



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

Summary of *Beyond the pale: Dutch extreme violence in the Indonesian War of Independence, 1945-1949*, with the main findings of the research programme on *Independence, Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia 1945-1950*.

In a sensational television interview in 1969, Indies veteran Joop Hueting declared that he and other soldiers had committed war crimes while serving in Indonesia. The Dutch government subsequently commissioned a brief inventory of the archives. Based on the inventory, it was concluded that although ‘excesses’ had probably taken place during the war in 1945-1949, ‘the armed forces as a whole had behaved correctly in Indonesia’. The position taken by the government in 1969 has never been revised. In recent years, however, there have been increasing indications – partly arising from lawsuits, media reports and historical research – that the Dutch armed forces used extreme violence on a larger scale than was officially admitted by the Dutch, either at the time or later.

This summary presents the main conclusions of the research, which focused on the use of extreme violence. These conclusions are set out in greater detail in the concluding volume, based on the research carried out in the sub-projects.

Conclusions

On 17 August 1945, two days after the Japanese surrender that brought an end to the Second World War in Asia, Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta declared Indonesian independence. This step was not recognized by the Netherlands, because the latter considered itself the legitimate authority and wanted to retain control over Indonesia’s future. Indonesia thus had to be brought back under control. In the wake of the British and Australian troops, the first Dutch servicemen and officials arrived in Indonesia to prepare for the return of colonial rule, followed by larger troop dispatches. The clashing ambitions of the Netherlands and the Republic resulted in four years of bitter warfare and tough negotiations.

In recent decades, there have been increasing indications, partly arising from lawsuits, media reports and historical research, that the Dutch armed forces used extreme violence in their actions on a larger scale than was officially admitted by the Dutch, either at the time or later. There were calls from society and scholars for further research into this history of war and violence. After the government determined in December 2016 that further research was needed, the decision was taken in February 2017 to fund this research programme.

The primary aim of the research was to provide a more detailed analysis and explanation of the nature of the Dutch military action in Indonesia between 1945 and 1949, paying ample attention to the historical, political and international context, as well as to the political and social aftermath of the war. The programme focused in particular on the use and consequences of extreme violence by the Dutch armed forces, and the extent to which political and legal responsibility was taken for this extreme violence both at the time and later. These questions formed the basis for the selection of the different sub-projects.

The focus on the actions of the Dutch armed forces and the use of extreme violence was set out explicitly in the programme that received funding from the Dutch government. It should be emphasized that these themes were researched in the light of the dynamics of the violence and the context in which it took place. Thus, in various places in the research the researchers examined the way in which the war had been waged by the Indonesians, whilst the research project on the *bersiap* period and the first phase of the Indonesian revolution was devoted in its entirety to both Indonesian extreme violence against Europeans, Indo-Europeans, Moluccans, Chinese and other population groups, and intra-Indonesian, Dutch, British and Japanese extreme violence.

The main findings of the research programme are summarized below. A more detailed account of the findings can be found in the 'Conclusions' chapter, jointly authored by the Dutch research team, in the summary volume *Beyond the Pale*.

The toll of the war

Due to the frequently high level of violence, the Indonesian War of Independence not only resulted in countless dead and wounded, mainly on the Indonesian side, but also a great many victims of physical violence outside regular combat, such as torture, rape, detention under inhumane conditions; and non-physical violence, such as forms of intimidation; actions against property, such as the torching of *kampongs*, theft and destruction of goods and food supplies; and mass detention and other repressive measures. In addition to those who were directly affected, many suffered indirectly or psychologically as a result of the war, including the families of long-term detainees. There were also the socio-economic effects of the naval blockade and, in a broader sense, the cost of delaying the country's reconstruction after the Japanese surrender.

