



Independence,  
decolonization,  
violence and war in  
**Indonesia, 1945 - 1950**

**Dealing with the legacies of a violent past**  
- some excerpts from the epilogue by Hilmar Farid -

*The program asked prominent Indonesian historian Hilmar Farid to write an epilogue to the conclusions in the volume *Beyond the Pale*. In his essay, he not only discusses various contributions and the conclusions, but also their significance for the historiography in Indonesia as well as for our dealing with the legacy of a shared violent past. Below some excerpts.*

Since the research questions, the conceptual framework and the methodology were defined in Dutch debates, the relevance of this book will be appreciated more in the Netherlands than in Indonesia. That does not mean, however, that this research is of little significance to the Indonesian discourse on the period in question. We can learn much from the data, analyses and conclusions in this book, not only with regard to the outbursts of violence during the revolution, but also in relation to the violence in the period following independence.

...

***On the significance of the research to Indonesia***

This research project does not merely confirm existing beliefs. ‘That there was no single war’ is a key conclusion, one that will lead, I believe, to new debates in Indonesia. After all, the extreme violence was not only perpetrated by Dutch troops, but also by Indonesian soldiers and armed groups; and not only in combat against an armed enemy, but also against unarmed civilians, mainly Indo-Europeans and Chinese, and those who were suspected of sympathizing with the Dutch.

...

The researchers carefully mapped out the various forces involved in the extreme violence on both the Dutch and the Indonesian side, and thus avoided the generalization that there were just two parties. In reality, all of the parties involved were made up of various ranks with different backgrounds, motives and levels of involvement. The methods of violence also differed, from summary executions to

technical violence based on artillery and other heavy weapons. We also gain a picture of the conflict area with its extremely fluid, partly overlapping territories, and how it changed constantly as the demarcation lines moved, power shifted and the intensity of the conflict changed. If there is one concept that encompasses all of this, it is that of the integral and permanent absence of authority. The Dutch side, which was better organized and had better equipment and weapons, was frequently unable to keep an effective check on its own troops, let alone control the situation as whole. The same was true of the Indonesian side, which consisted of different forces and armed groups with a more varied chain of command.

...

***Farid points out that there is a close link between the violence during the war and the violence during colonial rule***

This means that we cannot view the period 1945-1949 in isolation from the preceding colonial period. The social history of mass violence existed long before the 'outbursts of extreme violence' during the revolution. In other words, it is imperative that we emphasize that the extreme violence did not start in August 1945. In various parts of this book, the researchers show that violence was inherent to the colonial System. Both physical and symbolic violence were among the methods used by the colonial ruler to gain and maintain power. The colonial wars throughout the nineteenth century in all parts of the archipelago, the penal sanctions on the plantations on Sumatra, and various forms of violence and other cases of unlawful action created a social landscape that became fertile ground for outbreaks of extreme violence in subsequent periods. The Dutch policy of re-installing an inherently violent colonial System and dispatching military troops in order to achieve that goal therefore formed the main cause of the series of extreme acts of violence. If extreme violence, war crimes and genocide cannot be tolerated on humanitarian grounds, then the colonial system itself cannot be excused, either, because it relied on such practices throughout history.

...

***The burden of war and colonial rule continued to be felt in Indonesia economically, financially and politically even after the transfer of sovereignty***

After the transfer of sovereignty in December 1949, the Netherlands focused on national reconstruction. The aid from the United States made a major contribution to this effort, and the country enjoyed unprecedented economic growth in the 1950S. Indonesia made much less progress in the interim, partly because the outcomes of the Round Table Conference proved to be very disadvantageous. At that conference, the Netherlands succeeded in fully protecting its own commercial interests, so that it could operate once more as it had done in the colonial period. The Indonesian government was obliged to consult the Netherlands when deciding on monetary and fiscal policies that might affect Dutch economic interests. Indonesia was also obliged to take over the colonial government's debts, including debts incurred by the Netherlands during the war with Indonesia, excluding military expenditure. During a two-year transition phase, Indonesia likewise had

to pay 17,000 Dutch civil servants in accordance with European salary scales. As [Dutch historians wrote already in 2002], all of these steps meant that ‘the Netherlands was able to liquidate its colonial establishment largely at Indonesia’s expense’, and could focus on the national economy.

This was not the only colonial legacy with which Indonesia was saddled, however; under pressure to secure power rapidly and achieve a functioning government, Indonesia took over the colonial governmental institutions and the judiciary. Some of them remain in place today. The original proposition of the revolution - to bring radical change to the colonial system - was transformed into a transfer of power from the colonial rulers to the Indonesian national government. With such an institutional structure and legal apparatus, the government’s steps to carry out the liberation mission as prescribed in the Preamble to the Constitution of 1945 became more and more complicated; not to mention the clashes in various regions, armed uprisings supported by the United States, and political differences among the Republican leaders. As a result, safeguarding stability came to be more important than Wholesale reform of the colonial system. As part of this development, the role of the military became increasingly prominent, which in turn was a factor that heavily influenced the maintenance of the existing system.

...

***Finally, Farid discusses the significance of this research and the cooperation to study this legacy of a violent past***

The extreme violence during the revolution is an important part of this colonial legacy. If lawsuits on cases of extreme violence are conducted without due consideration of the historical background, they run the risk of blurring the relationship between such cases and the inherently violent colonial system. They also have the potential to create new injustices, because there are many other cases that will never be tried. In studies of the legacies of past violence, we encounter the idea of historical justice. Extreme violence forms part of a complex history, and there is no simple solution. Many countries in the world today - mostly countries that have lived under authoritarian regimes - continue to struggle with this issue, from Guatemala and South Africa to Indonesia. Lying at the heart of the attempts to overcome this legacy is the revelation of the truth; and that is surely this research project’s most important contribution.

This research can be seen as an attempt to ‘right past wrongs’, analogous to the movement to restore European museum collections that were acquired by force, or to topple statues and monuments that symbolize colonial power. They are all expressions of the effort to keep historical justice alive, and they are extremely important: not only as a way to correct what happened in the past, but also as fuel for imagining a better vision of the future.