

# Reconsidering Revolutionary ‘Heroes’ and Histories of Violence in Indonesia

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How can Indonesians benefit from a publication about Dutch violence? Can a report about Dutch ‘extreme violence’ during the Indonesian Revolution ignite further conversations amongst Indonesians about their own historiography? This forum contribution tries to link the publication of *Beyond the Pale* with the future of writing histories of violence in Indonesia. Inheriting the state- and military-centric historiography since the New Order era (1966-1998), Indonesians are struggling to move away from a nationalistic historiography that tends to either silence violent histories, or to justify them under the banner of safeguarding the nation’s unity. The publication of *Beyond the Pale* adds to the growing effort by Indonesian historians and others to recognise violence as part of Indonesian history. At the same time, the publication also leaves tasks that scholars can continue in the future.

Hoe kunnen Indonesiërs baat hebben bij een publicatie over Nederlands geweld? Kan een onderzoeksrapport over Nederlands ‘extreem geweld’ tijdens de Indonesische Revolutie de debatten in Indonesië over hun eigen geschiedschrijving verder aanwakkeren? Deze forumbijdrage brengt een analyse van de ODGOI-publicatie *Over de grens* in verband met deze vragen over de toekomstige geschiedschrijving over geweld in Indonesië. Gezien de erfenis van een door de staat en het leger gedomineerde Indonesische geschiedschrijving sinds het tijdperk van de Nieuwe Orde (1966-1998) worstelen Indonesiërs met het loskomen van een nationalistische historiografie waarin de neiging zichtbaar is om het eigen gewelddadige verleden ofwel te verzwijgen of om het te rechtvaardigen vanuit het idee dat de nationale eenheid zo wordt gevrijwaard. De publicatie van *Over de*

*grens* sluit dan ook aan bij de toenemende inspanningen van Indonesische historici en anderen om het gebruik van geweld als onderdeel van de Indonesische geschiedenis te erkennen. Tegelijkertijd laat deze studie ook vele onderzoeksthema's open die in de toekomst verder dienen te worden verkend.

After commencing the project 'Independence, Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia, 1945-1950' (ODGOI) in 2017, the project team published their findings in February 2022. Thirteen different books and volumes were released, corresponding with the project's subthemes. This essay focuses on one of those publications entitled *Beyond the Pale: Dutch Extreme Violence in the Indonesian War of Independence, 1945-1949*, which serves as a kind of general report, containing summaries of other subthemes.<sup>1</sup> Since the beginning, the project has generated substantial criticism, particularly on the relevance and voices of Indonesians in this Dutch government-funded project.<sup>2</sup> One of the three volume editors, Gert Oostindie, touches upon this issue in the first chapter of the book, emphasising the independency of the ODGOI project team and the Indonesian researchers in the 'Regional Studies' subproject.<sup>3</sup> To elaborate this point further, I will reflect on how a publication on Dutch violence can be utilised to think critically about Indonesian historiography, particularly its accounts of the history of violence. Ever since the New Order regime (1966-1998), Indonesian historiography has been controlled and dominated by the state and the military, which restrained any discussions on violent histories, except for those that can benefit the regime.<sup>4</sup> Since the early 2000s, Indonesian historiography has undergone massive changes, creating spaces for local histories and voices of minority groups.<sup>5</sup> Publications such as *Beyond the Pale* can be useful in amplifying the democratic process of history writing in Indonesia.

1 Parts of this contribution are an adaptation of Grace T. Leksana, 'Book discussion *Merdeka*', Book presentation for the English translation of Henk Schulte Nordholt and Harry Poeze, *Merdeka* (Amsterdam University Press 2024) at KITLV Leiden, 3 December 2024.

2 See Anne-Lot Hoek's essay in this forum: Anne-Lot Hoek, 'Power and the Production of History: Reflections on the Process and Outcomes of the ODGOI Project', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 140:2 (2025). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.19566>.

3 Gert Oostindie, Ben Schoenmaker and Frank van Vree (eds.), *Beyond the Pale: Dutch Extreme*

*Violence in the Indonesian War of Independence, 1945-1949* (Amsterdam University Press 2022) 20-21.

4 Katharine McGregor, *History in Uniform: Military Ideology and The Construction of Indonesia's Past* (Asian Studies Association of Australia/KITLV Press 2007).

5 Bambang Purwanto and Asvi Warman Adam, *Menggugat Historiografi Indonesia* (Ombak 2005); Henk Schulte Nordholt, Bambang Purwanto and Ratna Saptari, 'Memikir Ulang Historiografi Indonesia' in: Idem (eds.), *Perspektif Baru Penulisan Sejarah Indonesia* (KITLV-Jakarta/Yayasan Obor Indonesia 2008) 1-31.

