

Violence in Text and Image

Violence is inextricably linked with war but the way that violence is recorded differs between conflicts. In the case of the Indonesian war of independence, various parties were fighting one another. That made talking about and depicting the violence a sensitive issue: which group was the victim and which group the perpetrator? In this theme, this question is considered from various points of view.

However, it should be noted that the material in this selection comes overwhelmingly from white Dutch soldiers. Their perspective is therefore inevitably overrepresented and that affects the choice of subjects. There are consequently only a few items about incidents of Dutch violence in this collection, while war crimes committed by the Indonesians – especially during the *Bersiap* – receive much more attention.

Even so, our aim in this theme is to show the violence of the Indonesian war of independence without letting one particular perspective dominate. In this context, it is important to query why some forms of violence were documented and others not. How do these sources colour our perception of the violence in this war?

3.1 Shot Down Like Dogs

Descriptions of extreme violence can occasionally be found among the many letters sent by Dutch troops. An example is this letter that was handed over to H.W. Felderhof, the procurator general of the Dutch East Indies, by R.A.H. Bergmann, an inspector in Parepare. The letter from an anonymous author describes what were termed ‘purgings’ (*zuiveringen*) by KNIL soldiers in Suppa, South Sulawesi (the island formerly known as Celebes). In this operation, Dutch troops murdered around 200 Indonesians on 28 January 1947.

“Burnt a few kampongs to the ground, rounded up the population and, based on tips from some spies, shot over two hundred people down [...] like dogs with our revolvers. [...] Forgot to mention one interesting detail about this mass murder: lots of the soldiers were keen to get the rings off the fingers of the corpses. [...] That’s not for me, it goes against everything I feel and think, and everything I value. I find it impossible to see our idealistic, educative task anymore with this thick veil of murders and daily shambles.”

Beste Paul,

Ben echt in de stemming voor dit verhaal "De Miantendrai". Heb vanochtend het bevestigen van de macht van de Nederlandsche bajonetten in het landschap Soegpa meegemaakt. Dit was wel de uiteindelijke consequentie van mijn naam. Bistoren is daar een grootschoepsche actie geweest. "Gedwongen troepen", van den land te maken aan het kwaad van rampokkers en terroristen. Een stuk of wat kampongs aangebrand, bevolking verzameld en op aanwijzing van een stelletje spionnen ruim tweehonderd mensen "jeng toeroet extremis atau perampok", als honden, met revolver, neergeschoten. Er is hier een Kapitein bij het leger, die in een psychopaten inrichting thuishoort. Iedereen heeft de schurft aan hem, hij domineert den Bataljons Commandant, een Major, en is van meening dat "de eenige goede Indonesiër is een doode Indonesiër". Heert hij Connie verteld. Welnu, dit heer heeft persoonlijk, en met het grootste

praktijken uitoefenen. Voor den oorlog was er, voorts zou nog een keer een gestrafte doodgeslagen hebben. Sic. Heb nog een interessant detail van deze massamoord vergeten: vele soldaten beijverden zich de ringen van de vingers van de lijken af te halen. Ik heb er niets van gezien, het was een armyshow, maar alles uit de eerste hand van den MIVT. Maar vandaag moest ik er

geenszins wil ontkennen". Het zij zoo, maar dan wil ik er niets mee te maken hebben. Dit ligt mij niet, het gaat in tegen alles, wat ik voel en denk en waaraan ik waarde hecht. Door dit dichte gordijn van moord en dagelijkse rotzooi kan ik de idealistische opvoedende taak van ons niet meer zien.

Bernman

Parts of a letter from an unknown author to Paul [...] about the mass execution in Suppa by Dutch soldiers, 28 January 1947. Parepare, South Sulawesi, 29 January 1947. One item. D H 1284, number 149.

3.2 The Indisch Bronbeek District

The *Bersiap* was an extremely violent period in Dutch and Indonesian history that lasted from October 1945 to early 1946. In this initial phase of the Indonesian war of independence, thousands of Europeans and *Indisch* Dutch (Dutch people of mixed European-Indonesian heritage), Chinese, Moluccans, Indonesians, British, Indians and Japanese fell victim to violence committed by Indonesian people's militias. Anyone who was seen as the enemy or a collaborator could not be sure of their life. A mass murder took place in the *Indisch* Bronbeek district of Bandung, which was home to retired KNIL soldiers. This photo shows the corpses of residents of this district after they had been exhumed and identified.

Later, the *Bersiap* became one of the specific events that Dutch veterans used to justify the war in Indonesia. The use of extreme violence against the alleged Indonesian perpetrators was regularly presented retrospectively by former Dutch soldiers as 'retribution' for this bloody period.



Civilian victims of the mass murder in the *Indisch* Bronbeek district of Bandung, Java, c. 1946. Photographer unknown. KITLV A216, KITLV 14032.

