ghost of a chance.

Moorhead’s fight for self-determination and reparations for the colonial past has been going on for years, but it is only ‘the tip of the spear,’ he says. Social media is fueling indignation about the colonial past among young people. But the road is long.

Hadiya Sewer and La Vaughn Belle see no strong drive for independence on USVI. ‘It does something to you when your country isn’t depicted on many world maps,’ says Belle. ‘Nowadays I just say that we live on the tops of mountains in a deep sea; that gives a different perspective. But our American education system also ensures that, unfortunately, there is little movement towards independence. I think things just aren’t bad enough yet for really widespread discontent. Many Virgin Islanders are quite satisfied with their status as Americans. They belong to a powerful country and travel between islands more easily than many of their neighbors.’

“I think that strengthening our position and having our own constitution must be the first steps,” says Sewer. “Many people are afraid of independence because they still have too many questions: how do we handle this economically and militarily? Can we handle it? But self-determination remains crucial.”

Yet she, too, sees some shifting on the islands. During a speech in January, shortly after the Arctic unrest around Greenland, the Governor of the US Virgin Islands, Albert Bryan Jr., decided to no longer wear his chain of office at official occasions. The US Virgin Islands chain of office features seven flags. Not those of the islands themselves, but of the nations that colonized them. At a meeting with leaders from West Africa, he declared that with this, he finally feels ‘unchained’. ‘Virgin Islanders live with the idea that we belong to Denmark (...). We acknowledge not that we mainly come from West Africa.’

The Dutch colonial chapter

And of those seven flags on the chain of office is the red, white, and blue of the Netherlands. It is a forgotten chapter of colonial history, but the Dutch, and especially Zeelandic, impact on the Virgin Islands is significant. The first enslaved people worked in the service of the Dutch. The island of Jost Van Dyke, now part of the British Virgin Islands, bears the name of privateer Joost van Dijk, who also settled on Tortola in 1615. Later, he was recognized by the West India Company (WIC) as the ‘patron’ of the island.

Both indigenous and African enslaved people worked on the islands. The WIC also established itself on the three islands of the present-day US Virgin Islands: Saint Thomas, Saint John, and Saint Croix. After the takeover by the Danes in 1672, the slave trade was conducted primarily through the Prussian Brandenburg Company, de facto a Dutch enterprise set up by former Dutch WIC members. The Danish West India Company also relied heavily on this Dutch contribution. Danish authorities often spoke Dutch, and laws were also partly drafted in that language.

That was necessary, because even a century after the takeover, twice as many Dutch as Danes still lived on Saint John and Saint Thomas, along with their enslaved people. The lingua franca on the islands was a

mixed language also known as Virgin Island Dutch Creole. It has since become extinct, with the last speaker on Saint John in 1987, but it left behind a relatively large number of texts and words, meaning it is still studied as an important example of Creole languages.

Dutch Creole was therefore still spoken in 1917. Cefas van Rossem, a language researcher at the Meertens Institute, unearths a text from his archives that was recorded on Saint John in 1926. The informant reflects on the treaty in the Creole language. He recounts how the population hoped for a better life under the Americans. 'But the Americans treat us so badly that they don't even grant us our rum,' says the speaker. According to him, that is the reason 'so fel fa ons ka dot' that 'so many of us are dying.'

Is what happened to USVI in 1917 now threatening to happen to Greenland?

History probably does not repeat itself so literally. New Zealand researcher Elizabeth Buchanan, an expert in Arctic global politics, wrote the mildly cynical book *So You Want to Own Greenland?* in response to Trump's first Greenland statements in early 2025. In it, she outlines various scenarios: from war to referendums, from choosing dollars to total independence.

She considers a provisional maintenance of the status quo most likely, something that indeed seems to be happening after 'Davos' and the conversation between Donald Trump and NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte. Greenland can move further towards independence, but Buchanan also shows that Denmark could fade into the background, while Greenland could rapidly become more economically and militarily dependent on the US. She pays little attention to the 1917 treaty, but anyone who takes the lessons of the US Virgin Islands to heart will seriously consider an American offer Denmark can't refuse: a large sum of money under the threat of occupation.

According to Shelley Moorhead, Greenland is in a stronger position than USV was back then. 'They don't have to choose. Greenland does not belong to Denmark or the US, but to the Greenlanders. They are already further along in their process of independence than we are. They must cherish that.'

Regarding the US Virgin Islands, he has learned that a Danish diplomatic delegation is coming to the islands in March, a week before Transfer Day. Moorhead has inquired once again whether that visit might be accompanied by a formal apology for the colonial past. For the time being, he has received no answer.

— End of article —
