

## Voices from the War

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There are few people around in 2021 who can give eye-witness accounts of the Indonesian war of independence, and their numbers are becoming ever smaller. However, Leiden University Library's oral history collections still let us listen to first-hand testimonies of the war. Oral accounts not only provide new insights into historical events but also add nuances or reflections on those events. The interview extracts presented in this theme offer a wide range of personal perspectives on the war in Indonesia.

It is hardly surprising that all the interviews reveal the lasting impact of the war. As a source, interviews are highly subjective. Recorded many years after the event, they demonstrate how unreliable our memories can be or how interviewees are influenced by subsequent debates about the war in society at large. Even so, many people can recall their experiences with an impressive eye for detail. The 'voices from the war' that are presented here include civilians, soldiers and many others too.

The aim in making the selection was to let people with very different experiences be heard. Most of the interviews come from the collection of the Indonesia Oral History Foundation (*Stichting Mondelinge Geschiedenis Indonesië*, SMGI) and were recorded in the 1990s and 2000s in the Netherlands. This colours the witness accounts. One priority was therefore to select interviews that present positions and experiences from the war that usually tend to be overlooked, both in the Netherlands and Indonesia. Another selection criterion was the historical importance of the interviews: each testimony and each perspective brings us closer to the historical reality of the war of independence in Indonesia.

## 5.1 Pangs of Conscience (interview)

After a tough period of forced labour in Japan, in 1945 the *Indisch* KNIL soldier Mr Belvroy had to face Indonesian revolutionaries. Not long afterwards, he was transferred to the Special Troops Depot (*Depot Speciale Troepen*, DST) commando unit. He ended up on South Sulawesi under the charge of Captain Raymond Westerling, where he had to apply the notorious ‘Westerling method’. This method involved using harsh tactics to obtain intelligence from the local people, which was then used to draw up a list of alleged ‘terrorists’. The DST troops would encircle a kampong and the people on the list would be executed, in public without trial. While exact estimates vary, thousands of people were killed in this way on South Sulawesi between December 1946 and March 1947; this was a war crime that had approval from on high. Belvroy talks about how carrying out these ‘purges’ brought him pangs of conscience in later life.



Village next to a paddy field. South Sulawesi, 1937. Photographer unknown. KITLV 78227.

## TRANSCRIPTION

B: "Then you ask yourself if you really went through that. Then you feel guilty. You took part in something that you didn't want. That's sometimes difficult to explain. It's very difficult to be able to endorse it. The fact that you still went through it, without knowing or wanting it. Because that's what it's about in the end."

I: "You're referring to your military deployment against the Indonesians? How did you feel about that, the fact that you were deployed against your own people – if I can put it like that?"

B: "Yes."

I: "How did you feel about that?"

B: "You point your gun barrel at people you would actually like to keep alive. And that's the difficult thing: processing what happened. Even now. Because basically you're a soldier but you're also a murderer. Because that's what it's about: you need to be able to justify it, and that's not possible."

I: "Couldn't you go to your superiors and say, 'Sorry, I can't do this?'"

B: "That wasn't accepted. You were a soldier and you had to do your duty. That was what you were told."

## 5.2 Guerrilla and Counter-guerrilla Warfare (interview)

When Mr H. advanced with his KNIL unit during the first Dutch military operations in 1947, the Indonesian adversary was nowhere to be found. The Indonesian army had retreated, using scorched earth tactics, before the Dutch troops could launch their attack. The Indonesian troops waged guerrilla warfare against the Dutch army, which had the advantage of more weapons and heavier artillery. They used hit-and-run attacks to try and thwart Dutch attempts to restore colonial authority. Mr H. talks about a revenge campaign that his commander organized after two Dutch soldiers were killed in an ambush. The reprisals were aimed at setting an ‘example’ for the Indonesian freedom fighters, and for the local civilian population to discourage them from supporting the freedom fighters. This dynamic of guerrilla and counter-guerrilla attacks dragged the warring parties into a cycle of violence that spiralled out of control.



Dutch military column under fire during the Operation Product / *Agresi Militer Belanda* //First Military Action in the vicinity of Porsea. Sumatra, 1947.  
Photographer unknown. KITLV 14079.

## TRANSCRIPTION

H: "Look, of course you get excesses. If you're a bad person and you have some motive for shooting someone in the head, you'll think up a reason. That's what people are like. All that rubbish about us being comparable to the SS and us torturing people.