3.3 Anonymous Adversaries

After several defeats early on by the better equipped Dutch army, Indonesian army commanders increasingly resorted to guerrilla tactics. This strategy made it impossible to distinguish between Indonesian soldiers and the local people. As a result, the Dutch military became increasingly distrustful of Indonesian civilians. From their point of view, someone could be a villager one moment and an enemy soldier the next. That attitude can be seen in this photo where Dutch troops frisk Indonesian youngsters.

The Dutch army considered almost all Indonesians suspects. This was one of the many reasons why the Dutch forces in Indonesia became embroiled in a situation where the violence spiralled out of control. The dynamics were a breeding ground for acts of extreme violence: in such a tense environment many Dutch soldiers took the attitude of 'better safe than sorry'.



Dutch soldiers frisking Indonesian men. Batavia, October 1945. Photograph taken by Netherlands Indies Government Information Service (NIGIS). Or. 27.969, File Number 42, page 26.

3.4 The Final Convulsions

After the Dutch handed over sovereignty to Indonesia on 27 December 1949, there was an attempted coup on 23 January 1950 under the command of Captain Raymond Westerling. The aim was to overthrow the Republican government in Indonesia. This attempt to seize power was carried out by *Angkatan Perang Ratu Adil* (APRA), a military unit that was formed in secret. It was named after Ratu Adil, a mythical figure in Javanese culture who it was believed would one day release the people of Indonesia from oppression. The coup was soon put down by the Republic. It turned out to be a final convulsion, as it led indirectly to the official establishment on 17 August 1950 of the unitary state the Republic of Indonesia. It is quite surprising to find this particular photo in a Dutch album as it is rare for pictures of Indonesian victims of the Dutch army to end up in such albums.



Body of a TNI soldier in Bandung killed during the attempted coup by Angkatan Perang Ratu Adil (APRA) under the command of Raymond Westerling. Bandung, 1950. Photograph taken by D. Enkelaar. KITLV 42914.

3.5 An Indonesian Friendship Book

This photo album is the only one in the collection to have belonged to an Indonesian. Its owner was Sutarso Nasrudin, a soldier in the 1st Division of the Indonesian national army. The album is a friendship book that contains group portraits alongside love songs and battle songs. Thus the celebration of friendship goes hand in hand with a call to arms. It is not clear how exactly this object ended up in the Netherlands, but we do know what happened to Nasrudin. Written on the album cover are the words: “Seized in mid-Java 3-11 RI Owner Executed”. This information raises burning questions, particularly in the light of recent debates about returning colonial heritage items. Who does it belong to? A library in Leiden, the state of Indonesia or the heirs and descendants of Sutarso Nasrudin?



Photo's from an album belonging to Sutarso Nasrudin, a soldier in the Siliwangi Division of the TNI. Central Java, 1948. Photographer unknown. KITLV A1070.

3.6 Faked Escape

Ego documents such as the diaries of Dutch soldiers give a unique glimpse of individual experiences during the war in Indonesia. Many diaries are primarily a record of everyday routine but sometimes the reader chances upon a witness account noted down in passing of a skirmish or even war crimes. It is known that Indonesian prisoners of war were regularly shot and killed, whereby it was reported afterwards that the prisoner in question had ‘tried to escape’. This passage in pink ink is a witness account of this practice. It reports on the events in deadpan language (for example, the text in the margin says “Brains lay in newspaper on street”). The text notes that a prisoner who had “murdered Dutchmen” was shot down. The final sentence says “He made a ‘so-called’ escape attempt”, with the quotes around the word ‘so-called’ functioning as a disclaimer. The implication is that the prisoner did not attempt to escape at all but was simply executed.

Maandag, 17 Juni '46.
 Wacht bij het Huis van 4.30 tot 6.30.
 Gewerkt aan munitieopslagplaats.
 Flopper, die Hollanders vermoord had en
 met nog 5 andere gevangengehouden werd,
 neergeschoten. Hij wilde "hogenaam"
 ontvluchten.

Dinsdag, 18 Juni '46.
 Terrain schoongemaakt. Huurde mits.
 beschiet ploppers op 400 à 500 m. afstand.

Woensdag, 19 Juni '46.
 Geen bijzonderheden.

Donderdag, 20 Juni '46.
 Verhuisd naar oude lemp in Warandjenhal.
 Engelse majoor vraagt om inlichtingen.
 Engelsen altijd netjes gekleed, voor in
 de broek, ook op actie, pijp in de mond.
 Engelse traagheid, ook aan het front.
 's Avonds schaken in de Harmonie,
 Chinezen schaken goed. 10 sigaretten ge-
 wonnen. Met jeep van Lt. Schut om 12 uur
 in de lemp. Wilt. wagen voor de G.M.C.A.
 uitstappen.

Vrijdag, 21-6-'46
 Verlof. 's morgens om 6.15 met wagen
 naar Tjaloeng om aan de warmwater-
 bron te wassen. 2 films in Astoria en Capitol.
 "Thousand Cheers" over de Ameri. Tuf en Eddy
 "Gemwone" als Traperewerker.

