



Welcome to Hotel Helvetia!

Friedrich Wüthrich's Illicit Mercenary Trade Network for the Dutch East Indies, 1858-1890

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Because of limited human resources at home, the Dutch colonial army recruited up to forty percent of its soldiers outside of the Netherlands. This demand for mercenaries opened up a number of opportunities and challenges for non-Dutch European actors in a transnational military labour market. Among those who took advantage of these opportunities was the Swiss Friedrich Wüthrich. Born into a poor family, he first pursued a military career in the Dutch colonial army. Subsequently, he ran the Hotel Helvetia in the Dutch city of Harderwijk where the recruitment centre of the colonial army was also domiciled. From his hotel, Wüthrich set up an illicit recruitment network and lured young Swiss into the Dutch colonial army. By looking at his life, I examine the opportunities that the violence-infused colonial expansion offered to non-Dutch Europeans, and the repercussions that spread into Europe's hinterland.

Het Nederlandse koloniale leger bestond voor ongeveer veertig procent uit soldaten die uit andere Europese landen afkomstig waren, aangezien het in eigen land te weinig soldaten wist te rekruteren. Deze behoefte aan huurlingen bood een groot aantal niet-Nederlandse actoren tal van mogelijkheden om binnen een transnationale, militaire arbeidsmarkt te opereren. Een van de mensen die daarvan dankbaar gebruik maakten, was de Zwitser Friedrich Wüthrich. Afkomstig uit een armlastig gezin probeerde hij allereerst een loopbaan op te bouwen binnen het Nederlandse koloniale leger. Vervolgens werd hij uitbater van Hotel Helvetia in Harderwijk, waar ook het rekruteringscentrum van het koloniale leger was gevestigd. Vanuit dit hotel zette Wüthrich een illegaal rekruteringsnetwerk op, waarmee hij jonge Zwitsers naar het Nederlandse koloniale leger lokte. Aan de hand van zijn levensgeschiedenis onderzoek ik in dit artikel niet alleen de mogelijkheden die de gewelddadige koloniale expansie niet-Nederlandse Europeanen bood, maar ook de repercussies hiervan op Europa zelf.

On 5 July 1888, the Bernese police finally managed a long-awaited arrest at the Swiss capital's main train station: that of Friedrich Wüthrich, aged 58, after almost two decades of investigation. The prosecution accused Wüthrich of running an illicit network of recruitment agents from his Hotel Helvetia in Harderwijk, the Netherlands, which lured young Swiss men into the Dutch colonial army, the Koninklijk Nederlandsch-Indisch Leger (hereafter KNIL).² Promoting foreign military services had already been banned in Switzerland in 1849, as it contradicted the liberal spirit of the newly founded nation state. However, this did not prevent Wüthrich from exploiting the Dutch demand for European mercenaries to his financial advantage.

Wüthrich joins a long list of Swiss actors and institutions who had been entangled in European colonial enterprises since the seventeenth century – even though Switzerland never formally possessed any colonial territories of its own. In addition to the British, French and German colonies, they were also connected to the territories of the Dutch East and West Indies trading companies (West-Indische Compagnie and Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie) and the subsequent Dutch empire. The Dutch East Indies, today's Indonesia, in particular served as a destination for numerous Swiss naturalists, mercenaries, merchants and plantation owners who were involved in the trans-imperial circulation of commodities, ethnographic objects and knowledge. Thus, colonial spaces offered a variety of opportunities for Swiss people.³ Yet the emphasis of recent studies on Swiss colonial entanglements has primarily been confined to (urban) elites.

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- 2 See the trial records of the Swiss Federal Department of Justice and Police concerning Wüthrich, 17 December 1888, in Swiss Federal Archives (hereafter CH-BAR) CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#2343. (All citations not originally in English are the author's translations).

- 3 Contributions to research into colonial Switzerland have increased in recent years. For an overview see the anthology of: Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné (eds.), *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series (Basingstoke 2015); for Swiss migrants in the Dutch West Indies: Karwan Fatah-Black, 'A Swiss Village in the Dutch Tropics: The Limitations of Empire-Centred Approaches to the Early Modern Atlantic World', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* (hereafter *BMGN – LCHR*) 128:1 (2013) 31–52, <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.8354>; Bernhard Schär's study on Fritz and Paul Sarasin provided an illustrious example of Swiss naturalists in colonial spaces: Bernhard Schär, *Tropenliebe. Schweizer Naturforscher und niederländischer Imperialismus in Südostasien*

By examining how and why Friedrich Wüthrich built his mercenary trade network, I take his life as a case in point and argue that the Dutch empire provided a transnational space of demands and opportunities for members of the lower classes of non-Dutch European states as well. As I shall point out, the territorial penetration of the Indonesian archipelago pursued by the Netherlands resulted in the Dutch colonial army becoming one of the most important military employers for Swiss mercenaries in the second half of the nineteenth century. Such an opportunity offered the mercenaries an escape from poverty and the chance to pursue careers that would not have been possible within the rigid structures in Switzerland.

In order to support this thesis, I scrutinise Wüthrich's networks from a micro-historical perspective. Using this approach allows me to let members of the lower classes who lived outside of the centres of power speak, and to highlight contradictions that might be neglected in macro-histories.⁴ Thereby, this article not only provides new insights on the webbed character of the Dutch empire⁵, it also emphasises the cross-imperial dimensions described by Bernhard C. Schär in the introduction of this issue. Moreover, it ties in with the debate about how 'Dutch' the Dutch empire actually was⁶, since these non-Dutch mercenaries give a further example for David Arnold's concept of 'contingent colonialism'. With regard to British India, Arnold argues that colonial enterprises were rarely purely British, but transnational.

um 1900 (Frankfurt am Main 2015); for Swiss traders and plantation owners in Singapore and Sumatra: Andreas Zangger, *Koloniale Schweiz. Ein Stück Globalgeschichte zwischen Europa und Südostasien (1860-1930)* (Bielefeld 2011) <https://doi.org/10.14361/transcript.9783839417966.169>; Sigerist estimates that more than 6.000 Swiss were employed by the VOC as sailors, mercenaries, civil servants and merchants, see Stefan Sigerist, *Schweizer in Asien: Kaufleute, Uhrmacher, Missionare, Eisenbahner* (München 2017) 545-556.

- 4 There are different approaches to the definition of micro-history. In this article, I draw on recent works on 'Global Micro-History', which zoom in on actors and occasionally zoom out again to reveal (global) connections and interactions, see, for example: Harald Fischer-Tiné, 'Marrying Global History with South Asian History: Potential and Limits of Global Microhistory in a Regional Inflection', *Comparativ* (forthcoming 2019); Hans Medick, 'Turning Global? Microhistory in

Extension', *Historische Anthropologie* 24:2 (2016) 241-252, <https://doi.org/10.7788/ha-2016-0206>; and Angelika Epple 'Globale Mikrogeschichte. Auf dem Weg zu einer Geschichte der Relationen', in: Ewald Hiebl and Ernst Langthaler (eds.), *Im Kleinen das Grosse suchen: Mikrogeschichte in Theorie und Praxis* (Innsbruck 2012) 37-47.

- 5 On the webbed character of the Dutch empire, see Remco Raben, 'A New Dutch Imperial History? Perambulations in a Prospective Field', *BMGN – LCHR* 128:1 (2013) 5-30, <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.8353>.
- 6 On the discussion concerning the 'Dutchness' of the Dutch empire: Jos Gommans, 'Conclusion. Globalizing Empire: The Dutch Case', in: Cátia Antunes and Jos Gommans (eds.), *Exploring the Dutch Empire: Agents, Networks and Institutions, 1600-2000* (London 2015) 267-278; René Koekoek, Anne-Isabelle Richard and Arthur Weststeijn, 'Visions of Dutch Empire: Towards a Long-Term Global Perspective', *BMGN – LCHR* 132:2 (2017) 79-96, <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.10342>.

