Decolonial Dialogue and the Intricacies of Revolutionary Violence

FARABI FAKIH

The studies by Rémy Limpach and Azarja Harmanny, researched within the ODGOI project, strengthen the project's general conclusion that the Dutch violence during the Indonesian Revolution was systemic and structural. While focusing on the practices of violence and especially the use of intelligence and of heavy weapons, the authors both stress the continuations of how violence was executed during the colonial period, the Second World War and the War of Independence. This opens up the question for a decolonial dialogue between Dutch and Indonesian historians and societies, and should be seen as an important step for continuing conversation. In this essay both books are discussed, especially from the perspective of the possibilities and complexities of a decolonial dialogue between the Netherlands and Indonesia.

De studies van Rémy Limpach en Azarja Harmanny, die binnen het ODGOI onderzoeksproject tot stand zijn gekomen, versterken de algemene conclusie van het project dat het Nederlandse geweld tijdens de Indonesische Revolutie systematisch en structureel van aard was. Beide boeken leggen de praktijken van Nederlandse geweldsuitoefening tijdens de Onafhankelijksheidsoorlog bloot. De auteurs tonen aan dat er inzake de werking van de inlichtingendiensten en het gebruik van zware wapens een duidelijke continuïteit te zien is tussen de manieren waarop geweld werd gebruikt tijdens de koloniale periode, de Tweede Wereldoorlog en de Onafhankelijkheidsoorlog. Deze conclusie roept de vraag op naar een dekoloniale dialoog tussen Nederlandse en Indonesische historici en samenlevingen, en vormt dan ook een belangrijke stap in het voortzetten van deze

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gedachtenuitwisseling. In dit essay worden beide studies besproken, met name vanuit het perspectief van de mogelijkheden en complexiteiten van een dekoloniale dialoog tussen Nederland en Indonesië.

The publication of a series of studies within the ODGOI project is a momentous event in the historical relationship between Indonesia and the Netherlands, creating on the one hand possibilities for real dialogue, and perhaps even the start of an in-depth decolonial understanding. Many critics, including a number of Indonesians, have alluded to such strategic possibilities. On the other hand, this project is part of a longer Dutch introspective dialogue in an effort to ensure the primacy of their liberal values: almost taking the role of confession as a means to eliminate sin – a form of whitewashing. It is important to read the project publications both for their historical accuracies and contributions, but also within the context of the Dutch-Indonesian dialogue. The question that comes to mind here is: to what extent do the books contribute to advancing and nuancing historical memory? Also, what role can these books play in a truly decolonial Dutch-Indonesian dialogue about shared colonial histories? It is in the service of this continuing dialogue that these books can transcend the criticism of their function as whitewashing. Despite being academic historical works based on primary sources, they operate within a wider project of post-colonial or decolonial dialogue. These books, and others, directly resulted in an apology by the Dutch State to the Indonesian people for the crimes of the Dutch army during the Indonesian revolutionary War of Independence (1945-1949). It is within this broader context that we begin to read the two books at the centre of the discussion in this essay.

The books examined here are part of the research-based historical foundation for the ODGOI project's overall conclusion that Dutch military violence in the Indonesian National Revolution was structural and systemic. The first is Rémy Limpach's *Stumbling in the Dark: The Battle for Intelligence in the Indonesian War of Independence, 1945-1949* (*Tasten in het duister. Inlichtingenstrijd tijdens de Indonesische Onafhankelijkheidsoorlog, 1945-1949*), in which he discusses the military and civilian intelligence aspects of the Dutch war machine and how the use of violence was systemically and historically part of colonial intelligence. The second is Azarja Harmanny's *Grof geschut. Artillerie en luchtstrijdkrachten in de Indonesische Onafhankelijkheidsoorlog, 1945-1949* (Iron Fist: Artillery and Air Power in the Indonesian War of Independence, 1945-1949), which discusses the war machinery deployed by the Dutch and the extent to which these technologies produced 'technical violence'. Harmanny's book is based on his PhD dissertation, defended at Utrecht University.[1] Both

1 Rémy Limpach, *Stumbling in the Dark: The Battle for Intelligence in the Indonesian War of Independence, 1945-1949* (*Tasten in het duister. Inlichtingenstrijd tijdens de Indonesische Onafhankelijkheidsoorlog, 1945-1949*) (Amsterdam University Press 2022); Azarja Harmanny, *Grof*

Limpach and Harmanny were (and are) employed at the Netherlands Institute for Military History (NIMH), the historical institute of the Dutch Ministry of Defence. NIMH historians have stressed that despite their relations to the Dutch military, they hold a position of scientific autonomy, which is believable considering Limpach's critical works on Dutch military history.