As is the case for other wars of independence fought at the time, it is not possible to give precise figures for the impact on the Indonesian population. We only have fragmented and sometimes indirect indications, partly because the source material is incomplete and the evidence was often concealed. For example, it is not possible to give the total number of Indonesian casualties as a *direct* result of Dutch military violence. The estimate of 100,000, which is often cited in the literature, is surrounded by much uncertainty, but it is an indication and is partly based on Dutch sources; the latter tell us that in the seven months following the second Dutch offensive in December 1948 alone, at least 46,000 Indonesians registered as combatants were killed. It is absolutely clear that the casualty ratio in the fighting between the Netherlands and the Republic was *extremely unequal*. Finally, demographic calculations for this period show that excess mortality among the Indonesian population was in the millions, but it is unclear how far this can be attributed to the war.

By contrast, the number of deaths on the Dutch side can be determined fairly accurately, starting with the number of soldiers killed in the war: around 5,300 dead, including a considerable number of Indonesians in Dutch service. Roughly half of them died in combat, while the others died as a result of illness and accidents. From the sources that were carefully

examined in the context of the research, it can be concluded that the number of Europeans, Indo-Europeans, Moluccans, Minahasans, Timorese and other Indonesians on the Dutch side who died as a result of the violence in the first phase of the Indonesian revolution, known in the Netherlands as the *bersiap* period, came to almost 6,000.

The war: causes and motives

The war that the Netherlands waged in Indonesia between 1945 and 1949 was a clash of worldviews with dramatic humanitarian consequences. There was a deep gulf between the views of Indonesian and Dutch leaders about Indonesia's right to immediate and unconditional self-determination, on the one hand, and the Dutch desire, on the other hand, to continue to control the pursuit of independence by all possible means and, last but not least, to safeguard their own interests.

The war formed part of a colonial tradition of violent oppression, racism and exploitation. In their attempt to patronize and control Indonesia, Dutch politicians, military personnel and administrators in Indonesia *and* the Netherlands, convinced of their own superiority, were mainly driven by economic and geopolitical motives, and by the idea that they still had a mission in the 'East' and were indispensable there. Although the decision to reoccupy Indonesia militarily and administratively was taken long before the end of the Second World War, its implementation was delayed by the major organizational problems afflicting the rebuilding of the armed forces in the newly liberated Netherlands. The desire to send troops overseas gained some urgency in late 1945 due to the widespread, irregular and intense violence in the first phase of the Indonesian revolution, which is known in the Dutch culture of remembrance as the *bersiap* period; that violence provided an additional argument.

In the course of the war and partly under international pressure, the Netherlands made some concessions in the direction of a – partial – dismantling of the former colonial state, including *de facto* recognition of the Republic's authority in the territory that it occupied. However, the Netherlands did not waver from its goal of determining Indonesia's future. In order to achieve this, the power of the Republic had to be broken at all costs.

The Netherlands completely underestimated the widespread support for independence among the Indonesian population. The Republic was portrayed as a Japanese puppet that would collapse as soon as Dutch rule and the army returned. The Dutch image of the 'enemy' built on deeply rooted traditions, in which the Indonesian population was relegated on racial and cultural grounds to the margins of a moral and social order based on a Western vision. By extension, the Republic was viewed with disdain; it was considered incapable of building an independent state. The anti-colonial resistance was usually branded as illegitimate, excessive and criminal, and contrasted to the 'well-meaning' majority who were regarded as apolitical and in fact pro-Dutch, but said to be afraid of speaking out for fear of 'extremists'.

The dynamics of the war

The aim of the Netherlands was to regain complete control of Indonesia. In order to achieve this, the Republic, its army and the various enemy combat groups had to be eliminated, and population centres, key economic areas and communication lines had to be occupied and brought under control. The Netherlands used all possible means to this end, starting with the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL), which was mainly recruited locally. In addition, 30,000 war volunteers and as many as 95,000-100,000 conscripts were dispatched overseas from the Netherlands; the latter required a retroactive change to the constitution. Finally, 20,000-25,000 men from the Dutch Marine Brigade and the Royal Navy were also deployed.

