To Dutch people who had travelled on the Noordam it appeared as if the consequences of the Great War had almost passed by the Netherlands Indies. People in the Netherlands Indies thought differently. They were aware that they were better off than the people in Europe, but as a woman wrote to De Locomotief in March 1917 ‘is it not beginning to become alarming expensive. The price of everything is rising: food, clothing, building materials (and as a consequence more expensive rents) and earnings remain the same’.¹

War had made life only more expensive for all population groups. Duurte, dearness, was on everybody’s mind. Europeans complained about high prices and grumbled because they had to forego with luxuries like Eau-de-Cologne and some of the foodstuffs and drinks which pleased their palate most. Initially there had been substitutes. Europeans could buy ‘Edammer’ cheese and ‘Rheinwein’ from Australia and ‘Bordeaux wines’ from California. They could eat delicatessen products imported from the United States and drink beer from Japan, which people by now had started to appreciate.² Maintaining eating and drinking habits only became a problem in the later years of the war, when imports from Australia, an important source of ham, flour, cheese, and butter, and from the United States were disrupted.

The Netherlands Indies were not completely dependent on imports, a modest effort was made to set up an import substitution industry. Beer was produced locally. In Java jenever distilleries were established; in Sumatra cigar factories. Erdman and Sielcken experimented with the production of margarine from coconut oil. Another novelty was the First Medan Tea Factory, a Chinese initiative, where tea was blended and packed. A Dutch rusk factory and a vermicelli factory were opened. A special treat was guaranteed when a company succeeded in producing Haagse hopjes (coffee-flavoured butterscotch sweets). Such efforts were a drop in the ocean. Their European bias irritated nationalist leaders. In February 1918, when a chocolate and cacao fac-

¹ De Locomotief, 14-3-1917.
² De Locomotief, 14-1-1915; Koloniaal verslag 1919:261-2; Helfferich 1921:14.
tory commenced production, Neratja wondered when finally a factory which catered for the needs of Indonesians would be built. The same newspaper reacted differently when Australia issued a ban on the export of butter and cheese. This time Neratja expressed the hope that the ban would be a stimulus to start the production of these products in the Netherlands Indies.³

Europeans began to worry that because of a shortage of wheat soon bread could no longer be baked. Once again it was observed that loaves of bread had become smaller.⁴ Fortunately, in Bandung an experiment to make ‘flour’ suitable for the production of bread from cassava was successful. For some time the army had already been trying to develop such a product, but in vain. Now someone had succeeded. A local reporter noted that mixed with real flour, the bread, biscuits, and cakes made from it were rather tasty.⁵ Others disagreed. There were plenty of complaints about its taste when the tapioca flour bread reached the shops. Earlier, in the middle of 1917, experiments to grow wheat in the Archipelago had been successful.

The relief afforded by all such experiments and initiatives was pretty small. In early 1918 the price of butter rose by 50 per cent within two months after Australia had imposed an export ban. The shortage that followed forced the colonial Navy to institute ‘butterless days’. No butter was served if there was jam, meat, or sardines on the table.⁶ The price of bread and tinned milk had doubled since 1914. That of other foodstuffs had also mounted: ‘Who’, an angry speaker in Ambon demanded, ‘remembers what the inside of a tin of sardines looks like?’⁷ The prices of medicines, clothing, and textiles followed exactly the same pattern. Shoes, those markers of European status and of modernity, had become too expensive to buy for people with a modest income.⁸ Rents had risen. In some instances they had doubled by 1917.

The time was ripe for the European community to complain. In De Locomotief a reader from Blitar indignantly asked why the colonial government did not intervene? When matters affected ‘the brown brother,’ Batavia was quick to act. If the daily lives of the Europeans were put under pressure, and if the colonial government was confronted with the might of the large import companies, Batavia hesitated to take appropriate action. He posed that it was the ‘pur-sang’ Europeans who were hurt most. They could not do without European foodstuffs, or, we may conclude from the way he went on, their drinks (a bottle of Dutch gin had become four to five times more expensive).