The two publications under discussion here are not only part of the larger research project ODGOI that produced a series of significant publications on the Dutch military occupation of Indonesia after 1945, but are also part of a longer discussion on Dutch scholarship of colonial violence in Indonesia. Limpach's first book, *De brandende kampongs van Generaal Spoor* (General Spoor's Burning Villages), was well received in Indonesia and has been translated into Indonesian.[2] The book was based on his PhD dissertation at the University of Bern, Switzerland, defended in 2015 and published in 2016, before the start of the ODGOI project. The book can thus be conceived of as a major precursor to the ODGOI research – in particular its meticulous and detailed gathering of sources to conclusively determine the structural and systemic aspects of Dutch military violence.

Within the ODGOI project we can discern two categories of research. The first, of which the books by Limpach and Harmanny are part, focuses on the Dutch side of the military violence. These books include Remco Raben and Peter Romijn's *Tales of Violence* (*Talen van geweld*), which analyses how the construction of Dutch military and political discourse and its impact on propaganda and the press shielded the Dutch public from fully understanding the extent of violence perpetrated by their military in the name of the Dutch nation. Maarten van der Bent edited the report of the Van Rij en Stam committee including the original Dutch parliamentary inquiries and the resulting eight reports on Dutch military violence that were suppressed until the *Excessennota* debates of 1969. Lastly, Meindert van der Kaaij's *Een kwaad geweten* (An Evil Conscience) discusses the memories and historiography of Dutch violence within Dutch society after the 1949 transfer of sovereignty to Indonesia until the present. He demonstrates how politicians, journalists, historians and teachers engaged with the subject and how particular groups such as Dutch veterans, Moluccans and Indo-Europeans dealt with the discourse about and the knowledge of violence. These books thus are concerned primarily with the conditions that enabled violence and the reactions in Dutch society.[3]

geschut. Artillerie en luchtstrijdkrachten in de Indonesische Onafhankelijkheidsoorlog, 1945-1949 (Iron Fist: Artillery and Air Power in the Indonesian War of Independence, 1945-1949) (Amsterdam University Press 2022).

2 Rémy Limpach, *De brandende kampongs van Generaal Spoor* (Boom 2016).

3 Maarten van der Bent (ed.), *Van Rij en Stam. Rapporten van de Commissie van onderzoek naar beweerde excessen gepleegd door Nederlandse militairen in Indonesië, 1949-1954* (Amsterdam University Press 2022); Remco Raben and Peter Romijn, *Talen van geweld. Stilte, informatie en misleiding in de Indonesische*

The other category of ODGOI publications is concerned with the Indonesian side of the violence. Books in this class include Esther Captain and Onno Sinke's *Resonance of Violence* (*Het geluid van geweld*), which discusses the violence perpetrated by Indonesian paramilitary groups and *pemuda* or youths.[4] The book examines the so-called Bersiap-period (Indonesian for 'get ready!') in the aftermath of the Japanese capitulation, which unleashed what Indonesian historians have called a 'social revolution' and resulted in the use of violence against pro-colonial elements of society: Indonesian nobles and bureaucrats, minorities such as Chinese and Indian-Indonesians and, in particular, Europeans and Indo-Europeans. Bonnie Triyana, an Indonesian public intellectual and curator of the 2022 *Revolusi* exhibition at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, caused controversy by criticising the museum's use of the term bersiap, which is non-existent in Indonesian historiography on the Revolution. He called the term racist because it simplified the conflict within a racial category between Indonesians and the Dutch, while potentially ignoring the complexity of the violence used.[5] Captain and Sinke's book similarly debunks the general Dutch understanding of the Bersiap-period and covers a broad range of violent acts during the first months of the Revolution.[6]