The military approach was partly based on insights from the colonial past, as well as on 'modern' developments in the Second World War. The 'spearhead strategy' that was pursued from mid-1947 essentially meant that the armed forces – with mobile columns in a rapid offensive, making use of their material superiority and a great show of force – aimed to capture the main enemy 'sources of resistance' and topple the Republic's military and political leadership. After this intended 'decapitation', the resistance, under pressure from the intimidating action, would collapse like a house of cards, to be followed by a relatively short phase of 'pacification'. The tactics used in this 'pacification phase', which mainly consisted of small-scale patrols, purges and the 'restless pursuit' of the opponent, had emphatically colonial roots. This approach, however, which before 1942 had mostly been used to suppress local uprisings, proved completely ineffective in the new context of a war of independence that encompassed the entire archipelago.

The Dutch armed forces had many more and superior weapons at their disposal, and were therefore able to take larger areas. However, this success turned out to be very relative when the nature of the war changed, particularly from mid-1947, and the armed forces were confronted with effective but also very fierce guerrilla tactics from the Republic's army, the TNI, which was widely supported by the Indonesian population; voluntarily, but sometimes under heavy pressure as well. The Dutch military apparatus was unable to formulate an effective answer to this form of warfare, despite some initial successes in winning over the population – or parts of it – in some places. Little came of the intended reconstruction of the colonial state and the associated civilian authorities, partly because the aim of winning over the population increasingly had to give way to the destruction of the military opponent and the collective deterrence of the population that came with this. Similar patterns played out in the wars of independence that were waged against British and French oppressors during this period.

The fact that the Dutch armed forces failed to achieve their aim was not only due to what were ultimately limited human and material resources and the doctrine used, but also to a lack of vision on the part of the administrators and military personnel responsible. Military power was lacking in almost every respect. Poorly trained and badly informed military personnel, who were vastly outnumbered by the TNI, were managed and led by a cadre that often lacked the knowledge, experience and training to carry out an extremely ambitious if not impossible task. In such a large, intensive and harsh guerrilla conflict, in which it was frequently almost impossible to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants, the unfeasibility of the aims had the effect of promoting the widespread use of extreme violence.

In Dutch counter-guerrilla warfare, the emphasis was on small-scale patrols over extensive areas, search operations by larger units, often with support from heavy weapons, and collectively punishing or deterring fighters and civilians by destroying homes and food supplies, among other things. These actions were frequently fuelled by fear, panic and distrust among the soldiers, meaning that it was often civilians who became the victims. In order to obtain information and to force confessions, the intelligence services made systematic use of heavy-handed interrogation and torture. All of the above does not mean, of course, that the military action was always violent and that every patrol ended in violence. In many places, humanitarian and logistical aid was also provided, partly for tactical reasons and mostly *ad hoc*, and relations with the population could – at least ostensibly – be cordial.

Extreme violence

In this programme, the term 'extreme violence' functioned as an overarching concept to describe the violence that was largely used outside direct, regular combat situations, or at their margins. This violence was directed against civilians or against soldiers or fighters who had been disarmed after their capture or surrender. It usually took place in the absence of immediate military necessity or clearly defined military purposes, in the form of torture, execution without trial, ill-treatment, rape, looting, violent reprisals such as the torching of *kampongs* and the shooting of civilians, or mass detention. In addition, extreme violence was also used during regular combat action, for example when the risk of civilian casualties was overlooked or taken for granted when using heavy and also light weaponry; or when, in combat or actions, soldiers fired at attackers more intensively and for longer than may have been necessary.

With this broad description, the historical research maintained a deliberate distance from frameworks and concepts in modern international law or the law that applied at the time. International law underwent major changes during this period, and using such a framework would thus probably have given rise to complicated historical-legal debates. In this research, the concept of 'extreme violence' primarily functioned as a description of a form of warfare, but it simultaneously allowed the researchers to consider the impact of the violence on the victims and the political and moral dimensions of the violence, however difficult these can be to define. After all, these forms of violence were at odds with everything that contemporary Dutch political and military leaders claimed to stand for, certainly to the outside world, and they clashed with widely held moral values – not infrequently those of the perpetrators themselves – and the norms of international humanitarian law that the Netherlands undertook to uphold in the conflict, according to internal guidelines.