Approximately in the same year, two other books about the Indonesian Revolution were launched as well: the Dutch-language edition of Henk Schulte Nordholt and Harry Poeze's *Merdeka. De strijd om de Indonesische onafhankelijkheid en de ongewisse opkomst van de Republiek 1945-1950* (*Merdeka: The Struggle for Indonesian Independence and the Republic's Precarious Rise, 1945-1950*) and David Van Reybrouck's *Revolusi. Indonesië en het ontstaan van de moderne wereld* (*Revolusi: Indonesia and the Birth of the Modern World*).<sup>6</sup> *Beyond the Pale* and these books present a similar depiction of the Revolution: while it was indeed a monumental postcolonial turning point, it was a bloody and horrific moment as well. Take for example this excerpt from Schulte Nordholt and Poeze's *Merdeka*, where they quote Major Isman, former commander in chief of the Indonesian Student's Army, at the moment when his guerilla troops welcomed him in Malang in 1950:

'Please don't praise us as heroes,' he said. 'We are not heroes, we were criminals, we killed [our own] people, we raided and burned their houses. We are still young, but our hands are stained with blood.'<sup>7</sup>

This excerpt, together with *Beyond the Pale* and Reybrouck's *Revolusi*, strengthened my view, as an Indonesian historian, that the image of a strong new state emerging from colonialism in 1945 in the hands of Sukarno and Hatta is a construct the modern Indonesian state wants its people to believe. When Indonesia declared its independence, it had no party cadre, hardly any administrative foundation or an army.<sup>8</sup> The state emerged not from the declaration of independence, but from contestations of different powers and voices over what we tend to simplify as 'the people'. Moreover, even though the Indonesian Revolution produced its own winners and losers, I would argue that the idea that the Revolution created 'heroes' is actually a myth. This myth diverts us from the fact that the Revolution first and foremost generated victims.

6 The English translation of both books were published in 2024. See Harry Poeze and Henk Schulte Nordholt, *Merdeka: The Struggle for Indonesian Independence and the Republic's Precarious Rise, 1945-1950* (Amsterdam University Press 2024). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048560844>; David Van Reybrouck, *Revolusi: Indonesia and the Birth of the Modern World* (The Bodley Head 2024).

7 Poeze and Schulte Nordholt, *Merdeka*, 382. This statement was witnessed by Romo Mangunwijaya, the famous Catholic priest who became a social activist in the 1980s. See Darwis Khudori, 'The Altruism of Romo Mangun: The Seed, the Growth, the Fruit', *Indonesia and the Malay World* 29:85 (2001) 198-214. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639810120102067>.

8 Poeze and Schulte Nordholt, *Merdeka*, 383.



**Figure 1.** The Peniwen memorial complex, Malang, East Java. © CinecronicFilm.

I was triggered to further develop this argument when I met Rida in Peniwen village in Malang on East Java during a research project with Universitas Negeri Malang in 2023. She told a story about her uncle who was shot dead by Dutch troops in early 1949: 'I think those who were commemorated in Peniwen were not heroes. They are victims'.<sup>9</sup> It takes a woman to open our eyes as to how the idea of heroes is constructed within Indonesian nationalist discourse, which distances Indonesians from the fact that the Revolution is also another violent episode in national history. Peniwen witnessed gruesome Dutch violence on 19 and 20 February 1949. Around 25 soldiers, mostly Moluccan soldiers of the KNIL (Koninklijk Nederlandsch Indisch Leger / Royal Netherlands Indies Army), raided a health clinic and massacred ten people for allegedly hiding Republican soldiers. The troops patrolled and raided villagers' houses, which resulted in the killings of a number of residents, such as Rida's uncle, and in acts of sexual violence. This event is infamously known as the Peniwen Affair, which is still commemorated today. In 1983 a monument was built and 19 February, the date of the massacre, is considered a memorial day in the village (Figure 1). These remembrances commemorate the ten victims of the health clinic massacre as 'heroes', but remain silent on the experiences of sexual violence.

For Indonesians, the War of Independence between 1945 and 1949 is a sacred watershed. Indonesia was the first country to declare its independence after World War II.<sup>10</sup> It was a crucial moment to defend Indonesian sovereignty and to convey a message to the West that the formerly colonised countries were entitled to be independent. 17 August 1945 is commemorated as Day of Independence with massive celebrations at all levels; from the national ceremony at the presidential palace to parades and traditional games competitions in villages and kampongs. Independence Day ceremonies are filled with nationalistic tributes to Indonesia's war heroes and their willingness to sacrifice their lives for the country.