Well, I know one case of an ambush where civilians were shot dead and then the officer gunned down six people. Did I tell you that story?"

I: "I don't believe so."

H: "Well, one time a civilian vehicle got caught in an ambush, a provisions vehicle with a *baboe* to do the buying and two soldiers for protection. Two dead. The car smashed to smithereens. The commander was so furious that he grabbed six of his prisoners, took them to the site of the ambush and had them shot dead. He said they had to lie there for three days. Right, a really nice, quiet guy... I do remember his name, but – I mean because this is being recorded – I won't say his name because then some action group or other will say something nasty."

I: "How did you feel about it at the time?"

H: "Understandable, no more than that. I didn't approve or disapprove. Understandable."

## 5.3 Hearts and Minds (interview)

Mr D. grew up in Kampung Afrikan, a separate neighbourhood in Purworejo for descendants of African soldiers serving in the KNIL. In the nineteenth century, the KNIL had recruited these Africans via slave traders in Elmina on the coast of what is now Ghana. Their descendants, who were known as *Belanda Hitam* or ‘black Dutch’, usually had an African father and a Javanese mother. Many of these Indo-Africans followed in their father’s footsteps and joined the military as professional soldiers. However, Mr D. was called up for the KNIL in 1941 and was later held prisoner in Japan. When the archipelago was liberated, he joined the army again to help the British disarm the Japanese on Bali. Indonesian freedom fighters had recently started operating on the island. He talks about how his troops fought the revolutionaries on Bali and how the dividing line between the Indonesian combattants and civilians started to blur. At the same time, he was ordered to win the hearts and minds of the local population: a contradictory mission.



The Dutch Royal Marines provide outpatient care to the people of Kamal. Madura, 1947. Photographer unknown. KITLV 14075.

## TRANSCRIPTION

I: "How did those actions work?"

D: "We were given the necessary information about the Indonesian freedom fighters. Then, towards dawn, we would surround those villages. At daybreak the troops would enter the villages and the freedom fighters would be taken prisoner. But it was a heavy-handed operation. Of course the villagers soon realized what was going on. That's why the order was given not to flee. But I can imagine those people would have panicked and tried to flee anyway. They were simply shot down. That's incredibly... that is really... That's what happened every time. But of course there would inevitably have been innocent people who were shot down too. That is undoubtedly true. As a medic, I had to try and care for those wounded Indonesians."

I: "Do you know why you were given that order?"

D: "Of course we were supposed to generate goodwill among the Indonesians. In Mengwi on Bali, there was an Indonesian outpatient clinic. I'd regularly help out there, giving medicines. Because the army had more medicines than the Indonesians. We'd also confiscated the medicines that the Japanese had. So I gave that to the Indonesians. The idea was just to generate goodwill, of course."

| Anonymized interview with Mr D. SMGI 1187:1 (13), 1997.

## 5.4 Revolutionary Violence (interview)

After the Republic was proclaimed, the Indonesian revolution broke out, sparking a particularly violent period that is known in the Netherlands as the *Bersiap*. This word, which means ‘be prepared’ in Indonesian, became the battle cry for the *pemuda*, the youth militias, aimed at everyone who refused to accept Indonesia’s independence or who was suspected of this. While the period was dominated by Indonesian violence against the *Indisch* Europeans, Moluccans, Dutch and Chinese, there were many different victims and perpetrators of this extreme brutality. Violence could trigger an escalation in the form of reprisals. *Pemudas* attacked the Christian village in which Mr C., a Moluccan, lived. After being abused and humiliated, he was freed from Bogor (Buitenzorg) prison by British Gurkha troops. He then voluntarily joined the British army to take action against the Indonesians. Mr C.’s account shows how perpetrators and victims were not clearly defined separate categories in this early phase of the war of independence.



Indonesian nationalists guarded by Gurkhas. Batavia, 1945. Photograph taken by Netherlands Indies Government Information Service (NIGIS). KITLV 25305.

## TRANSCRIPTION

I: "Did the British take untrained youths and volunteers to fight alongside them?"

C: "Yes, you could apply to the British camp as a volunteer. These were police actions to stop the extremists infiltrating. And of course we were really keen to do something in return if possible. So for us, it was of course really fine to be able to take part in these police actions together with the British army."