They involved the expertise and resources of outsiders from various nations. Even though these outsiders did not build the British empire, they made a decisive contribution.⁷ Comparably, Swiss men (and very rarely women) did not form the Dutch empire on their own, but nonetheless made a significant contribution towards maintaining and even expanding physical and discursive power relations in 'imperial formations' stretching from the Dutch East Indies as far as the European hinterland in the Swiss Alps.⁸ In spite of the important part these Swiss mercenaries played for the Dutch colonial expansion as well as in the history of colonial migration more generally⁹, their role has hitherto scarcely been studied.¹⁰

Transnational military labour markets

Wüthrich did not become a recruiting agent by chance but took advantage of opportunities within economic and social structures that had developed over centuries. Since the early modern era, Switzerland had been part of a European transnational military labour market with global extensions and related migration flows.¹¹ From a Swiss perspective, working as a mercenary presented a viable way out of poverty. This option was widely popular in the nineteenth century, although compared to the previous centuries the number of mercenaries had declined by then.¹² For a long time these military labour migrants had met the demand of European powers such as the Kingdom of

- 7 David Arnold, 'Globalization and Contingent Colonialism: Towards a Transnational History of British India', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 16:2 (2015), 30 July 2019, DOI: 10.1353/cch.2015.0019.
- 8 On the concept of 'imperial formation', see: Ann Laura Stoler, 'Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination', *Cultural Anthropology* 23:2 (2008) 193, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2008.00007.x>.
- 9 For the role of military migration, see: Ulbe Bosma, 'Sailing through Suez from the South: The Emergence of an Indies-Dutch Migration Circuit, 1815-1940', *The International Migration Review* 41:2 (2007) 511-536, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2007.00077.x>.
- 10 Unlike the Swiss KNIL mercenaries, the Luxembourg mercenaries have been recently examined, see: Ulbe Bosma and Thomas Kolnberger, 'Military Migrants. Luxembourgers in the Colonial Army of the Dutch East Indies', *Itinerario* 41:3 (2017) 555-580, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115317000687>; Teichfischer studied the social profile of physicians and medical doctors in the KNIL: Philipp Teichfischer, 'Transnational Entanglements in Colonial Medicine: German Medical Practitioners as Members of the Health Service in the Dutch East Indies (1816-1884)', *History, Medicine and Health* 10 (2016): 63-79, DOI: 10.4000/hms.1035.
- 11 On transnational mercenary labour markets in the early modern era, see: Philippe Rogger and Benjamin Hitz, 'Söldnerlandschaften – räumliche Logiken und Gewaltmärkte in historisch-vergleichender Perspektive. Eine Einführung', in: idem (eds.): *Söldnerlandschaften: Frühneuzeitliche Gewaltmärkte im Vergleich* (Berlin 2014) 9-43.
- 12 On the structure of Swiss mercenary service in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

France, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and the Holy See, and were therefore hired in whole regiments.¹³

The emergence of national armies and conscription at the beginning of the nineteenth century saw a decline in these mercenary regiments in Europe. These tendencies stood in stark contrast to the newly formed armies that were used in imperial wars, such as the French Foreign Legion or the KNIL. Both France and the Netherlands needed ‘indigenous’ troops as well as European mercenaries for the expansive penetration of their colonial empires.¹⁴ In this interplay between supply and demand, civilian newcomers were as welcome as experienced mercenaries were. After the expiration of their contract, numerous mercenaries pursued horizontal military careers; they did not return home but enrolled with another army. From 1856–1860, for example, 1.200 Swiss mercenaries transferred from Neapolitan services to the KNIL.¹⁵

Like many of his contemporaries, Wüthrich’s poverty probably drove him into the military labour market. His parents were financially dependent on the municipality and he had to take care of himself from an early age.¹⁶ He left Switzerland at the age of seventeen to join a Swiss regiment in Naples in the kingdom of the Two Sicilies. In all likelihood, he took part with the Swiss regiments in the suppression of the rebellions in Naples and Sicily in 1848.¹⁷ After ten years of service, he was released in 1858. Thereafter he browsed the military labour market and joined the KNIL just three months later to serve for six years.¹⁸ When he arrived in the Dutch East Indies, he was deployed in Borneo in 1860 and 1861 when the island witnessed repeated armed conflicts.¹⁹

Christian Koller and Peter Huber, ‘Armut, Arbeit, Abenteuer – Sozialprofil und Motivationsstruktur von Schweizer Söldnern in der Moderne’, *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 102:1 (2015) 30–51; On the demand for so-called ‘living tools of empire’, see: Martin Bossenbroek, ‘The Living Tools of Empire: The Recruitment of European Soldiers for the Dutch Colonial Army, 1814–1909’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 23:1 (1995) 26–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086539508582943>; and idem, *Volk voor Indië. De werving van Europese militairen voor de Nederlandse koloniale dienst, 1814–1909* (Amsterdam 1992).

13 Swiss mercenary service for the Pope dates back to the fifteenth century, that for Naples to the eighteenth. ‘Heiliger Stuhl’, *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz* (hereafter HLS-DHS-DSS.CH), 30 July 2018, www.hls-dhs-dss.ch/textes/d/D7343.

php; and Marianne Bauer, ‘Neapel’, [hls-dhs-dss.ch](http://hls-dhs-dss.ch/textes/d/D6634.php), 23 July 2018, www.hls-dhs-dss.ch/textes/d/D6634.php.

14 Christian Koller, *Die Fremdenlegion. Kolonialismus, Söldnertum, Gewalt, 1831–1962* (Paderborn 2013), 27–39.

15 Bossenbroek, *Volk voor Indië*, 132.

16 On Wüthrich’s social background, see: ‘Trub municipal council report’, 1 November 1878, in: CH-BAR#Ez#1000/44#2349.

17 Bauer, ‘Neapel’.

18 Nationaal Archief Den Haag (hereafter NL-HANA), 2.10.50, 138, Folio 9613.

19 With regard to the interior of Borneo in the 1850s and 1860s, Jaap de Moor even speaks of ‘uninterrupted warfare’: Jaap de Moor, ‘Warmakers in the Archipelago: Dutch Expeditions in Nineteenth Century Indonesia’, in: idem and Henk Wesseling (eds.), *Imperialism and War:*

Quite obviously, Wüthrich had no problem being on the payroll of various European monarchies. Influential voices at home, however, had a different view. Since the end of the eighteenth century, increasing criticism had been levelled against mercenary service in Switzerland, especially within liberal circles. From their perspective, military service for foreign rulers and states contradicted the dignity and honour of their own nation. Therefore, at the foundation of the Swiss federal state in 1848, they ensured that a ban on concluding new military capitulations – which were contracts between cantonal authorities and foreign powers for entire contingents of troops – was included in the liberal constitution. In a brief period, mercenary service was further legally restricted. In 1849, recruitment on Swiss territory was banned; in 1851 and 1853 the penalties were intensified.²⁰

While Wüthrich was already fighting in the Dutch East Indies, Swiss mercenaries in papal service plundered the Italian City of Perugia, and his former colleagues in the Swiss regiments of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies mutinied. In 1859, in response to this turmoil, the Swiss parliament passed a far-reaching law prohibiting both the promotion of foreign military service and the entry into so-called ‘non-national’ troops, including not only the regiments in Naples and Rome, but also explicitly the French Foreign Legion and the KNIL.²¹ With regard to the KNIL, the problem seemed to solve itself. In reaction to a mutiny among Swiss and French mercenaries on Java, the Dutch stopped recruiting Swiss mercenaries on their own initiative in 1860.²²

After being released from the KNIL, Wüthrich returned to Bern in 1864 where he attempted to find his way back into civil life. Integration into the civilian world, however, was difficult and it did not take long before he came into conflict with the authorities. In March 1866, the Bernese court sentenced

Essays on Colonial Wars in Asia and Africa (Leiden 1989) 55-62; on warfare in Borneo, see also: Petra Groen, ‘Colonial Warfare and Military Ethics in the Netherlands East Indies, 1816-1941’, *Journal of Genocide Research* 14:3-4 (2012) 282-283, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2012.719365>.