Indonesian historians were involved in the ODGOI research as well. Their collaboration was meant to nuance the fact that the project would primarily focus on Dutch culpability in systemic violence, leaving questions open about violence on the Indonesian side. The Indonesian historians involved in the project, including myself, were financed by the Dutch government but worked at the History Department of Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta (Java). The results of this research were published in *Revolutionary Worlds*, a volume edited by Bambang Purwanto et al. that was also translated into Indonesian.[7] While primarily focusing on the study of violence, the Indonesian researchers expanded the scope of their research to examine the role of women, *pemuda* and minorities in the revolutionary war. Unlike the Dutch historians, who had been mandated to address the issue of

onafhankelijkheidsoorlog, 1945-1949 (Amsterdam University Press 2023); Meindert van der Kaaij, *Een kwaad geweten. De worsteling met de Indonesische onafhankelijkheidsoorlog vanaf 1950* (Amsterdam University Press 2022).

4 Esther Captain and Otto Sinke, *Het geluid van geweld. Bersiap en de dynamiek van geweld tijdens de eerste fase van de Indonesische revolutie, 1945-1946* (Amsterdam University Press 2022).

5 Bonnie Triyana, 'Schrap de term "Bersiap" want die is racistisch', NRC 10 January 2022, https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/01/10/schrap-term-bersiap-voor-periodisering-want-die-is-racistisch-a4077367.

6 See the essays in this forum by Susie Protschky and Pepijn Brandon, 'On "extreme violence" and "impunity"'. DOI: https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.19567; and by Katharine McGregor, 'Silences and Memories of the Indonesian Revolution and Dutch Colonialism'. DOI: https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.19569.

7 Bambang Purwanto et al. (eds.), *Revolutionary Worlds: Local Perspectives and Dynamics during the Indonesian Independence War, 1945-1949* (Amsterdam University Press 2023).

structural and systemic violence, the Indonesian team had the autonomy to determine its own research goals.

While the findings on Dutch violence are extremely interesting for Indonesian historians, they are not surprised at the conclusion that the Dutch deployed systemic and structural violence; this was never in doubt in Indonesian historiography. Indonesian historiography has typically portrayed the Revolution as the mythical source narrative for the Indonesian nation, positioning Indonesian youth and the legitimacy of the Republican army within the framework of nationalist ideology. Instead of the Dutch fixation on what went wrong and who was to blame, Indonesian historiography focuses on the making of heroes and of a romantic narrative of an emergent nation-state.[8]

This outline of the various positions within the ODGOI project is important for understanding the two books discussed here. Because the project involved historians from both the Netherlands and Indonesia, and because – especially during the early part of the research – the project garnered public attention in both countries, Limpach's and Harmanny's books represent the potential for a more nuanced dialogue between the former coloniser and the colonised, and offer food for thought of what that dialogue could mean for a decolonial historiography in both nations.

Technicalities of violence

Limpach's and Harmanny's findings are forceful and strong: each found evidence of structural and systemic violence deployed by the Dutch armed forces in their efforts to reconquer Indonesia. Importantly, these findings do not refer to a few bad apples, or a lack of discipline or enforcement within the chain of command ('*excesses*', to use the nomenclature of the last Dutch government investigation in 1969). Instead, 'extreme violence' was integral to both the production of intelligence and the use of weapons technology. Violence was an inextricable part of the Dutch intelligence service. It was also important for the choice of weapons systems deployed at the front. Limpach's first book had already dispelled the notion that Dutch violence might have been the result of a few bad apples. His follow-up book and Harmanny's study therefore successfully deepen the evidence for and understanding of the structural nature of Dutch violence.

