Colonial Armies in Southeast Asia

Preparations for the start of the research programme “Van Indië tot Indië: De herschikking van de Indoneisische samenleving” – on the decolonization and restructuring of Indonesian society during the 1930s to 1960s are in full swing.

By Eveline Buchheim, Peter Post & Marie-Eve Blanc

In the spring of 2001, the Dutch Ministry of Public Health, Welfare and Sports (VWS) commissioned the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD) to develop a historical research programme on the history of the Netherlands East Indies and Indonesia between the 1930s and 1960s, with specific reference to the social and economic effects of the Japanese occupation and the subsequent episodes of revolution, decolonization, state formation, and nation building for the various groups and strata of the Indies’ and Indonesian society.

To be carried out by NIOD, in close cooperation with Dutch and Indonesian counterparts, the research programme is part of a set of policies by the Dutch government concerning the Indies’ community that came to the Netherlands in the aftermath of the Pacific War and Indonesian independence. Part of the research will be devoted to specific problems related to the Indies’ Dutch community: the material and cultural losses suffered during war and revolution, the attitude of the respective authorities towards damages, the arrears of salary payment, and claims for compensation. Other parts of the programme will concentrate on the effects of war, revolution, and decolonization in the fields of economy, urbanism, crime, and security.

The aim of the programme is to create new insights in the trajectories of the various communities of Indies and Dutch labourers that resided in the Netherlands East Indies and in Indonesia during the turbulent decades between the 1930s and 1960s. The changes wrought by the chain of events of crisis, war, revolution, and the creation of national structures can be grouped under the term “decolonization”. Usually, decolonization is seen primarily in terms of “the end of empire”, the withdrawal of (formal) colonial rule, a departure that was often accompanied by war, rebellion, and drawn-out negotiations. In this programme it denotes the entire range of developments related to the withering dominance of the colonial sectors and the increasing self-awareness of the Indonesian peoples.

The programme will offer an analysis of war and decolonization across the traditional boundaries of history and nation. Contemporary research often concentrates on a specific period, be it the colonial period, the years of Japanese occupation, the revolution, or the post-independence era. By doing so, many dynamics of history are neglected, and the more long-term developments are often obscured. In contrast to the traditional approaches, the entire period between the 1930s and 1960s, with the revolution, nation building and the ensuing social and political disruption, can be seen as a protected period of transition, in which the internal relationships of power and wealth in the Indonesian archipelago were thoroughly reconsidered and redistributed. This not only involved the expropriation of possessions of Europeans and Eurasians – most of whom left Indonesia in the period 1945–1962 – but also the advent of new entrepreneurial groups and new political elites. While giving rise to new styles of business, new authority structures, and changed patterns of life and the everyday environment.

The colonial elite’s departure on the one hand and the adjustment to new political, social and economic realities by the inhabitants on the other made society subject to radical change, influencing the lives of most inhabitants of the Indonesian archipelago in a variety of ways. This process was highly unevenly distributed among the different regions, communities, and classes in the archipelago. A sensible way to investigate the different patterns of change in the various regions, communities, and classes in the archipelago is to concentrate on local and regional developments: on the ups and downs of specific enterprises, on changes in specific urban neighbourhoods, on the evolution of crime and order in a selected number of regions. The research will be carried out by an international team of historians, cultural historians, and social scientists, and will be institutionally chaperoned by LIPI (the Indonesian Institute of Sciences), the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD), and KITLV in Leiden, the University of Utrecht, and NIOD. As most research themes will zoom in on events at the regional level, cooperation is sought with local research groups at universities in Indonesia. Local academic knowledge, archives, newspapers, and oral sources, will constitute the base and marrow of the researches.

The research programme will start in the second half of 2002 and will run for four years. Its output will consist of at least four monographs, a research report, and several edited volumes. Apart from catering to the academic community, the programme provides a range of activities that appeal to a wider audience. Regular symposia, film programmes, a website, and participation in educational television broadcasts, will highlight specific themes from the researches and bring the results to a larger audience. We hope to inform you on the programme’s progress in future articles in this newsletter.

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The Leviathan’s Military Arm

The EUROSEAS panel on “Colonial Armies in Southeast Asia” – organized by Tobias Rettig and chaired by Ian Brown, both SOAS – tapped into the recently expanding interest in colonial institutions and in particular the history of colonial armies. Ten scholars from five countries presented papers that raised interesting and stimulating questions concerning the similarities and differences of the region’s variegated colonial armies.

That most dreaded of colonial fears was that the colonized people, and those in the armed forces in particular, would suddenly refuse to obey or even turn their weapons against their colonal masters. Both Richard Meisels and Tobias Rettig looked at such worst-case scenarios by analysing colonial mutinies. Thus Meisels’ excellent paper analysed the context and causes of the Philippine Scout Mutiny of 1904. Little-known, perhaps because it was resolved without bloodshed, whilst Rettig explored the drastic and far-reaching changes of military policies in French Indo-China resulting from the far more violent Yen Bay Mutiny of 1910. The main difference was that the former constituted a “loyal” mutiny aiming towards improving service conditions, whereas the latter, like the Singapore Mutiny of 1915, clearly intended to overthrow the existing political order by violent action.

To prevent such mutinies, colonial regimes devised structures and mechanisms of divide and rule aimed towards maintaining soldiers’ obedience and including purposeful under-representation of majority populations in the army. Michel Bodin traced the history of the use of Indo-Chinese ethnic minority soldiers in the French Expeditionsary Corps during the First Indo-China War, but also painstakingly tried to reconstruct their day-to-day lives. Vladimir Kolotov challenged the audience by arguing that the French had mastered an informal “collective security system” that used colonial ethnic minorities to perform in the subaltern’s anti-colonial activity. The former, like the Singapore Mutiny of 1915, clearly intended to overthrow the existing political order by violent action.

The two final papers dealt with the dispatch of nearly 50 000 and 15 000 Indo-Chinese soldier-workers recruited respectively to serve “their” mère-patrie in France during the First and Second World War. Marie-Blanc compared how this new type of colonial control over these predominantly Vietnamese soldiers and workers differed from the latter’s anti-colonial opposition during both wars. Kim-Lina Hack studied the literature for exaggerating the number of soldiers that had against their own will been conscripted for the Great War, by emphasising that many had in fact volunteered to escape their dire economic situation. This generated a passionate debate about the nature of push-and-pull factors and the difference between voluntary and forced service, but also revealed that French colonial authorities in the Indo-China region to send soldiers to Europe to sustain its war effort on the battlefield, as well as in industrial and agricultural production.

Editor’s note

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Editors’ note

Report from EUROSEAS

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