- 20 Hans Rudolf Fuhrer and Robert-Peter Eyer, ‘Das Ende der “Fremden Dienste”’, in: idem and Philippe Clerc (eds.), *Schweizer in ‘Fremden Diensten’*. *Verherrlicht und verurteilt* (Zürich 2006) 247-258; older, but in great detail: Johann Aellig, *Die Aufhebung der schweizerischen Söldnerdienste im Meinungskampf des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Basel 1954) 83-103; and Georg Bislin, *Der unerlaubte Eintritt in fremden Militärdienst als Schwächung der Wehrkraft* (Bern 1938) 1-19.

21 Schweizer Bundesrath, ‘Kreis Schreiben des Bundesrathes an sämtliche Kantonsregierungen, betreffend Vollziehung des Bundesgesetzes über die Werbung und den Eintritt in fremden Kriegsdienst’, in: *Bundesblatt*, Bd. II (42) 1861, 575.

- 22 On the mutiny, see: Thomas Stevens, ‘Mouterij op Java. Achtergronden en verloop van het soldatenoproer van 1860. In het besonder Samarang’, *Mededelingen van de sectie militaire geschiedenis Landsmachtsaf* 8 (1985) 5-14; Guy Le Comte, ‘La Dernière Revolte’, *Le Brécaillon* 30 (2010) 22-43; and David Auberson, ‘Engagés pour six ans en enfer. Les mercenaires suisses à la conquête de Java et Bornéo, 1855-1864’, in: Sébastien Rial (ed.), *De Nimègue à Java. Les soldats*



This painting entitled '*Strassenschlacht in Neapel*' depicts the 4th Swiss Regiment fighting for the King of the Two Sicilies in the streets of Naples during the uprising of 15 May 1848. Wüthrich was part of this regiment and like him, around 1.200 Swiss mercenaries transferred to the KNIL between 1856 and 1860. An unknown artist reproduced the painting several times in 1848. An identical piece can be found in the Swiss National Museum. © Arnold Geiger, Appenzell Meistersrüte.

him for seriously threatening a fellow citizen.²³ In the same month, Wüthrich left Switzerland and took over the Hotel Helvetia in Harderwijk.²⁴

Filling a gap in the market

In 1866, two incidents offered Wüthrich a promising economic perspective. Firstly, in the Canton of Bern, the former KNIL-soldier Johannes Flückiger, who had recently returned from the Dutch East Indies, was arrested for vagrancy. As further investigations revealed that Flückiger joined the KNIL after July 1859, the Bernese authorities were uncertain whether this constituted a violation of the aforementioned law and submitted a query to the Federal Department of Justice and Police. The Swiss authorities forwarded the query to the government in The Hague via the newly established Dutch Consul General J. G. Suter-Vermeulen, who was based in Bern. After consulting with the Dutch government, Suter-Vermeulen responded that the colonial troops ought to be regarded as national troops, since Dutchmen fought in the same forces with foreigners.²⁵ The Swiss Federal Council, surprisingly, took note of this without objection – presumably, because the driving force behind the law of 1859, Jakob Stämpfli, had already resigned from the Federal Council in 1863 – and reported the new facts to the press.²⁶ Moreover, the two countries maintained a friendship of ‘a very amicable nature’²⁷, as the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* called it referring to the Netherlands supporting Swiss access to the Japanese market in 1864.²⁸ Promoting the service in the KNIL, however, remained prohibited.

Secondly, Suter-Vermeulen reported to his government in The Hague that he regularly received requests from Swiss volunteers willing to join the KNIL. The Dutch colonial ministry decided to accept Swiss mercenaries again for colonial service in minor numbers. Consequently, unlike during the period from 1857–1860, this time the Dutch did not establish an official recruiting

suisses au service de la Hollande: xviii-xxe siècles
(Morges 2014) 221-235.

23 See the copy of Wüthrich’s criminal record, 2 November 1878, in CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#2349.

24 Appeal of the Government Council of the Canton of Bern to the Swiss Federal Council, 17 December 1888, CH-BAR #E2#1000/44#2343. Unfortunately, this source does not disclose where he got the money from to buy the hotel.

25 On Flückiger, see: CH-BAR E2#1000/44#2349; and on the enquiry: Letter from Consul-Generaal Suter-Vermeulen to the Swiss Federal President Knüsel, 10 September 1866, NL-HaNA 2.05.14.05, 40.

26 *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 13 September 1866; and Schweizer Bundesrath, ‘Bericht des schweiz. Bundesrathes an die h. Bundesversammlung über seine Geschäftsführung im Jahr 1866’, in: *Bundesblatt*, 1:16 (1867) 652.

27 *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 15 April 1864.

28 On the Dutch support for Japan’s market opening towards Switzerland, see: Roger Mottini, *Die Schweiz und Japan während der Meiji-Zeit (1868-1912)* (St. Gallen 1998) 50-58; and Paul Akio Nakai, *Preussen, die Schweiz und Deutschland aus japanischer Sicht. Modernisierung, Politik, Krieg und Frieden* (München 2014) 30-36.

agency located close to the Swiss border and no further travel expenses were paid in advance.²⁹

The restraint of the Dutch government to campaign for Swiss volunteers left a gap in the transnational recruiting market that was filled by private recruiting agents.³⁰ Based on his own experience, Wüthrich was all too familiar with both the supply and demand aspects of this military labour market and soon took up his new role as an illicit recruiting agent.

Selling souls

In a nutshell, Wüthrich's business model consisted of combining the demands of Swiss men willing to emigrate with those of the Dutch empire. A closer look reveals, however, that this was not quite that simple. Until 1853, Wüthrich's plans would not have caused any problem. There was usually a consensus between him and the mercenaries, and Swiss citizens were allowed to cross the borders to their neighbouring countries without special conditions. It was therefore neither a matter of human trafficking, nor of smuggling. The only violation of Swiss law was the promotion of foreign service and the recruitment of mercenaries. In addition to this legal hurdle, there was stiff competition from other recruiting agents. Wüthrich was neither the first nor the only recruiter for foreign armies. In Switzerland, other recruitment agents also promoted the French Foreign Legion and the papal regiments in Italy.³¹ Thus, Wüthrich and other illicit recruiting agents tried to influence the migrants' decision in their favour, which gave them a dubious reputation among the general population. In folk tales and accounts of veterans, recruiters were therefore often depicted as 'soul sellers' (*Seelenverkäufer*) who sent people to their doom by fraudulent means or even abductions.³² According to the statements in Wüthrich's trial, he, too, was not beyond reproach. Many of the Swiss mercenaries were ill-disposed towards him because he allegedly overcharged his drunken guests and sold them watches merely to buy them back later at a lower price when they ran out of cash. Moreover, Wüthrich's recruiting agents had deliberately promised Swiss compatriots to find well-paid work in France. When they arrived there and found no employment, Wüthrich and his subagents could easily recruit them.³³

29 Bossenbroek, *Volk voor Indië*, 125-128, 158-159.

30 *Ibid.*, 159.

31 On the recruitment for the French Foreign Legion, see: BAR E2#1000/44#2350.

32 See, for example, the fictional tale of the Swiss mercenary Christen, who was drugged by recruiters in a pub and abducted across the border to finally enter the KNIL. Anonymous,

'Wozu ein Unglück gut sein kann', *Historischer Kalender, oder, Der hinkende Bot* (1875); Erwin Eckert, *Erlebnisse eines Schweizer als Deserteurs der holländ. Kolonial-Armee in Ost-Indien* (Weinfelden 1912); Bossenbroek, *Volk voor Indië*, 186.