Limpach's discussion on Dutch intelligence services is nuanced and based on a rich selection of primary sources, including soldiers' ego documents, government sources, newspapers and interviews. He paints a picture of amateurish Dutch intelligence operations compared to a more

8 See the essay by Grace Leksana in this forum: 'Reconsidering Revolutionary "Heroes" and Histories of Violence in Indonesia'. DOI: https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.19565.

effective Indonesian intelligence network whose sophistication surprised the Dutch army. Limpach argues that the Dutch paternalistic colonial ideology produced 'politicised intelligence' refracted through colonial racism and bias (p. 19, 48). His examination of corporate intelligence in the plantation and oil sectors working together with state intelligence is very interesting. According to Limpach, due to the Dutch neutrality during the First World War, the Dutch intelligence services in the East Indies failed to be properly professionalised, which led to colonial intelligence breakdowns, such as the failure to prevent the Communist uprisings of 1926 and 1927 in Java and Sumatra and the ineffectual response to Japanese intelligence prior to the Second World War. After the war, Dutch intelligence got off to a 'false start' under the tutelage of British forces. Dutch intelligence services were plagued with information leaks, they had problems with receiving valid information, and experienced language and cultural barriers separating officers and their mostly Indonesian informants.

Dutch readers will perhaps find Chapter 6 the most powerful, due to how Limpach details the use of extreme violence by Dutch intelligence services and special troops: forms of torture included using electricity, water, lit cigarettes and blunt or sharp objects. Sometimes prisoners died during their interrogation. Mock executions were used to coerce information or confessions. Sexual violence was also recorded. Information gathered through torture was also often unreliable. Impunity for military personnel who used torture, together with vague army regulations, played an important part in explaining the standard use of torture. Personal vendettas also motivated some acts of torture. Aside from the superficial education, training and selection of personnel, Limpach notes that the experiences of the colonial army and intelligence personnel were important for bringing with them colonial knowledge, bias and attitudes (p. 313-314). Outside interrogation rooms, collective punishments such as mass arrests, violent raids, 'sweeps' and murders, also executed by Dutch hit squads, were forms of violence that had their origins in the colonial period. The influence of colonial forms and norms of violence was part of the reason for the Dutch failure to reconquer Indonesia, particularly the underestimation of the Indonesian population and the failure to win their 'hearts and minds'.

Harmanny's book then focuses on technical violence and tries to ascertain whether the choice to deploy particular weapons and weapons systems translated into greater violence. This line of questioning had already begun in Jacques van Doorn and Willem Hendrix's *Ontsporing van geweld* (Derailment of Violence), which was the first study in 1970 to use the term technical violence (*technisch geweld*) in the context of this war. The book also engages with a wider discussion about the history of mechanisation in war. The assumption was that hand-held weapons such as guns and knives had a greater personal impact on soldiers and thus reduced their propensity for use, while impersonal, large-scale weapons such as tanks or heavy artillery shield

the operator from the personal result of their deployment were thus 'morally' easier (p. 36-37) because of it is 'impersonal' and 'dehumanizes' the victim (p. 29, 297). This line of thinking played a role in the categorisation of much of the violence conducted by the Dutch army as 'mere' excesses – an unintended consequence of the impersonal nature of technology due to the deployment of large-scale weapons systems.

Harmanny uses several case studies to analyse the effect of different heavy weapons systems on violence – in particular the use of artillery and air power – in combination with other on-the-ground deployments. He starts off with what is arguably one of the most intense and violent battles during the revolutionary period, the Battle of Surabaya in November 1945, in which British and British Indian troops fought revolutionary Indonesian youth using a modern arsenal, including air defences. Harmanny also examines three battles in Central Java: a Dutch naval bombardment of the port city of Semarang in 1946, an artillery battle in Karanganyar in 1947, and an airborne operation at Gunung Kidul in 1949. The battle in Semarang took place during a period of re-establishment of Dutch control in parts of Java, while the other two battles were in response to the guerilla warfare conducted by Indonesians. The use of modern weapons against a technologically inferior population was something that had occurred much earlier in Indonesia, since at least the last imperial expansion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The heavy mechanical nature of warfare during the First and Second World Wars meant that ethical issues regarding technologies of warfare were understood by the Dutch. The Second World War was also the frame of reference that the Dutch army brought with it to Indonesia at that time. Thus, both the colonial and Second World War experiences coloured the decision-making process.

