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Iconic Events and People

It is the case for all wars that they are often reduced to that one brilliant commander or tragic battle. That involves a choice of who and what is deemed ‘iconic’ and who and what is not. Numerous iconic events and people can be identified in the Indonesian war of independence too. That is because many different belligerent parties became embroiled in the conflict, each with its own view of ‘its’ events and key figures.

In this theme, an attempt has been made based on the collections of KITLV and Leiden University Library to consider ‘the iconic’ from a variety of angles. While no side has been chosen, the available material in the archives is still a limiting factor. Even so, the aim in this theme is to offer a well-considered selection. It shows some of the historical figures and events that symbolized the groups and developments during and – in particular – after the war in Indonesia. The way in which some people and moments developed into icons in the Netherlands and Indonesia tells us a great deal.

4.1 The British Invade

This photo gives a glimpse of the start of the Indonesian war of independence. After Japan capitulated, the British were given the task of restoring order in Indonesia. To do this, soldiers from British India were deployed. This included Gurkha brigades, elite units consisting of soldiers from Nepal. It resulted in a situation in which colonial troops from one colonial power (Britain) were used to defend the colony of another colonial power (the Netherlands). Eventually, this led to a bloody clash on 10 November 1945 between British and Indian troops on the one hand and Indonesian fighters on the other. This confrontation, the Battle of Surabaya, has entered the history books as the most savage fight of the Indonesian war of independence.



Soldier of the 3rd Royal Gurkha Rifles talks to a Dutch child. Batavia, 1945.
Photograph taken by Netherlands Indies Government Information Service (NIGIS).
KITLV 6760.

4.2 A Colonial Future?

At the Malino Conference in 1946, Lieutenant Governor-General Huib van Mook (wearing the tropical helmet) was welcomed by the Prince of Gowa. At this conference, Van Mook (as the highest-ranking official in the Dutch East Indies) revealed his new plans for the gradual decolonization of the colony. The idea was that the Malino Conference would result in a federal union of states that could act as a counterweight to the Republic on Java and Sumatra, which the Netherlands had recognized. However, Sukarno and his associates saw this as an attempt to undermine the Republic and viewed the Malino states as Dutch puppet states. Federalist Indonesians, however, wanted independence to be a gradual process, with local autonomy and in consultation with the former colonial power. The Malino Conference thus proved the start of a bitter conflict about the constitutional form and political direction that Indonesia should take.



Lieutenant Governor-General H.J. van Mook is welcomed by the Prince of Gowa at the Malino Conference, northeast of Makassar. Sulawesi (Celebes), 1946. Photograph taken by Netherlands Indies Government Information Service (NIGIS). KITLV A1133, KITLV 157695.

4.3 The Final Curtain

On 27 December 1949, the formal transfer of sovereignty to the Republic of Indonesia was signed in the Royal Palace on Dam Square in Amsterdam. This photo shows the Indonesian flag being raised during the transfer of the command over Central Java in Semarang. The origins of the Indonesian flag are not entirely clear. The story told on the Dutch side was that the flag was created when Indonesians tore off the blue strip at the bottom of the Dutch tricolour. But this ignored the fact that the Republican nationalists saw themselves as the heirs of a united precolonial Indonesia (the Majapahit Empire). It was believed that this empire also used a red and white flag back in the thirteenth century. Sukarno and his associates explicitly identified with that glorious past.



Transfer of the command, Semarang. Central Java, 1949. Photographer unknown. D H 1297, KITLV 40558.

4.4 Internal Strife (interview)

Mr R. from Java received military training from the Japanese after they had occupied the Dutch East Indies. After the capitulation of Japan, revolution broke out in Indonesia. R. and his comrades formed a combat unit using Japanese weapons. The unit became part of the Republic of Indonesia's national army, the TNI. However, other Indonesian military forces were fighting for control of the archipelago too. On 18 September 1948, soldiers of the communist party PKI started a rebellion together with sympathisers in the TNI in the city of Madiun, which at that point was controlled by the Republic. The merciless way in which the TNI put down this uprising convinced the United States that the Republic could become an ally in the global fight against communism. This made the uprising in Madiun a key turning point in the war in Indonesia. Mr. R. talks about the brutal treatment of the communist soldiers, a painful memory that continues to haunt him.



Indonesian communist students with banner. Near Tasikmalaya, date unknown.
Photographer unknown. D H 1691 (45).

TRANSCRIPTION

I: "When you saw how the TNI killed other TNI soldiers and PKI soldiers, it wasn't so clear anymore who were the good guys and who the bad ones, and who stood for what. How did you feel about that?"

R: "They were on the PKI's side. They shouldn't have been doing that. They were in the wrong. They were captured and shot dead. But first, before they got a bullet, they were stabbed with a bayonet. Oh!"

I: "And then they were shot?"

R: "Yes. I saw that, you know!"

I: "You saw that, and then you continued?"

R: "Yes. [Silence] It's not nice to have that in your mind again."

I: "Have you often thought back to that?"

R: "Yes. You can't just forget that. It's impossible. How they screamed when they got that bayonet in their body. Sometimes people say, 'He's just making it up! Are those things true?' But I saw it! I'm telling you, the TNI bayoneted them."

4.5 The Chinese in Revolutionary Surabaya (interview)

When the Allied British troops landed in Indonesia in 1945 to disarm the Japanese, the Indonesian revolution was already underway. An incident at the Oranje Hotel in Surabaya in which the Dutch tricolour was raised sparked off the bloodiest battle in the war of independence. The revolutionaries feared that the British would help the Dutch colonial power take back control. Everyone who the Indonesian revolutionaries suspected – rightly or wrongly – of spying or collaboration with the colonial power was in danger, including Indonesians. Chinese Indonesians too were often seen as representatives of the colonial regime. That was why Mr Sie and five others organized the evacuation of Chinese families from Surabaya. He talks about the violence that erupted at that time. While Indonesians remember this period as the Revolution, for the European and *Indisch* Dutch it is known as the *Bersiap*. These different perspectives on the war still reverberate today.



Chinese refugees making their way to the British lines during the Battle of Surabaya. Surabaya, 1945. Photographer unknown. KITLV 44715.

TRANSCRIPTION

S: "We slept in the rice husking mill with those... refugees, let's call them, all of them Chinese. On the way, I saw one person, a general; apparently he was an Arab because one of the bystanders said that. He said it was the Arab Sunkar. I'll never forget those words: Arab Sunkar."

I: "Arab Sunkar?"

S: "Sunkar is a name, Arab because he's an Arab and he's called Sunkar. He was dragged from South Surabaya in the direction of Sidoarjo. I saw that."

I: 'What do you mean, 'dragged'?'

S: "Dragged behind a truck, alive."

I: "Oh no."

S: "Dragged. Because he was a '*mata-mata musuh*' [spy]. And – I myself didn't see it but one of my friends did, Lian Hwat – people were burned. In the square. '*lya mata-mata musuh*.'"

I: "Were they Chinese people?"

S: "No, no. No Chinese at all. They were Indonesians."

I: "And you went to Surabaya for the Chinese..."

S: "To fetch them."

I: "...and take them to a safer place."

| Interview with Mr Sie Gwan San. CIHC Oral History Collection CIHC 22-1. No place, 2013.



[5.4]