

Gert Oostindie, *Soldaat in Indonesië, 1945-1950. Getuigenissen van een oorlog aan de verkeerde kant van de geschiedenis* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2015, 320 pp., ISBN 978 90 35 1 4349 4).

Responses to Gert Oostindie's recently published *Soldaat in Indonesië* (the full title translates as 'Soldier in Indonesia, 1945-1950: Witnesses to a war on the wrong side of history') now in its third reprint, provides clear evidence that opinions on Holland's war in Indonesia of 1945-1949 – also known as *Politioenele Acties* (Police Actions) or the Indonesian War of Independence – are still fiercely contested in the Netherlands today. While this book treads carefully into territory long redacted by Dutch political, military, veteran and even academic writers, it is an indication that the demand for 'the truth' about the *vuile* (dirty) war is increasingly making itself heard. If nothing else, the book has succeeded in securely embedding the terms 'war' and 'war crimes' into all future Dutch public debate concerning events that took place in Indonesia between 1945 and 1950, as the Netherlands attempted to maintain control over their former colony.

The aim of this book is not to rehearse the events of this war, nor to deliver judgement. Specifically, in the context of the increasingly voluminous and vocal debate in the Netherlands, Oostindie's team of researchers has set out to address one initial, but surely foundational, question: what is the evidence that war crimes were committed by Dutch forces in Indonesia in the period 1945-1950? The answer is clear: even this analysis of a relatively limited selection of evidence – the 100,000 pages of text from 659 published accounts authored by 1362 (veteran) witnesses (less than 1% of Dutch military involved) – reveals that at least 800 acts that could constitute war crimes as defined under the Geneva Convention were committed by Dutch forces. That figure includes 97 cases of the shooting of prisoners and 33 cases of execution during interrogation.

At one level it is this very mathematical calculation that drives the point home. Generalised, it allows the author to authoritatively conclude that 'the total number of crimes (*misdriften*) is more likely to amount to tens of thousands than thousands' (176). As such, the book argues that war crimes constituted a 'structural' element in the conduct of the counter-guerrilla war, but not a 'systemic' one. The distinction is crucial, and is made repeatedly throughout the book. And this points to why, in the end, this account of the war represents unfinished business. While incidents of rape, execution of civilians and prisoners, burning of villages et cetera were widespread, as accounts presented in published testimony by this fraction of the combatants

attest, the book is concerned to emphasize such behaviour was not officially sanctioned. One might ask whether this provides an escape clause for the Dutch national conscience? Critical voices within the Netherlands say not. Were the book to be translated and read by an international public, the answer, also, would surely be a resounding ‘no’. Indeed there are enough hints in the copious and often lengthy extracts from veterans’ memoirs that characterise this book to conclude that even within this relatively small sample, many veterans were conscious of the fact that political and military leaders – as well as higher ranks in the field – condoned such acts in the pursuit of the desired outcome.

The war involved round 30,000 volunteers, 95,000 conscripts, and 1,000 professional soldiers recruited in the Netherlands who augmented an estimated 70,000 to 80,000 strong Royal Dutch-Indies Army (KNIL) force (of whom the majority were Indonesian) to face an unknown, largely guerrilla, Indonesian opposition. The Dutch side suffered an estimated 6,000 deaths as a direct result of war. Indonesian casualties are almost impossible to calculate, and the book does not address this question. According to Adrian Vickers (*A History of Modern Indonesia* (New York 2005) 100) 45,000-100,000 Indonesian military and 25,000-100,000 Indonesian civilians were killed, and seven million Indonesians displaced.