33 Trial records, 17 December 1888, CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#2343.

The question as to what degree Wüthrich had deceived the potential mercenaries with regard to their future employer is difficult to verify. Putting all the blame on the recruiting agents is nonetheless problematic, as this would deny the recruits any agency and reduce them to the status of mere victims. This would be an undue oversimplification, as there is ample evidence that numerous young Swiss deliberately wanted to be recruited, whether because of the lure of adventure, the hardships of utter poverty, or merely in order to escape the social obligations at home.³⁴ It is equally well documented, however, that many mercenaries imagined life and service in the Dutch East Indies differently and had to come to grips with the stark realities of their everyday experiences in the East. Comparable to the Luxembourg KNIL-soldiers, the bulk of Swiss mercenaries probably saw themselves as ‘life cycle migrants’.³⁵ In this sense, emigration was conceived as part of a life cycle supposed to be merely temporary and served to bridge a period of poverty. At the end of this life cycle, they intended to return to their home country to found a family or a business. Indeed, there were a number of Swiss returnees, for example, who received a pension or disability payment from the Dutch government for years and in some cases even managed social advancement.³⁶ Nevertheless, this was easier said than done, as a number of requests from Swiss mercenaries to the Swiss authorities to release them from Dutch duties as well as the aforementioned mutiny testify of their dissatisfaction.³⁷ Several reports by Swiss mercenaries deplore the boredom of everyday life in the barracks, the social isolation from the civilian European colonists and especially the tropical heat as a source of frustration.³⁸ The Swiss consulate in Batavia had no other option but to warn against the idea of serving in the KNIL.³⁹

34 With regard to the KNIL, see the letters of motivation and the objections of family members in: NL-HANA 2.05.14.05, 38 and NL-HANL 2.05.14.05, 41. For the French Foreign Legion, see: Peter Huber, *Fluchtpunkt Fremdenlegion. Schweizer im Indochina und Algerienkrieg, 1945-1962* (Zürich 2016) 75-91.

35 For ‘life-cycle soldiers’ in the KNIL, see: Bosma and Kolnberger, ‘Military Migrants’, 558.

36 An example of a life-cycle migrant is Carl Haab, who served in the KNIL from 1859-1864. See his memoirs: Carl August Haab, *Handwerksburschen-Erinnerungen. Meine Reise von St. Gallen nach Ostindien. Vier Monate Hin- und vier Monate Rückreise; Vier Jahre auf der Insel Java*

(Ebnat-Kappel 1916). On pensions, see: CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#1110-1117.

37 One example is Johann Gottfried Gerber, a mercenary stationed in Meester Cornelis on Java applied for release from colonial service in 1879. Gerber used to support his family and regret the step he took out of recklessness. NL-HANA 2.05.14.05, 41. Kaspar Daubenmeier is another, see: CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#1111.

38 Haab, *Handwerksburschen-Erinnerungen*, 29.

39 Schweiz. Generalkonsul in Batavia, ‘Bericht des schweiz. Generalkonsulats in Batavia über das Jahr 1873’, in: *Bundesblatt* 2:43 (1874) 926.



Christens Heimkehr.



This drawing entitled 'Christens Heimkehr' dates from 1875 and illustrates the story 'Wozu ein Unglück gut sein kann'. The young Christen is heartbroken and hence gets drunk. Two recruiters seize the opportunity to drug him and take him across the border, where he joins the KNIL. When he returns seven years later and sees his embittered ex-girlfriend, he is glad that he has not stayed with her. With his savings, he buys a blacksmith's house and gets married. © Stämpfli Verlag AG, Bern, Hinkende Bot auf das Jahr 1875.

Most likely no ordinary Swiss hotelier would have thought of opening a hotel in Harderwijk since the town on the Zuiderzee was called ‘the sewer of Europe’. It had obtained this dubious reputation because it was home to the KNIL recruitment centre as well as to numerous traders, prostitutes, and musicians surrounding it. The flow of potential European colonial soldiers also lured many bar operators on the scene.⁴⁰ Thus, Wüthrich’s hotel was only one of over a hundred places licensed to serve liquor. In the face of such considerable competition, Wüthrich had to be innovative, especially as many hotel guests merely stayed a night, unless they did not carry the necessary documents.⁴¹ If this was the case they had to dwell in the hotel until they either received the right papers or changed their minds and returned home. Wüthrich charged 1,5 guilders for board and lodging, which he deducted directly from the 160-200 guilders bounty that the mercenaries received in case of enlisting with the KNIL.⁴²

Yet the sum of 1,5 guilders seems to be negligible in comparison to the 75 guilders that a Swiss mercenary usually had to pay Wüthrich for travel and expenses when he was recruited by him or one of his subagents. How exactly this illicit recruitment was carried out is difficult to reconstruct. The first contact between subagent and potential mercenary is scarcely documented. Did the recruits already know beforehand about Wüthrich’s network and the KNIL and therefore sought contact or were they persuaded by his subagents on the spot? Probably both. Either they received information about acquaintances who had also served in the KNIL, or they were addressed directly by the advertisers. Once the candidates had agreed on the terms and conditions, the subagents led them to a meeting point beyond the Swiss border near Basel where Wüthrich picked them up or sent them precise instructions on how to get to the Hotel Helvetia in Harderwijk. There, he also issued them a bill of exchange for 75 guilders. If the KNIL accepted the volunteers, Wüthrich deducted this sum directly from their bounty. In addition, he received a premium of ten guilders from the KNIL for the successful placement.⁴³

Advancing travel costs and pointing the way were only two aspects of Wüthrich’s work. Since, in contrast to the French Foreign Legion, the KNIL demanded an impeccable reputation certificate as well as the birth certificate and – in the case of those volunteers who were considered minors in their home country – the consent of their parents or guardians⁴⁴, Wüthrich

40 On Harderwijk, see: Bossenbroek, *Volk voor Indië*, 189-193.

41 In order to be admitted to the KNIL, candidates had to present an official birth certificate and a certificate of good character and, in the case of minors, a written statement from their

parents. See, for example, NL-HaNA 2.05.14.05, 40.

42 Trial records, 17 December 1888, CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#2343.

43 *Ibid.*

44 Bossenbroek, ‘Living tools’, 39.



Postcard of 1902 depicting Harderwijk sent by a Swiss mercenary to his family in Switzerland, with the request to send him postcards from Zurich, the mountains or the Swiss military. © Privately owned by the Brandenberger family, Switzerland.

and his collaborators also forged these documents for ten to twenty-five additional guilders. Here, too, they proceeded with an astonishing degree of professionalism. They printed a vast number of references beforehand and had a whole range of forged stamps from cantonal, municipal or police authorities. They proceeded so systematically that Wüthrich even issued a forged document to a recruit holding valid papers in order to conceal the difference from the fake documents.⁴⁵

Wüthrich probably entered the illicit military labour market right from the beginning when the KNIL resumed enrolling Swiss mercenaries in 1866. Already in April 1867, the Swiss consul in Rotterdam complained about the latest extent of the recruitment and the involvement of a certain Swiss named 'Wüthrich' living in Harderwijk. Apparently, the latter had accomplices and travelled on a regular basis to Leopoldshöhe in Baden-Württemberg or St. Louis in Alsace (both neighbouring villages of Basel) from where he had already organised several transports of ten to twenty Swiss volunteers to Harderwijk. Since many of these mercenaries returned either sick or unable to work after their period of service, the consul argued that any kind of advertising of that colonial military service should be counteracted.⁴⁶

Despite this warning, Wüthrich's activities flourished for several years. The reasons for his success in this risky business were rooted in his caution and adaptability. These two skills helped him master the first serious threat in 1871 when Alsace, Baden and Württemberg became part of the newly founded German Empire. Under Prussian leadership, the German authorities no longer tolerated recruiting campaigns, which is why Wüthrich had to move his station to Belfort in France. Wüthrich himself never lived in Belfort. His subagents ran his business there while he dropped by from time to time. It cannot be determined how many Swiss people entered the KNIL during this period with Wüthrich's help. Measured against the annual average of 60 Swiss mercenaries who joined in the 1860s (the corresponding figure for the period 1870-1872 was 47)⁴⁷, his participation may have been quite significant. Nevertheless, Wüthrich's heyday was yet to come.