The use of extreme violence

The research shows how closely the use of extreme violence was bound not only to the nature of the war, the chosen strategy and the dynamics of the violence, but also to the way in which it was handled by the political, military and legal authorities.

In this complex context, where boundaries could be unclear – between combatants and non-combatants, between periods of fighting and cease-fires, and also topographically, in the sense that there were no clear frontlines – it was often difficult or even impossible to make a sharp distinction between 'lawful' war violence and forms of extreme violence. Moreover, although the military and civilian authorities were aware that the Dutch armed forces systematically crossed the line in such situations, that awareness did not result in a willingness to take action.

The incomplete nature of the Dutch and Indonesian source material means that it is impossible to quantify the extent and consequences of the use of extreme violence, broken down into its many forms. This also applies to the number of victims in the Indonesian War of Independence. Much was not reported and recorded, and much of what was recorded at the time was later lost or deliberately destroyed; the post-war process of establishing the truth by holding interviews was limited in nature. As explained above, this difficulty also applies to determining the precise impact in terms of the numbers of dead, wounded and other victims on the Indonesian side, and to making a sharp distinction between military and civilian victims.

Although we cannot give precise figures, numerous and diverse sources contain convincing evidence and indications that many forms of extreme violence were used on a frequent and structural basis by units of the Royal Netherlands Army, the KNIL and the Marine Brigade – and that this also happened on the Republican side. Much of the violence took place at the margins of combat or even completely outside combat situations, such as liquidations,

executions without trial, and the torching of houses and villages. Soldiers from the Dutch armed forces used excessive force during detentions and interrogations, including ill-treatment and torture, in a structural and even systematic manner. It was already known that for a long period, the army leadership gave the special forces *de facto* 'carte blanche' to break the resistance with extreme violence if necessary, and to coerce the population into supporting the Netherlands; something that the special forces did on a large scale.

The intelligence services also took and were given the space to use extreme violence on a systematic basis. Furthermore, Dutch troops often deployed significant firepower, including heavy weaponry, in the many purge operations and other combat actions. In doing so, they frequently ran a high risk of civilian casualties, partly in order to minimize the risk of losses on their own side. The extent and impact of this form of extreme violence cannot be determined accurately. In addition to extreme violence that was considered more or less functional – violence intended to serve military ends – there was also dysfunctional violence, including robbery and rape. The former was condoned or even desired, and rarely punished; the latter was not usually condoned, but nevertheless only punished to a limited extent.

This pattern was clearly reflected in the actions of the judiciary. The extreme violence perpetrated by Dutch troops in the context of what was considered to be military action went virtually unpunished. An analysis of courts martial judgements shows that the military justice system, under pressure from the military authorities, often negated to punish 'functional violence' such as the killing of prisoners, the use of torture during interrogations and the torching of *kampongs*. Those who committed crimes that were not considered to be functional ran a slightly higher risk of (relatively severe) punishment. These were often individual actions of an unusually cruel or public nature, such as rapes and killings in public places such as markets. Even when it came to such crimes, however, Dutch judges showed a high degree of understanding for the servicemen and their position, and military interests were the foremost concern.

At every step in the legal proceedings, and thus at all levels, forces were at work to hinder or prevent prosecution. Responsibility for investigating and potentially prosecuting violence committed by Dutch military personnel lay primarily with the military commanders, and in particular with the army commander-in-chief (the highest military authority in the region). At every link in the judicial chain, the actions – or failure to act – of the military justice system in Indonesia had direct consequences for the use of violence on the Dutch side. The result of the policy of condonation was institutionalized impunity.

This dynamic was not only characteristic of the Dutch situation, but it is also the connecting factor in explaining the structural character of British and French extreme violence. Precisely because of this institutionalization, it played an important role in the continuation of certain practices. In colonies and metropolises across the world, the perpetrators, those giving orders, those who looked away and the condoners at all levels were spared punishment or rarely held to account.