³ Neratja, 18-2-1918, 13-3-1918.
⁴ De Locomotief, 21-5-1918.
⁵ De Preangerbode, cited in De Locomotief, 8-4-1918.
⁶ Nieuwe Soerabaia Courant, cited in De Locomotief, 3-6-1918.
⁷ De Locomotief, 21-5-1918, 25-5-1918.
⁸ De Locomotief, 12-4-1918, 13-4-1918.
The reader angrily suggested that everybody should become a teetotaller. This would teach the import companies not to stock their warehouses full of jenever in expectation of higher prices.9

Indonesians did not lay behind in lamentations. As early as May 1916, in a fierce editorial Oetoesan Hindia had observed that since the outbreak of the war not only had prices of imported goods risen steeply but it was the same story for products made and grown in Java. Oetoesan Hindia urged the government to act against the ‘capitalists’, the leeches, who were making money hand over fist from huge war profits and who were responsible for the rise in the price of domestic products. Batavia had to wake up to just how serious the situation was. If they could not buy enough food, the Javanese might not support the Dutch if the Japanese invaded the island.10 People’s welfare was hard hit. In February 1917, a contributor to Islam Bergerak put the consequences of the war on a par with other disasters such as the plague, floods, and earthquakes.11 A few months later Oetoesan Hindia wrote that natives did not worry about the telegraphic blockade. For them there was only one question: mati atau roti, dead or bread.

Indicative of the growing poverty outside Java was the drop in government income from commutation of statute labour outside Java. It fell from 632,121 guilders in 1914 to 191,500 guilders in 1918.12 The increasing profits at government pawnshops mirrored the steep economic decline of the indigenous population of Java. Receipts increased from 10 million guilders in 1914, to 12 million guilders in 1916 and 14 million guilders in 1917.13

Prickled into action by the duurte, a variety of European and Indonesian organizations staged meetings to protest about the consequent high cost of living, in 1917 and early 1918. They asked the government to intervene and to fix prices. If we may believe a statement by the central board of the Sarekat Islam of March 1918, almost all its branches had organized protest meetings, which had drawn hundreds, thousands, and even tens of thousand people.14 On the principles the organizations were all agreed. The difference lay in the way the message should be conveyed. The ISDV and the Sarekat Islam wanted to present demands directly to the government. Boedi Oetomo and other more moderate organizations did not want to go further than to draw up urgent requests. Usually the resolutions accepted at such protest meetings were brought to the attention of Van Limburg Stirum by wire. A reader of

9 De Locomotief, 17-4-1918.
10 Oetoesan Hindia, 9-5-1916.
11 Islam Bergerak, 10-2-1917.
12 Volksraad 1918:529.
13 Volksraad 1918:528.
14 Neratja, 30-3-1918.
Oetoesan Hindia protested about this practice. It was a waste and a shameful fashion, a mania, at a time when entrenchments were being propagated from all sides. Each word cost 10 cents. Some telegrams held hundreds even over a thousand words. This was typical capitalist behaviour. It would be better to send a registered letter to the Governor General. The editors of Oetoesan Hindia begged to disagree. They claimed that it was a well-known fact that Batavia paid attention only to telegrams, registered letters got short shrift.

To compensate for the higher cost of living, European firms, the NHM in the forefront, had already increased the salaries of their European staff by adding a special allowance in 1916. At first no more than a few per cent, the allowance could rise as high as 15 per cent at the beginning of 1917. Some companies restricted this to Europeans who earned less than 500 guilders per month. Other companies gave their European staff an allowance depending on the composition of their family. Sometimes Indonesian and Chinese employees and labourers were also compensated, but often, not always – Internatio was one of the exceptions – at a lesser rate than the European staff. Neratja reacted

Oetoesan Hindia, 23-4-1918.
indignantly. Indonesians also worked hard and could not be treated as ‘mere natives’. The labour force usually had to do without. They were precisely the people leaders of the Sarekat Islam sagely pointed out without whom the estate owners would not have been able to grow rich.

Judging from a report in Djawa Tengah, which urged its readers to demand a similar measure from Chinese employers, Chinese firms did not follow suit, at least not immediately. Among those Chinese who did not pay their employees compensation, or perhaps not enough, were Chinese owners of sugar estates. The trade union of people employed in the sugar industry in Java and Madura, De Suikerbond (Sugar Union) called for action. Initially Batavia had also refused to pay a cost-of-living supplement, a duurtetoeslag, a word which was to enter the Malay vocabulary. The colonial government admitted that life had become expensive, but refused to follow the example of the private sector. A cost-of-living supplement would cost too much. Van Limburg Stirum’s staff had calculated that it would require expenditure of 8.7 million guilders annually. This calculation did not yet take into account a similar allowance for the soldiers in the colonial army.