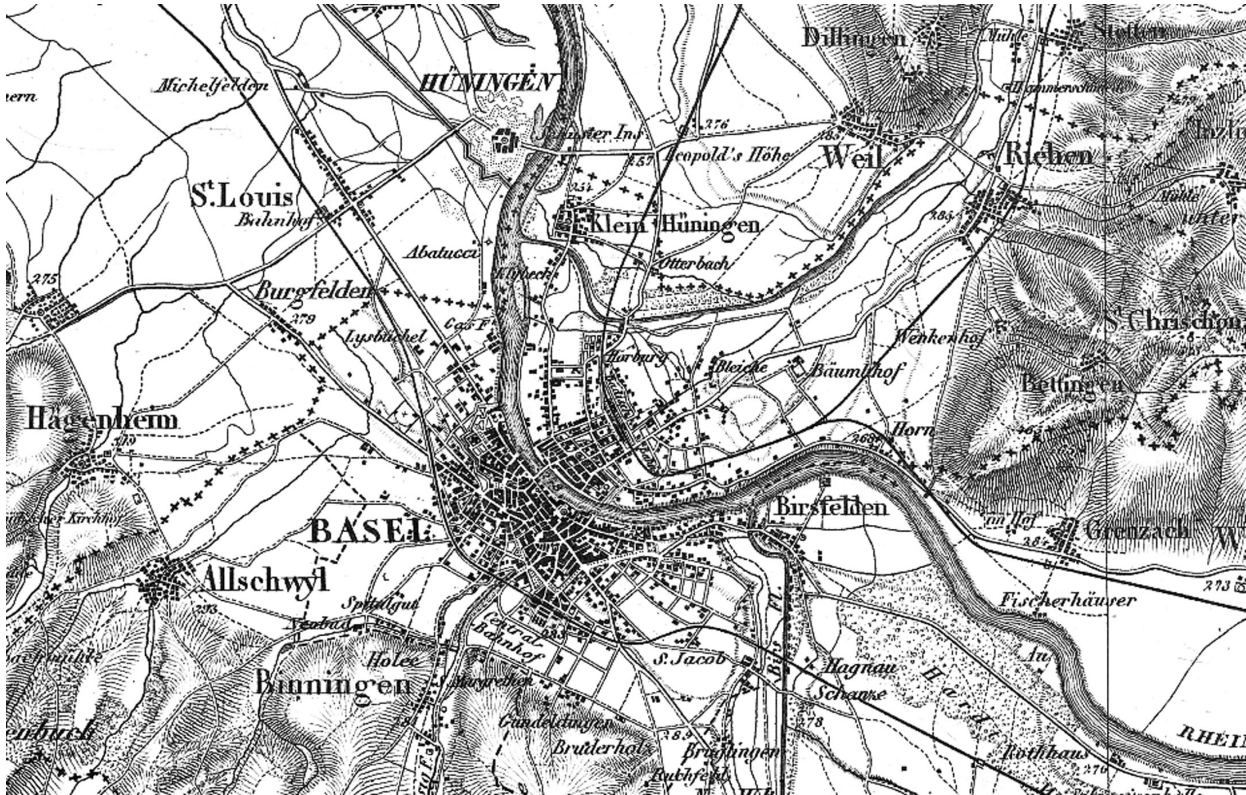
Aceh's long arm

In 1873, the Dutch authorities launched a new wave of recruitment that was triggered by the Aceh War in northwestern Sumatra. Both the island's economic potential and the new strategic position at the mouth of the Malacca

45 On forgery of documents, see the trial records of 15 November 1888 and 17 December 1888, CH-BAR #E2#1000/44#2343.

46 Letter from Consul Wartmann to the Swiss Federal Council, Amsterdam 26 April 1867, CH-BAR E2#1000-44#2349.

47 Bossenbroek, *Volk voor Indië*, 278.



A map of Basel and its trinalational surroundings around 1870. North of the Swiss border lies Leopold's Höhe in Baden, to the northwest of the French town of St. Louis. Both were important stations in Wüthrich's network for a brief period. Reproduced by permission of swisstopo (JA100120).

Street in the wake of the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 aroused Dutch desires. Officially, the British prohibited the Dutch from intervening in Aceh by the London Treaty of 1824. In 1871, however, the British abandoned their stance and lifted the ban on interference in exchange for the Gold Coast from the Dutch. To enforce control in the newly annexed territory the Dutch governor general initiated a confrontation with Sultan Mahmud Shah, and in 1873 a war broke out that was to last no less than forty years. This war would cost the lives of an estimated 75.000 Acehnese and 25.000 troops and coolies in service of the KNIL.⁴⁸

The sluggish course of the war, the fierce resistance of the Sultanate and the scourge of cholera demanded high numbers of troops. To satisfy this demand, the KNIL improved the conditions of service and increased the bounty for foreigners.⁴⁹ For its recruitment, the KNIL and also Wüthrich himself benefitted from a global economic crisis that also affected Switzerland in 1873 and prompted many Swiss to leave their country.⁵⁰ In the summer of 1874, the increased Dutch recruitment efforts came to the attention of the Swiss government. The Swiss consul in Batavia reported to the Federal Council that more Swiss mercenaries were arriving in Java. According to his report, thirty-two of the last troop transport of 150 soldiers were Swiss. 'For all those who are familiar with the conditions in Java,' the consul wrote, 'it is incomprehensible how so many can forget themselves so far to sell their freedom with inexplicable carelessness in a moment of excitement against an almost certain death or against a physical and moral wastefulness.'⁵¹ In order to prevent more Swiss people from finding themselves in this miserable situation, Federal President Carl Schenk issued a circular to all cantons stating that increased attention should be paid by the police to combat recruiting agents.⁵²

As it soon turned out, Schenk's warning was utterly hypocritical. The authorities of the canton of Bern took his orders seriously and paid

48 Martijn Kitzen, *The Course of Co-Option: Co-Option of Local Power-Holders as a Tool for Obtaining Control over the Population in Counterinsurgency Campaigns in Weblike Societies. With Case Studies on Dutch Experiences during the Aceh War (1873-c. 1912) and the Uruzgan Campaign (2006-2010)* (2016) 189-192; Groen, 'Colonial Warfare', 283-286; Emmanuel Kreike, 'Genocide in the Kampongs? Dutch Nineteenth Century Colonial Warfare in Aceh, Sumatra', *Journal of Genocide Research* 14:3-4 (2012) 297-315, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2012.719367>; Henk Schulte Nordholt, 'A genealogy of violence', in:

Freek Colombijn and Jan Thomas Lindblad, *Roots of Violence in Indonesia: Contemporary Violence in Historical Perspective* (Leiden 2002) 33-61.

49 Bossenbroek, *Volk voor Indië*, 175-189.

50 On the economic crisis in Switzerland, see Jean-François Bergier, *Wirtschaftsgeschichte der Schweiz. Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Zurich 1990) 218-261.

51 Telegram of the Consul in Batavia to the Swiss Federal Council, 2 September 1874, in: *Bundesblatt* 2:39 (1874) 766-767.

52 Circular, 9 September 1874, CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#2349.

more attention to offences against the 1859 law. They intercepted a letter containing a leaflet about admission to the KNIL. Nevertheless, the explosive thing about the letter was less the content, and more the sender: a stamp in the lower left corner pointed to the Dutch Consul General Suter-Vermeulen, based in Bern. This seemingly confirmed the rumours circulating previously, which claimed that Suter-Vermeulen was directly involved in or at least familiar with the illicit recruitment. However, the Bernese could not take action, because the Dutch ambassador was protected by international law.⁵³ Schenk confronted Suter-Vermeulen with the accusations, which the latter rejected, as this would have constituted an obvious violation of the 1859 law. Suter-Vermeulen stated officially that he did not recruit Swiss individuals and it was in his personal interest to keep the number of Swiss mercenaries as low as possible, as most of the unpleasant consular business concerned these mercenaries. Only non-Swiss people were given information on the conditions of admission. The letter in question, he assured, must therefore have been based on a misunderstanding and, as far as the rumors were concerned, they might have been deliberately spread by individuals he had rejected.⁵⁴

However, Suter-Vermeulen's answer was a lie, as was President Schenk's indignation. The two had been friends for some time and they had confidentially discussed Suter-Vermeulen's recruitment activities in 1873, as a classified letter from the consul to the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Baron Gericke van Herwijnen reveals.⁵⁵ The reason for the conversation back then was Suter-Vermeulen's discomfort with the recruitment. In the course of the Aceh War, the Dutch consuls in Belgium, France and Switzerland were urged to do their utmost to promote the recruitment of local volunteers.⁵⁶ In order to fulfil this task, Suter-Vermeulen had consciously crossed the border of illegality several times and was afraid of being discovered. He therefore sought advice from several members of the Swiss Federal Council on how he could proceed unnoticed.⁵⁷ In 1874, the matter finally became too explosive for Schenk as well. In a classified letter, he asked Suter-Vermeulen to 'double his caution in this recruitment process' and to stop providing information about the KNIL.⁵⁸ The fact that, unlike the rest of the correspondence between Suter-Vermeulen and members of the Federal Council, this letter is to be found exclusively in the Dutch National Archives, and that it was written in an unusually amicably

53 Letter from the Council of Bern to the Federal Council, 12 December 1874, CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#842.
 54 Letter from Suter-Vermeulen to Schenk, 17 December 1874, CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#842.
 55 Letter from Consul-Generaal Suter-Vermeulen to Foreign Minister Baron Gericke van Herwijnen, 30 June 1873, NL-HaNA 2.05.14.05, 40.