Apart from calculating ‘the nature and frequency of war crimes’, the aim of Oostindie’s book is specifically ‘to investigate the context in which these took place and how those involved considered these, at the time and afterwards’ (20). The structure of the book accentuates this concern for providing ‘balance’. Accordingly, the evidence of war crimes reported and discussed in the book’s three central chapters are bookended by three introductory and two concluding chapters that focus on the soldiers’ (self-reported) experience. These seek to understand the psychological environment in which such acts were committed. These chapters ask: Why did they enlist? How did they view ‘the enemy’? What were their conditions? How were they received on returning home? Seeking answers to these questions fulfills the intention of Oostindie’s team of researchers to recognize and respect the memory of the thousands of (mostly) Dutch men who answered the nation’s call. At the time the slogan, ‘Save our Indies’, screamed down from posters (a selection of which are included in this book) to challenge the patriotism of a generation only just freed from Nazi tutelage, during which 350,000 Dutch civilians had been exported to German labour camps. Meanwhile, in the colony, a further 100,000 Europeans had been interned in Japanese internment camps, while an estimated 50,000 men, women and children were being interned by Indonesian Republican forces as the fighting was taking place.

Although polls at the time indicated lukewarm support from the Dutch public for the ‘*politioenele acties*’ (a little over 50 percent), as international opinion turned against the Netherlands – and, as the subtitle suggests, history

changed sides – it evidently served the ‘greater national interest’ to quarantine the details of this dirty war. A later official enquiry into the events – the so-called ‘Excessennota’ of 1969 – allowed only reference to military ‘excesses’ and it was not till cases were brought by relatives of Indonesian victims that the Dutch government was prepared to make public admissions, with ground breaking apologies to the Indonesian nation in 2011 and 2013, for specific ‘incidents’. Nevertheless, it was not prepared to officially contribute to the research project conducted by KITLV and associated public research institutions that to date has culminated in the present volume.

Given that, in the past, Dutch historians have been, in the words of one member of a new generation of scholars, overly ‘careful’, this book is an important step forward in clearing the ground for a full public disclosure of this murky national history. It joins others, such as Van Liempt’s, *Nederland valt aan. Op weg naar oorlog met Indonesië 1947* (Amsterdam 2012) (The Netherlands attacks: On the way to war in Indonesia), which examines the official military and political record preliminary to the outbreak of the war, in what will inevitably become a virtual torrent as the historical dam walls are broken through.

Yet the limitations of *Soldaat in Indonesië* in this regard are important to point out. It remains limited by its exclusive reference to an internal Dutch debate – and the Dutch language. (Readers of English are recommended to consult Stef Scagliola, ‘Cleo’s “Unfinished Business”: Coming to Terms with Dutch War Crimes in Indonesia’s War of Independence’, *Journal of Genocide Research* 14:3-4 (2012) 419-439 for an English language outline of that debate.) It lacks any reference to a burgeoning international literature on (colonial) war crimes as discussed for instance in Bart Luttikhuis and Dirk Moses (eds.), *Colonial Counterinsurgency and Mass Violence* (London, New York 2014). Apart from one brief, and ineffectual Indonesian reference, the book eschews Indonesian sources. In view of the sensitivities still surrounding these events, the latter omission is perhaps understandable and as Oostindie rightly points out, Indonesian historians (and public) have also still to address their side of this violent history. For Indonesia, too, maintaining the existing national narrative remains a key obstacle to ‘full disclosure’. Be that as it may, however, one might question whether Indonesian accounts would in any event yet find acceptance in this scrutiny of a Dutch national conscience.

A broader question might be to question the limits of ‘witness histories’ – in this case further limited to those that have been published – in the writing of contested histories. While clearly (Dutch) veterans’ accounts will enable the historian to fill in what official documents elide, and will be increasingly convincing in proportion to their representativeness, ultimately more robust analysis of official records, and reference to international research frameworks applied to similar episodes – as well as to Indonesian perspectives – will be essential.

This contribution to a burgeoning national debate, then, is to be welcomed in setting a benchmark from which others can take – and are already taking – the debate further. As the foreword admits, it represents only part of a wider investigation that the KITLV team is undertaking, and even now it is evident that the debate – and the revelations – have already rushed ahead in the wider national discourse. It is, still, a very careful introduction to a history of the Indonesian War of Independence. And before that can be adequately written, the results of the Dutch research need to be opened up to international scrutiny (which effectively means translation into English) and the involvement of Indonesian historians.

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