Van Limburg Stirum tried to convince the civil servants that in the Netherlands Indies people had ‘more reason for gratitude than for complaint’. They should not demand a special allowance. People in Holland were far worse off. The colonial government could not ‘neutralize every consequence of war for civil servants’. As an additional argument, in the closing months of 1917 Batavia pointed out that it was no great burden for private firms to pay a cost-of-living supplement. They could well afford it. They only had few Europeans with a permanent appointment and in ‘the present circumstances’ they were doing ‘good, many even very good business’. The state was in a different position. It was suffering the financial consequences of the war, had to cope with an ever increasing expenditure, and had a much larger number of people with a permanent appointment.

The VSTP which had made a cost-of-living allowance a centre piece of agitation since January 1917, dismissed Batavia’s decision as a gross neglect of the interests of the civil servants. It did so at the end of the year in an appeal to other unions of public servants to make a united stand to force a fair cost-of-living supplement out of the government. Earlier attempts to make a

---

16 Neratja, 10-4-1918.
18 De Locomotief, 19-2-1917.
19 Van Limburg Stirum to Pleyte, 17-12-1917, NA, Kol. Geheim, Vb. 31-12-1917 A15.
20 Van Limburg Stirum to Pleyte, 17-12-1917, NA, Kol. Geheim, Vb. 31-12-1917 A15.
21 Circular, cited in De Locomotief, 5-11-1917.
22 De Locomotief, 27-12-1917.
common stand had failed. This time the VSTP appeal was successful. Twelve trade unions and other organizations met in Yogyakarta on 2 February 1918. They claimed to have 17,464 members. A telegram was sent to the Parliament in The Hague to ask for support. Among its signatories were Dwidojosewojo of Boedi Oetomo and Sneevliet of the ISDV. The telegram had at least one unexpected result. It made members of Parliament aware that Great Britain had ended its wire blockade.

The government gave in in April 1918. Batavia announced that it would compensate civil servants and soldiers who earned less than 315 guilders per month for the high cost-of-living. It was a progressive allowance. Those with a salary of less than 50 guilders received an increase of 20 per cent; those earning between 200 and 315 guilders 5 per cent. It was calculated that these allowances would cost the government 7.5 million guilders annually.

The compensation was immediately attacked as being too low. Throughout 1918 trade unions and other organizations continued to plead with the People’s Council, in petitions and in letters, for higher wages. To show that the government measures were inadequate some argued that the cost of living had risen by 30 per cent. To illustrate the desperate living conditions of Indonesian civil servants, Malay newspapers published surveys of how much money ordinary Indonesian civil servants had to spend on daily necessities and how inadequate their salaries were. The discrepancy between low pay and high expenditure was also presented as a reason – besides the rigid labour relations and the marks of homage superiors still demanded from their underlings – why, as Europeans did not fail to notice, fewer and fewer Indonesians entered the civil service. It was also claimed that only uneducated civil servants were forced to remain in government employment because they could find no job elsewhere.

Critics also stigmatized the compensation as inadequate. One of the reasons for them to argue in such a vein was that a cost-of-living allowance was only given to those who had a permanent appointment; not the people, some pointed out, who needed it most. Initially even retired people were excluded, but this mistake was redressed at the end of October 1918. Widows and orphans, many struggling with a very small pension, did not receive an allowance either. Batavia said that it had forgotten to include them. Yet another point of criticism was that the compensation did not take into account regional differences in the cost of living. One of the complaints claimed that

23 Handelingen Tweede Kamer 1917-18:1493.
24 Volkstraad 1918:135.
25 Neratja, 2-11-1918.
26 De Locomotief, 5-4-1918.
27 Volkstraad 1918:206.
life in Ambon was much more expensive than in Java. A teacher in Ambon who earned 300 guilders was still reduced to poverty and had experienced great difficulty in making ends meet. Consequently the local branch of the Nederlandsch-Indisch Onderwijzers Genootschap (NIOG, Netherlands Indies’ Teachers’ Association) asked for a special cost of living allowance of 25 per cent for salaries below 600 guilders. Those who earned less than 100 guilders should get even more.8

The criticism failed to make an impression on Batavia. The representative of the government for general affairs in the People’s Council, the lawyer D. Talma, explained that it never had been the intention to compensate in full for the rise in the price level. It would be unfair were only civil servants to be fully compensated and the rest of the population still continued to suffer from the high prices.9

Another specific point of complaint was rent. There was a housing shortage in almost all the larger cities. Housing had not kept pace with the increasing number of Europeans who had come to the colony before the war. It had also not been able to accommodate the growing number of employees on modest pay. During the war rents rose steeply, one reason lay the blame at the door of Arabs and Chinese especially, often the owners of houses rented by Europeans, even in the richer neighbourhoods. Relaxing the restrictions on residence of the Chinese and Arab population had also contributed its mite. Rich Chinese and Arabs took up residence in the quarters of town where the Europeans lived.