While the use of heavy weapons is often seen as creating conditions for causing indiscriminate victims ('collateral damage'), Harmanny's three case studies provide a more complicated picture. In the battle in Karanganyar, the use of heavy weapons did result in a large number of casualties, but less so in the other two cases, where the deployment of heavy artillery was part of a larger operation which resulted in the emptying of villages and the creation of 'safe' or controlled areas which reduced civilian casualties. Heavy artillery was thus deployed to clear an area, spread fear and demoralise the enemy. The case of Gunung Kidul in 1949 showed the limits of heavy artillery and large-scale operations compared to smaller units using lighter forms of artillery. Heavy air and artillery attacks were prone to scattering Indonesian forces, which were then harder for Dutch forces to eliminate. Harmanny concludes there is no evidence that the use of heavy weapons resulted in higher casualties and significant effect on the enemy, which instead depended on the situation on the ground and the reactions of the Indonesian army and population (p. 249-251).

In both Limpach's and Harmanny's books, the colonial past – particularly the gruesome wars during the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries – guides the Dutch decision-making during the Revolutionary War. The use of intelligence, heavy artillery and airpower was also influenced by the experiences of the Second World War. The Indonesian War of Independence can thus be seen as part of the long Second World War, as Limpach suggests (p. 314-315). Both books touch on the Indonesian side of the conflict only briefly. Limpach provides a cursory overview of the emergence, structure and operations of Indonesian intelligence. Chapter seven is incredibly interesting for Indonesians, although limited in scope. Harmanny's findings in this respect are more straightforward: Indonesia lacked artillery and airpower during the Revolution. Although the Dutch used a 'light' heavy artillery system compared to the one deployed by the Allies during the Second World War, it was significantly superior to the weapons available to Indonesian forces (p. 306-307).

In both cases, the question of intentions and ethics emerges. Focusing on the technicalities and instrumentalities of war can deflect attention away from their intent. That the logic of instrumental violence is determined by the technology and not the human intent of the operator is redolent of Hannah Arendt's notion of the 'banality of evil'.[9] The phrase 'following orders' should always be considered with suspicion. In this regard, both Limpach's and Harmanny's work are important for nuancing that notion. Limpach examines the emotions behind the strategic deployment of intelligence: fear, hatred, revenge and other human frailties. Harmanny examines the choices made by military strategists in deploying particular heavy artillery that were later acknowledged as wrong, which points to the ethical dilemmas constantly faced by human decision-makers, not machines.

Within these parameters, the authors achieved their goals of revealing the intent behind military decisions, and thus assigning a moral or ethical value to the choices made. In this regard, the ODGOI project has succeeded in 'normalising' the war as being comparable to any other conflict in Indonesia, and indeed, other contemporaneous anti-colonial wars of independence: filled with the failed, callous plans of fallible humans in difficult positions and resulting in the gruesome deaths of innocent people.[10] In a sense, the human banality of evil points to an interesting blind spot in several parts of Dutch historiography and an ideologically informed Dutch self-image that has taken decades to revise. It remains to be seen how enduring this serious disruption to the self-image of the Dutch as 'good colonisers' will be.

The horrors and immorality of colonialism have been replaced by the instrumentalities of evil, but the Dutch self-image seemed intact, at least until recently. In this regard, one way to measure the ODGOI project's success will be the extent to which it triggers true introspection in the Netherlands

9 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil* (Viking Press 1963).

10 Thijs Brocades Zaalberg and Bart Luttikhuis (eds.), *Empire's Violent End: Comparing British, Dutch and French Wars of Decolonization, 1945-1962* (Cornell University Press 2022).

about Dutch national identity regarding the colonial past and, perhaps more importantly, its continuing fallibilities in the present, including its relations with the racial minority populations in the Netherlands, the questions surrounding stolen heritage, the continuing veneration of and nostalgia for the Dutch 'Golden Age', and the broader question of Dutch involvement in the slave trade and the lack of public engagement on the effects of colonialism on such nations as Indonesia.