Heerinnen
 lezen in
 (krantje)
 op straat

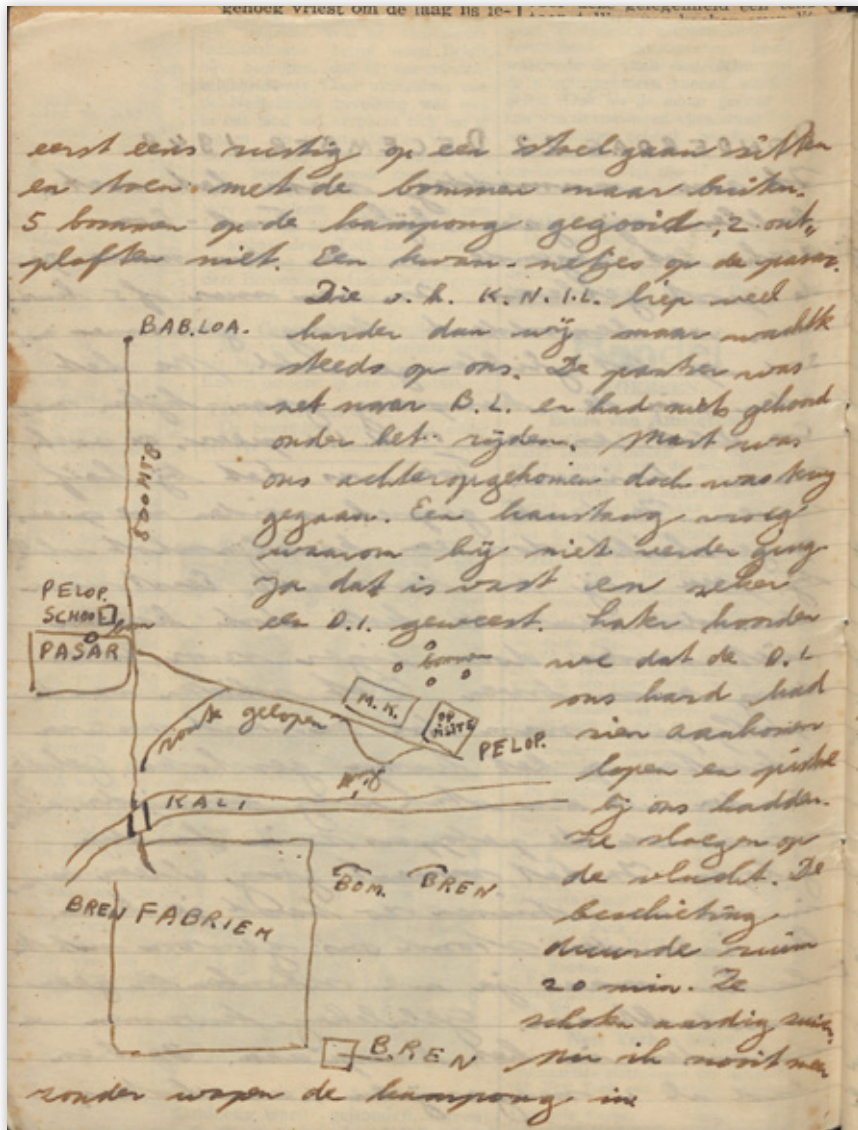
Diary of the soldier Verbeten, first company VII Reg. storm troops, army postal
 service office. Batavia, 1946. Or. 27.014-1.

3.7 Bomb on the Market

The Dutch troops had much better equipment than their Indonesian opponents. Not only were the Dutch infantry better armed but the Dutch forces also had heavier equipment such as tanks, planes, ships and artillery. The Indonesian forces made up for this imbalance by switching to guerrilla warfare. Without clearly defined battlefields, situations frequently developed in which there were civilian casualties, especially when Dutch troops deployed heavy weaponry. This was termed ‘technical’ or ‘mechanical’ violence and often involved shooting at a target from a great distance, with little idea of the effect. Such actions could result in large numbers of civilian casualties. This text mentions five bombs that were dropped on a kampong: “Two didn’t explode, one came down nicely on the pasar [market].” This soldier has drawn a little map showing the “pasar”, “factory”, “pelop” (short for pelopor, or pelopper) and “bomb”.

TRANSCRIPTION

“After eating in the kampong, went and had a look with [C.V.] and a KNIL chap to search for *kris* knives. We were in the middle of a conversation when we were disturbed by a carbine shot nearby. [...] The shooting from the *peloppers* increased and now they were shooting at the camp from three sides. [...] At that point, the only thing I could think of was to keep on walking as fast as I could. A native just stood and laughed at us but we ignored them. Luckily we got back to the camp unharmed. [...] Sat down first on a chair to get some rest, then went outside with the bombs. Launched five bombs at the kampong. Two didn’t explode, one landed nicely on the *pasar* [market].”



Diary of the conscript C. Kommer (see also p. 74). West Java, 22 December 1949. Or. 27.014-3.



[4.3, detail]