56 Bossenbroek, *Volk voor Indië*, 182-183.

57 Letter from Consul-Generaal Suter-Vermeulen to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Baron Gericke van Herwijnen, 30 June 1873, NL-HaNA 2.05.14.05, 40.

58 Letter from the Swiss President Schenk to Suter-Vermeulen, 18 December 1874, *ibid.*

tone without a formal address, suggest that Schenk wanted to keep the Dutch operations hidden from other Swiss authorities. Why Schenk played this double game remains in the realm of speculation. Perhaps he attached more importance to good diplomatic relations with the Netherlands as they represented a gateway to Asian markets, which the Swiss export industry increasingly aimed to penetrate at the end of the nineteenth century.⁵⁹

In any case, Suter-Vermeulen was under pressure. The government in The Hague wanted to recruit more Swiss men because of the Aceh war. Suter-Vermeulen attempted his best to do so without being caught. He generously gave information to all potential recruits who either wrote to him by letter or even visited him at home. His commitment even went so far that he also suggested to the Dutch Foreign Minister to set up a registration office near the German town of Friedrichshafen and transport the volunteers by steamboat from Mannheim to the Netherlands, all under the guise of a removal company. He developed these ideas in consultation with several recruiting agents who had visited him personally, some of whom were Wüthrich's accomplices. Additionally, in order to escort volunteers from Switzerland quickly across the border, he proposed paying the recruiters an advance.⁶⁰ However, after the incident of 1874, Suter-Vermeulen changed his attitude towards the recruitment question. From then on, he reacted dismissively to questions concerning the KNIL.⁶¹

Catch me if you can

Wüthrich, on the other hand, continued to pull strings from Harderwijk, and his recruiting agents continued sending him volunteers. To avoid attracting the attention of the Swiss authorities, they corresponded with each other as if they were discussing the shipment of cheese rather than of mercenaries.⁶² Nevertheless, the noose of justice continued to tighten. One of Wüthrich's agents, Johann Peter Wagner, was sentenced to three months in prison by the Basel court in 1874. He tried to evade his punishment and fled to Germany, where he was finally arrested in Mainz. Another long-time accomplice of Wüthrich and operator of the station in Belfort, Georg Hitz, was expelled from France in 1876 because of his recruitment activities.

Wüthrich himself remained untouched until 1878, when an anonymous person from the Belgian town of Verviers accused him of operating an advertising depot in Belfort.⁶³ As the Swiss authorities knew

59 Zangger, *Koloniale Schweiz*, 20-25.

60 Letter from Consul-Generaal Suter-Vermeulen to Gericke van Herwijnen, 17 August 1873, NL-HaNA 2.05.14.05, 40.

61 See, for instance, the letter from Suter-Vermeulen to Rahn-Meyer, 10 December 1878, *ibid.*

62 On the 'cheese camouflage', see the Federal Council's report to the two chambers of Parliament, 21 May 1874, CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#2342.

63 See anonymous letter to the president of the Bernese Police Department, 18 October 1878, CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#2349.

neither the author of the letter nor any further details about Wüthrich, they instructed their consulates in Brussels and Rotterdam to investigate the matter. At first, these enquiries were fruitless. However, Wüthrich made a mistake. The Swiss authorities would have struggled to locate him in Harderwijk if he had not approached them himself in 1874 to make sure that his marriage to his Dutch wife, Mechteld Lieman, would be recognised in Switzerland as well. By notifying the Swiss authorities of his place of residence in Harderwijk, he inadvertently helped to uncover his identity. Finally, the Swiss consul in Rotterdam could confirm that Wüthrich was an innkeeper there and was associated with the recruitment network.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, as long as Wüthrich was outside Switzerland, the police were unable to arrest him.

Arguably, another reason why Wüthrich was not stopped could have been that not all local Swiss authorities were interested in ending the mercenary service as the Bernese government was. Swiss authorities frequently considered these mercenaries as ‘work-shy vagabonds’. A community representative from the canton of Solothurn even went as far as contacting Wüthrich’s agents to deport an ‘individual annoying the community’. The planned deportation, however, was discovered and the municipal employee was convicted.⁶⁵ In general, the Swiss authorities had a discretionary power at the local level, allowing them to determine the extent to which they would tolerate recruitment. According to the testimony of a convicted recruiting agent, the police lieutenant of Solothurn assured him that the police would not intervene as the deportation of such individuals would only be ‘beneficial to the country’.⁶⁶ In the eyes of these exponents, the KNIL was one of the numerous means to maintain the bourgeois order in view of the growing proletariat. These voices – albeit on a smaller scale – tied in with the discourses of the German, French and English imperialists on the deportation of poor and so-called deviant ‘white subalterns’.⁶⁷

Despite local sympathies, Wüthrich still had to act cautiously since not only the Bernese but also the German authorities kept an eye on him. Finally, the latter arrested him on his way to Switzerland in November 1879. Yet after two months, he was released because it could not be proven that he had recruited Germans within German territory. Wüthrich then boldly asked the Swiss government to support him to obtain satisfaction from the German

64 Letter from Consul Koch to the Swiss Federal Council, 18 November 1878, CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#2349.

65 See: ‘Botschaft des Bundesrathes an die Bundesversammlung betreffend des Gnadengesuchs des Jakob Kambers’, 5 June 1889, CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#2342.

66 CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#2342.

67 In both the French and British empires, there were numerous discourses on the deportation of poor or deviant white subalterns. See, for instance: Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans: Race, Class, and “White Subalternity” in Colonial India* (New Delhi 2009); and for France: Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, *La République impériale. Politique et racisme d’État* (Paris 2009).

government. They refused, pointing out that he had also been reported to them for recruiting activities.⁶⁸

Besides these reversals, Wüthrich experienced further personal setbacks. In 1882, a Dutch court sentenced Wüthrich to a year in prison for concealing – according to his own statements – that his hotel guests used false papers. As soon as he was released from prison, he resumed recruiting. The principle was the same: Wüthrich set up a network of agents who picked up volunteers in Switzerland and led them across the border. The agents, however, were confronted with an increasingly difficult situation. Johann Jakob Cottier, who had already worked with Wüthrich earlier, managed a new station in Belfort together with his son when a retired sergeant from Harderwijk denounced him to the Swiss Ministry of Justice in 1884. Based on Cottier's criminal record (from 1870 to 1883 he had already been sentenced seven times to shorter prison terms for illicit recruitment), the authorities started the investigation of this 'incurable recruiter'. Witnesses in Switzerland and the Netherlands were questioned until Cottier was finally sentenced to a year in prison and a fine of 200 francs in January 1886. Cottier did not think of returning to prison and left for France, where he continued to hire mercenaries along with his son and Wüthrich.⁶⁹

Once again, it did not take long before their activities were unveiled. On this occasion, it was the president of the *Société Suisse* in Belfort who was upset with the Cottier family. The association acknowledged that 'this kind of slave trade is a necessary evil for good-for-nothings & riffraff, who are constantly in conflict with law & authorities, and also for the authorities here & there because it makes their tasks in criminal matters easier, but how many innocent people have to suffer as a result?'⁷⁰ Thereupon, the Foreign Ministry informed the Swiss delegation in Paris, which in turn contacted the French authorities in Belfort. The Cottiers were finally expelled from France in autumn 1886 and were arrested at the border while crossing into Switzerland. Simultaneously, a resident of Harderwijk accused Wüthrich of illicit recruitment at the Swiss Federal Council. At least since the Cottier trial the Swiss authorities definitely knew that Wüthrich was an important part of the illicit recruitment network. However, as recruitment was not prohibited in the Netherlands, he could not be extradited. The authorities had no choice but to put him on the wanted list.⁷¹

68 See the report of the Foreign Office of the German Empire of 3 February 1880 and Wüthrich's letter of 17 November 1879, CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#2349.