The primacy of war

The picture that emerges from the various sub-projects is one of a colonial war that was fought in increasingly vicious and bitter fashion, and that literally became all-consuming. On the Dutch side, for a political majority and for the administrators and military personnel who implemented this policy, achieving a military victory became the driving principle, in addition to limiting Dutch losses. Successive Dutch governments paved the way for this, in close consultation with the army leadership, who constantly pressured the politicians responsible to take a hard line. From the highest ranks to the lowest, administrators, diplomats and soldiers, but also the military and

civilian judicial systems, proved willing to go along with the belief that the conflict could and would only be settled by military means; that is, by violence. This also applied to most of the media and other civil society institutions, which tended to be submissive and were rarely critical.

The Netherlands waged the war in Indonesia under authoritarian power relations, whereby the army increasingly dominated the civilian administration in practice. Checks and balances were lacking or were disabled, while abuses were concealed or covered up. As critical voices in Dutch society were more or less marginalized, partly due to active opposition from above – and, in the case of conscientious objectors, severely punished – in addition to the Republic's successful military strategy of attrition, international pressure was ultimately needed to bring the Netherlands to the negotiating table a number of times. Although the Dutch government realized after the first quarter of 1949 that the war had become a hopeless undertaking, giving up remained difficult and painful. The Dutch protagonists hardly knew how to cast off their rigid pre-war colonial mindset or their political and economic interests, and had great difficulty acknowledging the failure of the policy that had been pursued since 1945.

Responsibility

When it comes to responsibility for the widespread use of extreme violence, it must be stated that the Dutch armed forces *as an institution* were responsible; but we should immediately add that the armed forces operated in close consultation with and under the responsibility of the Dutch government. Politicians in the Netherlands, with the backing of their supporters, took no responsibility for the war or the extreme violence, either – and they were able to take this line because there was broad social support for the war and they were subject to little criticism. The geographical distance, and above all the mental distance, played a key role in this, and it is evident that the Dutch involved at every level unquestioningly applied different standards to the colonies and colonial subjects. They knew that crimes had been committed, albeit via what was often filtered information, but they looked away and rarely took action. In practice, this amounted to an acceptance of extreme violence.

The research programme has shown that the actors on the Dutch side – politicians, soldiers, civil servants, judges and others – showed a collective willingness systematically to tolerate, justify and leave unpunished extreme violence, in order to impose their will on the opponent and win the war. They did so for the sake of the end goal, convinced they were right and invoking their good intentions. People at every level showed a willingness to set aside written and unwritten legal rules, or bend them selectively, and in so doing to go against their own sense of justice. Many sources testify to this, from soldiers in the field to senior administrators. That sense of justice – a moral order – guided people's sense of right and wrong, and reflected their upbringing and education, subjective life experience, and interaction with their own community and society as a whole.

These norms and values were only partly recorded in rules of conduct and regulations, but they did provide food for thought. It is striking that the people involved frequently drew comparisons between their own behaviour or that of their comrades and the criminal methods used by the German and Japanese occupying forces during the Second World War. That they were nevertheless prepared to abandon moral frameworks can be explained in various ways: the pressure of circumstances or hierarchical relationships, ideological considerations, the colonial mindset, out of fear, the fight for survival, or blunted mental capacities or brutalization as a consequence of wartime conditions. What remained was the devastating impact of the war and the violence, first and foremost on the Indonesians.

The aftermath of the war

The eventual willingness of the Dutch to formally transfer sovereignty – on 27 December 1949 – was the result of strong pressure from the international community and the growing realization that the war could not be won. In the aftermath, Dutch politicians attempted to keep the war, and certainly questions concerning the extreme violence, out of the political arena as far as possible, both in order to cover up their own failings and to spare war veterans and the Indo-Dutch and Moluccan communities. This defensive attitude, and the unwillingness to take responsibility for the consequences of the actions of the political and judicial authorities and the conduct of the Dutch armed forces, only changed in fits in starts. It was convenient that Indonesia did not press for an investigation. It thus took many years for the space to emerge to reflect critically on this episode, one that was so at odds with the deeply rooted rose-tinted national self-image.