This sacralised revolutionary discourse also creates a highly uncritical understanding of the War of Independence. It obscures the fact that, although the war was fought for a noble cause, it was also an act of mass violence in which both Dutch and Indonesians participated. There were more than 6,000 deaths recorded on the Dutch side and approximately 100,000 Indonesian soldiers and civilians were killed. Furthermore, the nationalistic stance generates a rigid binary portrayal of the war as a conflict between Dutch and Indonesians. As a result, other phenomena that do not fit into that portrayal are removed to the periphery of Indonesian historiography, as is the case with the Moluccans who joined the KNIL or the experiences of women during the war, as shown in the case of Peniwen (Figure 2).

9 Gedhe Ashari (director) and Nizam Alfahmi (producer), *Eling-Eling Peniwen* (CinecronicFilm 2023).

10 Van Reybrouck, *Revolusi*.



**Figure 2.** The 17 August (Day of Independence) commemoration at the Peniwen memorial complex in 2023. © CinecronicFilm.

Given this background, ODGOR's summary volume *Beyond the Pale* presents a timely and significant contribution for Indonesians to rethink the meaning of the Revolution beyond its heroic construction. In general, the ODGOR project managed to thoroughly examine Dutch 'extreme violence' and the factors that facilitated it during the war. The book employs 'extreme violence' as an overarching term covering both the use of violence in irregular combat situations and in regular forms, such as in the use of heavy weaponry. It concludes by giving several explanations for the Dutch use of 'extreme violence': an unrealistic and risky military strategy with inadequate resources based on an underestimation of the opponent, policies without preventive effect which led to opportunities for more violence, the failure of judicial authorities to punish violent acts, which had the effect of silencing and legitimising it, and the quality and culture of the Dutch armed forces, for example the lack of leadership, experience and education of its personnel. For some researchers, for instance Remco Raben and Peter Romijn, 'extreme violence' remained too vague a term, which shows the diverse perspectives within the project.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from the insights that *Beyond the Pale* can generate for Indonesian historians, I would like to raise a few points about this volume. The first is about the human dimension that could have been given more space, so that the War of Independence was not simply considered as a gruesome act of violence that remains in the past, but an event that shaped the present and future of both Indonesia and the Netherlands. In *Beyond the Pale*, this human dimension is the subject of the 'Intermezzo' by Eveline Buchheim, Fridus Steijlen and Stephanie Welvaart, entitled 'The Human Dimension: The Search for Stories about the Indonesian War of Independence'. This section actually prevents the whole book from being merely a published research report funded by the Dutch government, and thus it would have deserved a more central position.<sup>12</sup>

The section presents a summary of the 'Witnesses and Contemporaries' subproject of ODGOR, which gave space to personal stories, actively inviting people in the Netherlands and Indonesia to share their experiences and memories of the War of Independence. Buchheim, Steijlen and Welvaart convincingly argue that these personal stories 'offer an opportunity to get closer to the experiences of the people who helped to shape history, and who

11 Remco Raben and Peter Romijn, 'Silence, Information and Deception in the Indonesian War of Independence', in: Oostindie, Schoenmaker and Van Vree, *Beyond the Pale*, 312.

12 Eveline Buchheim, Fridus Steijlen and Stephanie Welvaart, 'Intermezzo: The Human Dimension.

The Search for Stories about the Indonesian War of Independence', in: Oostindie, Schoenmaker and Van Vree, *Beyond the Pale*, 117-138.

lived through and experienced it as eyewitnesses in different ways, and with different nuances and different accents, which have also changed in the course of time' (p. 120). Personal stories can also serve as a critical medium against which the official sources can be read. This subproject actually did more than just give 'nuance' to the already complex research. The personal narratives reveal emotions, trauma, hesitations, memories and also hope for the future. They reflect the intertwined and conflicting individual experiences with the broader 'norms, beliefs, values of a country, organization or community' (p. 119). And they create room for interactions between Indonesian and Dutch experiences as well.

Another point is about the participation of Indonesian scholars. Since the start of this project, the Indonesian researchers who were part of the 'Regional Studies' subproject clearly stated that they did not want to be guided solely by questions originating from the Dutch perspective.<sup>13</sup> As a consequence, the ODGOI project was broadened by the collaboration of Indonesian researchers. The resulting publication series incorporates more nuanced Indonesian experiences of the war that are not confined to the sacralised Indonesian revolutionary discourse. Roel Frakking and Martijn Eickhoff's chapter 'Revolutionary Worlds' in *Beyond the Pale* and the volume of the same name edited by Bambang Purwanto et al. look into the regional dynamics of the Revolution, covering different areas on Java, Bali and Sumatra.<sup>14</sup> The latter book shows that although Indonesian independence was proclaimed, not everyone agreed on the way forward. The Revolution was never a unitary process. On the contrary, it was complex and multilayered, involving different groups and even individuals with their own agendas and rivalries, and with varying levels of popular support. Indonesian historians also hope that, in the future, these findings will be followed by further discussions about the methodology on researching war, revolution or other similar events, beyond the state-centric and Javanese-centric perspective.