I: "Did you have any sense that it would be dangerous?"

C: "Sure, that was made completely clear beforehand. These weren't games you were playing out there: they were serious operations. So you had to be aware of that, of course."

I: "Did you have to sign anything?"

C: "Well, no. We were so fanatically involved in the situation that we wanted to do our bit for these operations."

I: "And your parents?"

C: "My father was dead against it at first, of course. But you still pushed to be allowed to join them. I went along several times – two or three times, I think. Afterwards, I concentrated more on school."

| Anonymized interview with Mr C. SMGI 1303.3 (2), 1998.

## 5.5 Shades of Grey (interview)

Both propaganda and history books tend to make a sharp distinction between enemies and allies, but the reality was more nuanced. The father of Mrs S.J., a Javanese, was a KNIL sergeant but he could not progress further up the ranks because of his 'native' status. Mrs S.J. attended Dutch schools but felt Javanese. In the colonial period, she was in a scouting group that flew the Indonesian flag. But she was suddenly removed, as her father's reputation was at stake. During the Japanese occupation, she became convinced that Indonesians need to free themselves from both Japanese and colonial oppression. When the revolution broke out, her father joined the Republican army without a moment's hesitation. Mrs S.J. talks about her experiences and about her father, who later switched back to the KNIL. During the war, she married a Dutch soldier and emigrated with him to the Netherlands.



Young Indonesians stand to attention as the Indonesian flag is raised. Java, c. 1945-1950. Photograph taken by Cas Oorthuys. KITLV 44728.

## TRANSCRIPTION

SJ: "My mother and I had to go to Yogyakarta [the capital of the Republic]. We walked for three nights and three days. There wasn't any transport. We had to go to my father."

I: "Was your father back with the KNIL then?"

SJ: "No. He was with the TNI then. He's got a TNI uniform in his cupboard, as well as a KNIL uniform."

I: "So your father..."

SJ: "...switched sides to the TNI. When the Japanese left. He applied to them and was taken on. He was promoted a rank, because those KNIL guys had experience and the Javanese didn't. Then all of a sudden my father was a TNI captain!"

I: "Can you remember how your father arrived at that decision to join the TNI?"

SJ: "He's an Indonesian. That's an easy decision."

I: "He'd really got a feeling that the Dutch should never return?"

SJ: "Yes. But when the Dutch arrived, they had hope again, and then he immediately switched back to the KNIL."

I: "And when did he return to the TNI again?"

SJ: "Only later, after the Dutch had left."

| Anonymized interview with Mrs S.J. SMGI 1314.1 (14), 1998.

## 5.6 The Bombing of Malang (interview)

Whereas the Indonesian military were generally poorly armed during the war of independence, the Dutch army deployed tanks, ships and planes. This so-called ‘technical violence’ could cause considerable damage to the enemy. However, while these weapons had serious firepower, they were not very accurate. As a result, it was not uncommon for bombardments and artillery fire to lead to numerous civilian casualties. Unsurprisingly, this form of warfare sowed fear among civilians. Mrs S.M., a Chinese-Indonesian woman, was only four when she experienced the Dutch bombing of the city of Malang, where she lived with her family. She talks about this childhood memory, which illustrates the impact of the Dutch bombardments during the war.



Refugees making their way to the British lines during the Battle of Surabaya. East Java, 1945. Photographer unknown. KITLV 44717.

## TRANSCRIPTION

SM: "The street had to be evacuated. They had warned us that a Dutch plane would be bombing the street."

I: "Why would they do that?"

SM: "I don't know. Then I had to poo. Everyone was waiting for me outside the door. My mother told me all this later. My mother helped me. Then I'd just finished so my mother and I ran to the front door where everyone was already in the street waiting. Then the whole building was bombed to the ground, right behind me."

I: "So the bomb fell on your house?"

SM: "Yes, I got such a fright. I clung to my mother's legs, but she was heavily pregnant with my brother. I can remember – in fragments – that there were a lot of people lying in the street with their stomachs ripped open, blood, a broken leg and intestines. That was a bombardment like you see in films. A bomb doesn't have eyes. They don't just bomb the buildings; they were bombing the people too. So they could claim that Indonesia still belongs to the Netherlands. We walked to the borrowed house and then the next day my brother was born. In Jalan Dempo. We could borrow that house because the people who lived there had already fled."



[6.4]