The Indonesian reaction

Since neither of the two books has been published in Indonesia so far, we are yet to see the reaction from Indonesian readers. The findings of the ODGOI research were broadcast on Dutch television in February 2022 and created some continuing interest in Indonesian society. Yet, perhaps one of the biggest surprises has been the relatively lacklustre reaction from Indonesian society to the findings. One of the biggest criticisms voiced by some Indonesian critics in the Netherlands was that it was a form of whitewashing of the Dutch State's history of violence.[11] Yet, the project's conclusion seemed to support the complicity of the Dutch State, resulting in an official apology made by the erstwhile Dutch Prime Minister. Why does there seem to be a general lack of interest for the project's results in Indonesian society, including among Indonesian historians?

It has been an achievement for Dutch society to face its colonial past more critically after decades of denial. Indonesians, however, are not that impressed with this realisation, since they already knew about the depraved levels of violence and evil that were the result of Dutch capitalism and colonialism. A reaction to the results of the research would be: why would it have been any different? After all, the Netherlands was a colonial power bent on defeating its anti-colonial adversaries by any means available to them. Indonesians tend to ascribe a superior moral position to themselves in the Revolutionary War, not because they are Indonesians, but as a consequence of their position as victims of colonialism. Indonesians' recognition of the history of violence has also been shaped by the continuing fallibility of Indonesian governments and society when it comes to violence *after* independence and up to the present day. A more difficult history of violence to acknowledge than the Revolution has been the killings of 1965-1966.

On the one hand, the ODGOI research has been a major success. The inclusion of Indonesian historians, even at a limited scale, allows a form of dialogue between former colonisers and colonised; collaborative research and

11 For example from historian Bonnie Setiawan or the Alumny Family association of the Lemhanas (National Resilience Institute), https://historia.id/militer/articles/penelitian-dekolonisasi-belanda-membuka-perdebatan-baru-DEa7b.

writing between Indonesian and Dutch historians offer fruitful possibilities. This is not to say that there has not been cooperation in historical research between Indonesian and Dutch historians before, but it was important for this project to demonstrate some post-colonial self-awareness. The goals of the collaboration were not to achieve a corrective similarity between the two historiographies, but to see how differing historiographies can create connections, dissimilarities and dialogue. In the Indonesian case, in general, the historiography on the Revolution was sacred to the Indonesian national myth. Yet, precisely for that reason, the ODGOI project had the potential to bring about an uncomfortable reimagining of this myth by allowing Dutch and other minority voices to reshape the dominant narrative. Revisionist histories of the Revolution could be the prelude to a deeper discussion of the violence that has plagued post-colonial Indonesian history, placing the violence within a longer history of colonialism and imperialism.

On the other hand, Dutch discussions of their own post-colonial positionalities also had the potential to include the voices of Indonesians within Dutch historiography, and perhaps more importantly, the voice of minorities within present-day Dutch society. The intersections with histories of slavery could be part of the Netherlands' soul-searching and reimagining of its post-colonial present. These post-colonial potentialities are perhaps the most interesting outcome of the research: to turn historical narratives into tools for Dutch and Indonesians to discuss difficult shared histories, for the purpose of introspection, and to analyse the present day.

This potentiality is there, but it does not seem to be achieved yet. The empirical focus on big questions around the historical use of violence, as persuasively analysed by Limpach, Harmanny and many others, is only one part of the project. The other part – social dialogue – is yet to follow. And this is something that many historians perhaps lack the stomach for, or do not have the intellectual interest to do. As it is, the research has been an important part of the dialogue that Dutch society has been having with itself since the 1950s. More importantly, it is the start from which Indonesian society can hopefully begin its own introspective search into the soul of Indonesian history and identity. We can perhaps start with the acknowledgement that, for better or worse, both the Netherlands and Indonesia will continue to be entangled as part of their post-colonial heritage. And that working with this entanglement is better than denying it.

Farabi Fakih is a lecturer and head of the Master's Programme at the Department of History at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta. His current research interest is the history of the Indonesian New Order state, corruption and the oil industry. He is currently finishing several articles which delve into corruption during the New Order. In 2020, he published *Authoritarian Modernization in Indonesia's Early Independence Period: The Foundation of the New Order State (1950-1965)* with Brill. The book is based on his PhD dissertation from Leiden University. E-mail: farabi.fib@ugm.ac.id.