### The future of historiographies of violence

The significance of *Beyond the Pale* does not end with its release. Indonesian historian Hilmar Farid, who wrote a reply to the project in the epilogue of the work, emphasises the need to situate the Dutch use of violence during

13 Oostindie, Schoenmaker and Van Vree, *Beyond the Pale*, 20-21.

14 Roel Frakking and Martijn Eickhoff, 'Revolutionary Worlds: Legitimacy, Violence and Loyalty during the Indonesian War of Independence', in: Oostindie, Schoenmaker and Van Vree, *Beyond*

*the Pale*, 177-202; Bambang Purwanto et al., (eds.), *Revolutionary Worlds: Local Perspectives and Dynamics during the Indonesian Independence War, 1945-1949* (Amsterdam University Press 2023). The Indonesian translation was published in 2023.

the Revolution in the larger context of Dutch colonialism: 'the violence did not start in August 1945' (p. 481). Although he notes the lack of Indonesian sources used, Farid sees the project as a successful attempt to 'keep the historical justice alive' (p. 485) by unraveling the factors, dynamics and effects of Dutch violence. Farid's response can be a start to question whether ODGOI's findings could also influence the study of other elements of Dutch colonial history, for example by stretching the term of extreme violence to the context of the *cultuurstelsel* (cultivation system) or other related colonial policies.

Next to Farid, Indonesian historian Sri Margana of the Universitas Gajah Mada also draws attention to the historical and political consequences for Indonesia that have yet to be faced.<sup>15</sup> He challenges Indonesian historians to uncover the violence during the Revolution perpetrated by Indonesians against other Indonesian civilians, and therefore to move away from the heroic interpretation of the Revolution. Meanwhile, Margana also speculates about the political consequences if the Netherlands had recognised the Indonesian independence on 17 August 1945. Would the violence perpetrated by Indonesians then have been interpreted as the responsibility of the Indonesian military and government, just as it is in the Dutch case? He also asks if the Indonesian state would be prepared to apologise for acts of violence against the Dutch. Margana further poses the question to what extent the Indonesian government would support academic efforts to unravel state violence against civilians *beyond* the War of Independence (Figure 3).

In short, adding to existing scholarly work on histories of violence in Indonesia, *Beyond the Pale* presents insights into how violence can be approached and studied in Indonesia, rather than denying or silencing it. Unfortunately, the publication of the ODGOI research findings were met with very little public response in Indonesia. In my opinion, this is not the consequence of a lack of promotion, but of a difficulty to move away from a well-established narrative of justified violence in Indonesian society – violence is acceptable as long as it serves a bigger purpose to safeguard the nation or to maintain peace and unity. The framing of violence during the Revolution in nationalist narratives has created this logic of justified violence. The same logic has legitimised the use of violence against communists in 1965-1966,<sup>16</sup> the

15 Sri Margana, 'Konsekuensi Dari Kesimpulan Tim Peneliti Belanda', *Historia.id*, 18 February 2022, <https://historia.id/militer/articles/konsekuensi-dari-kesimpulan-tim-peneliti-belanda-vxg3l>.

16 The anti-communist operation resulted in the death of more than 500,000 Indonesians who were accused of being members of the Indonesian Communist Party and activists of leftist organisations. See Nugroho Notosusanto and Ismail Saleh, *The Coup Attempt of the*

*September 30 Movement in Indonesia* (PT. Pembimbing Masa 1968). These killings were justified by stating that the nation should be safeguarded against the treacherous Communist Party. This logic is still prevalent in Indonesian society today. See Grace T. Leksana, *Memory Culture of the Anti-Leftist Violence in Indonesia: Embedded Remembering* (Amsterdam University Press 2023). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463723565>.



Figure 3. The sculpture and the inscribed text of the Peniwen monument, Malang, Java. © CinecronicFilm.

military invasion to Timor Leste (1975-1999), the violent military operation in Aceh (1990-1998) and even the continuing violence in Papua.

To conclude, the ongoing challenge for Indonesian historians now is to continue moving beyond the nationalist framework and to break with the cycle of justified violence and the heroic interpretations of violence. This does not imply that nationalism has not been important to the formation of an independent Indonesia, nor does it mean that we should judge the story of Indonesian independence as one of sugar-coated wrongdoings. Yet, we also need to realise that violence is an element that has shaped Indonesian national identity. Many scholars and activists, Indonesians and beyond, have recognised this since the fall of the authoritarian Suharto regime.<sup>17</sup> This will be even more important in this time of growing rightist power, whether in Indonesia or worldwide, as the heavily contested field of history is used by disputing powers to make claims and to erase memories.

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17 See, for example, Purwanto and Adam, *Menggugat Historiografi Indonesia*; Schulte Nordholt, Purwanto and Saptari, *Perspektif Baru*.