69 See the File on Cottier, CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#2343.

70 Letter from G. Schaltenbrand to the Federal Military Department, 27 August 1886, CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#2343.

71 Notification from the Police Headquarters of the Canton of Bern to the Federal Department of Police and Justice, 8 November 1886, CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#2343.

In the summer of 1888, when Wüthrich allegedly wanted to visit his two sisters in Switzerland, the Bernese police finally arrested him. It seemed unlikely to them that Wüthrich solely intended to see his sisters. For one, he had recently visited other Swiss cities that were not on his itinerary. Furthermore, Wüthrich tried to hide some business cards from them, bearing the inscription ‘Hôtel et Restaurant Helvetia. F Wüthrich Harderwijk. Send travel money after sending in your certificate of origin and character reference’. He replied to the investigating judge that he had only made a detour via these cities out of ignorance of the Swiss railway network and that the cards had fallen into his trousers by accident. Overall, he denied being a recruiting agent and claimed that the accusations from Harderwijk were nothing more than slanderous rumours spread by his competitors.⁷²

His excuses, however, no longer helped him; the circumstantial evidence was crushing. Furthermore, numerous witnesses incriminated him. Besides Johann Jakob Cottier, who revealed himself as Wüthrich’s subagent, Wüthrich was also burdened by three former Swiss mercenaries, as well as the landlady of a pension in Belfort. He was sentenced to one year in prison, but both he and the public prosecutor’s office lodged an appeal. Wüthrich pleaded for a lesser sentence and argued that for a long time he had been living in the Netherlands, where recruitment was not punishable. The appellate court replied to Wüthrich that this did not make him inculpable as he was a Swiss citizen, had lived in Switzerland previously and had maintained strong ties to his home country. In addition, he knew the Swiss laws well; after all, the Swiss legal authorities argued, this was precisely why he operated from abroad. His appeal was denied, and he was sent to prison.⁷³ After his release in 1890 he returned to Harderwijk, where he died in 1899.⁷⁴

A colonial state of violence and its demand for mercenaries

If one situates Wüthrich’s story exclusively in a European context – as I have done thus far in this article – his activities would seem rather harmless. One could easily be tempted to sympathise with this underdog from Switzerland, who for years fooled the authorities of several European states. However, there is another side to the story that also needs to be told. With his network, Wüthrich responded to the enormous Dutch demand for mercenaries. The Netherlands faced a paradoxical situation whereby, on the one hand, it was a small and vulnerable country in of Europe; while on the other, they had the second largest colonial empire.⁷⁵ In order to maintain and extend

72 Trial records, 17 December 1888, CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#2343.

73 Trial records of the Bernese appeal court, 26 January 1889, CH-BAR#E2#1000/44#2343.

74 Rijksarchief in Gelderland. Burgerlijke Stand. Harderwijk F 89, nummer 24.

75 Henk Wesseling, ‘The giant that was a dwarf, or the strange history of Dutch imperialism’,

their influence within its colonial sphere, the Netherlands installed ‘a state of violence’, as Henk Schulte Nordholt has termed it.⁷⁶ Military violence – and the threat thereof – had been part and parcel of the Dutch colonial domination since the VOC took its first steps in the archipelago.⁷⁷ While the VOC was less interested in territorial gains and confined its military control to a few strategic bases, the succeeding Dutch government expanded its influence in the archipelago through the course of the nineteenth century.⁷⁸ Although the government in The Hague initially refrained from extending its military control to the outer islands of the archipelago after the gruelling Java War (1825–1830), a period of several wars and ‘expeditions’ followed from 1844 until 1914. Decisive for the unofficial change of policy were a combination of an increasing Dutch fear of other imperial powers as well as the colonial ambitions of local officials in the field who promoted a form of frontier imperialism.⁷⁹

However, this colonial intrusion was never purely ‘Dutch’.⁸⁰ From the very beginning of the Dutch expansion, the demographic resources of the Netherlands were too limited to raise a colonial army comprising solely of Dutch citizens.⁸¹ In the nineteenth century, the recruitment of Dutch citizens was further hampered by competition from the newly formed and far more popular Dutch National Army. Therefore, the Ministry of Colonies had to draw on the recruitment of non-Dutch European troops, primarily from Belgium, Germany, France and Switzerland. To recruit these mercenaries, a European network of Dutch ambassadors, official recruitment stations abroad and the support of illegal recruitment agents was necessary. Nonetheless, this network was not stable, as it was subject to the fluctuating demand of the Dutch empire and dependent on the initiative

The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History 16:3 (1988) 58–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086538808582768>.

76 Schulte Nordholt, ‘A genealogy of violence’, 37; on the critique of that concept, see: Remco Raben, ‘On genocide and mass violence in colonial Indonesia’, *Journal of Genocide Research* 14:3–4 (2012) 488–489, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2012.719673>.

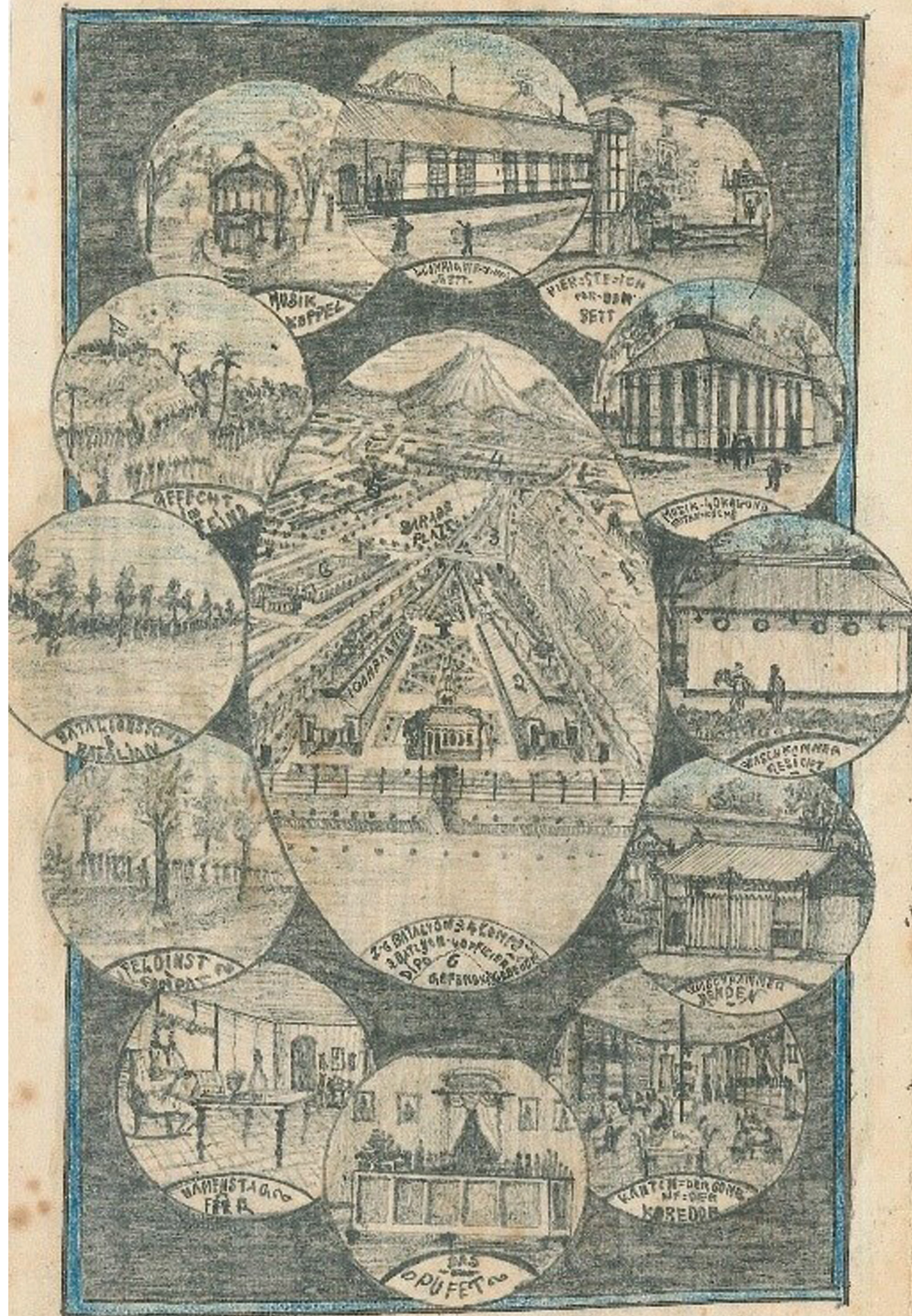
77 Groen, ‘Colonial Warfare’, 278; and Raben, ‘On genocide’, 487–490.

78 Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, ‘Dutch expansion in the Indonesian archipelago around 1900 and the imperialism debate’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 25:1 (1994) 94–96, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20071619>.

79 Officially, the policy of abstention prevailed for the entire nineteenth century. Groen, ‘Colonial Warfare’, 282.

80 On the discussion concerning the ‘Dutchness’ of the Dutch Empire: Jos Gommans, ‘Globalizing Empire: The Dutch Case’, in: Cátia Antunes and Jos Gommans (eds.): *Exploring the Dutch Empire: Agents, Networks and Institutions, 1600–2000* (London 2015) 267–278; Koekkoek, Richard and Weststeijn, ‘Visions of Dutch Empire’, 79–96.

81 The VOC had already recruited parts of its troops outside the Netherlands: Tzoref-Ashkenazi, ‘Deutsche Hilfstruppen in Imperialkriegen 1776–1808’, in: Tanja Bühner e.a. (eds.), *Imperialkriege von 1500 bis heute. Strukturen, Akteure, Lernprozesse* (Paderborn 2011) 348–349; Bossenbroek, *Volk voor Indië*.



of individual players. In Brussels, for example, in the middle of the 1870s, the business with forged papers for potential KNIL soldiers flourished and in Germany, too, there were recruiters who operated illegally. Thanks to formal and informal connections, the Dutch Ministry of Colonies was able to expand its network into nearby countries. The KNIL managed to recruit about 72.000 non-Dutch European mercenaries (approximately 40 percent of the European contingent) from 1814-1909.⁸² Together with forces recruited among Africans and Dutch colonised subjects, this transnational army was thus able to promote the ruthless colonial expansion of the Dutch empire.⁸³

The estimated 7.600 Swiss mercenaries recruited from 1815-1914 fully participated in this violence, as individual testimonies corroborate. In 1859, for instance, a mercenary from the French-speaking part of Switzerland wrote to his parents about his participation in the Boni campaign on Celebes, present-day Sulawesi, that ‘there, it was a real butchery: we walked in blood and corpses up to our knees. [...] As for me, I have already given you knowledge of this rage that carries me away like a furious tiger: everything in front of me falls under my blows.’ He went on to describe how they ‘hunted’ in nearby villages and burned everything down ‘without sparing anyone’.⁸⁴ Wüthrich, too, took part in such ‘expeditions’ and in 1864, he was awarded the Order of Willem Knight 4th class as he had fought at the front line during the storming of a benteng (a small fortification) on Borneo.⁸⁵ It is therefore obvious that both Wüthrich and the mercenaries contributed to this state of violence.

82 Bossenbroek, ‘Living Tools of Empire’, 26-53.

83 Indigenous soldiers were divided into the artificial categories of Christian Ambonese and Muslim Javanese. Jaap de Moor, ‘The recruitment of Indonesian soldiers for the Dutch colonial army, c. 1700-1950’, in: David Killingray and David Omissi (eds.), *Guardians of Empire. The Armed Forces of*

the Colonial Powers, c. 1700-1964 (Manchester 1999) 53-69.

84 The letter was published anonymously in the *Gazette de Lausanne*, 8 October 1859.

85 NL-HANA, 2.10.50, 138, Folio 9613; and Stamboek kanselarij MWO 4de klasse nr.3865. I thank John Klein Nagelvoort for providing me this information.



Pencil drawing made by the Swiss mercenary Josef Arnold Egloff. Egloff joined the KNIL in 1889 and planned to return to Switzerland after six years. However, half a year before the end of his service he succumbed to the injuries he had suffered during the Lombok campaign in 1894. In several letters he reported to his family in Switzerland about his life in the barracks in Malang. He supplemented these reports with numerous pencil drawings, like the one displayed here. Starting in the middle and going up clockwise: the barracks and surroundings, company house, Egloff's self-portrait in front of his bed, music hall, washing chamber for the face, washing chamber for the hands, canteen, buffet, name day party, field service, battalion school, battle with the enemy, music ensemble. © Privately owned by the Egloff family, Switzerland.


Conclusion

In this article, I have followed the global traces of Friedrich Wüthrich, who throughout his life tried to escape the fate of his impoverished parents, while not hesitating to cross both national and legal borders. In doing so, two salient points become apparent. First, for Wüthrich and other Swiss mercenaries coming from the lower strata, the Dutch empire served as a space of opportunities for decades. This was possible in particular because the structures of the international military labour market changed fundamentally in the second half of the nineteenth century. From the point of view of the mercenaries, Wüthrich offered unemployed or adventure-seeking Swiss men the knowledge and opportunity to emigrate and strive for financial advancement in the colonies. The colonial reality, however, disenchanted the expectations of the majority of them shortly after their arrival. The KNIL, on the other hand, welcomed Wüthrich's supply since they depended on the influx of non-Dutch European soldiers. While the VOC was still primarily limited to securing strategic bases and carrying out expeditions, in the nineteenth century local officials in particular pursued a frontier imperialism that required the military support of the KNIL and led to the territorial penetration of the archipelago. Because of their limited demographic resources, the Dutch had to extend their search to a transnational European recruitment zone to meet the demand for European mercenaries.

Secondly, the threads of the Dutch empire also influenced areas such as Switzerland that did not possess any formal colonies. This influence went beyond the mere formation of cultural and scientific discourses for elitist circles. In its material and political dimensions it encompassed people from all social strata, from impoverished vagrants and their families to the Federal President. Moreover, on all administrative levels of government, from the municipality to the canton to the federal state, the Dutch demand for mercenaries caused tensions. Although liberal politicians wanted to ban foreign military service – especially because the activities of the Swiss mercenaries in Neapolitan and papal services tarnished the reputation of the federal state – a complete ban on supporting colonial regimes that rejected the values of freedom and self-determination remained short-lived. Consequently, only recruitment activities and their promotion remained prohibited. However, the application of this law was also contested. While the cantonal government of Bern intended to take vigorous action against the recruitment and sought the support of the federal government, the latter secretly warned the Dutch consul to exercise more caution. The matter was also dealt with differently at the local level. On the one hand, mercenary service required an enormous administrative effort, since in addition to the criminal investigations against recruiting agents there were numerous enquiries into the Swiss mercenaries themselves. On the other hand, a few local Swiss

representatives endorsed the emigration of poor people to the Dutch empire in order to ease the financial burden they posed.

As this story demonstrates, the micro-historical approach can illuminate colonial entanglements and tensions across borders. Looking at the case of Friedrich Wüthrich, it becomes evident that the Dutch empire was not merely a national affair, but a European one – although the degree of participation of the actors involved varied.



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