Projects to build cheaper houses had been started or were planned by municipalities and public companies before 1914. During the war such plans were still contemplated by Insulinde, the Sarekat Islam, and the NIOG. Suggestions that civil servants be given a special rent-allowance could be heard as early as January 1915. In the course of the war matters only became worse. In view of this, government services gave their employees a special supplement to cover rising rents, or paid them as travel allowance, to give them the opportunity to rent a cheaper house outside the city. In Surabaya, said to be a city where rents were especially high, civil servants who earned less than 60 guilders a month received a rent allowance of 5 guilders. Javanese assistant-teachers were excluded from the rent allowance. They complained bitterly about this; the more so because Batavia intended to deny them the rises in salary it gave to the better-educated ordinary teachers.30

Housing and rent affected people of all population groups, but the protests against rising rents focused on the problems it created for Europeans.

8 De Locomotief, 10-4-1918, 17-4-1918, 27-5-1918, 5-6-1918.
9 Volksraad 1918:557.
30 Oetoesan Hindia, 24-5-1918, 29-8-1918.
At times the issue drove Europeans and Indonesians apart. The Sarekat Islam withdrew as co-organizer of a well-organized protest meeting held at the City Gardens of Surabaya on 30 April 1918, attended by over 5,000 people. It did so after a conflict with the NIOG, an exclusive European organization, about what the aim of the meeting should be. The NIOG leaders wanted to highlight high rents. The representatives of the Sarekat Islam protested that rent was mainly a problem affecting the European population. Food prices and hunger should take centre stage.\(^{31}\)

Measures were taken in June 1918. The first step was an ordinance which protected house-owners against eviction by the owner of the land on which their houses were built. An ‘ordinance against the unreasonable forcing up of rents’ was issued a few days later. It pegged the rent level at that of 1 January 1916. Higher house rents were allowed only when local rent commissions gave permission. The Sarekat Islam organized information meetings to assist Indonesians tenants. The stated aim was to prevent that people were evicted or were tricked into paying a higher rent than that allowed.

Though hailed as a welcome step the rent ordinance did not bear full fruit. Not everywhere was it easy to appoint a rent commission. In Cirebon, in an effort to guarantee impartiality, the municipal council looked for somebody as a chairman who was neither a tenant nor a landlord. As most Europeans in the city rented their houses from Arabs or Chinese, such a person was difficult to find.\(^{32}\) In Semarang the mayor was reluctant to institute a rent commission. In his opinion rents had not increased too sharply. Ways were also found to circumvent the ordinance. From Batavia it was reported that Arabs did precisely this by upgrading the value of the furniture in the houses they rented out. Yet other owners tried to evict their tenants under the pretext that they needed the house for themselves to live in.

The adverse circumstances forced the colonial government to announce, as leaders of the Sarekat Islam and others in Java and West Sumatra had already asked, that it would be lenient with the collection of tax.\(^{33}\) As in 1914 Dutch colonial civil servants also hastened to urge the population to be thrifty. Leaders of the nationalist movement made similar appeals. The central board of Boedi Oetomo issued a manifesto, in Javanese and in Latin script, about the shortage of food and clothing amid ever-rising prices in May 1918. It urged the people to be careful how they spent their money. They should avoid all extravagant activities and purchases. The measures taken by the government to guard the welfare of everybody had to be obeyed to the letter. They should

\(^{31}\) Oetoesan Hindia, 27-4-1918, 29-4-1918, 2-5-1918.

\(^{32}\) De Locomotief, 19-6-1918.

\(^{33}\) Oetoesan Hindia, 18-5-1918.
not be misunderstood. It was the duty of all who read the manifesto, the statement ended, to explain the message to others, especially to those who could not read.\textsuperscript{34} Within the devout Islamic community, similar pleas were coupled at times with admonitions not to spend money on watching traditional performances of dance, gamelan, wayang, and other un-Islamic activities.\textsuperscript{35}

The dilemma was that food and clothing had gone up in price, and the economic consequences of the war had made it more difficult to find employment. A picul of rice which had cost 6 guilders in 1916 cost 11 guilders in February 1918, in Batavia as much as 12. Cassava had become more expensive. The price of eggs and chickens had doubled since the outbreak of the war. That of fresh fish had tripled. \textit{Kain} had become twice as costly.\textsuperscript{36} Equally burdensome was that the price of petroleum used in lamps had mounted. It was claimed that some Indonesians could no longer afford to light their houses at night because of this.\textsuperscript{37} On top of this, the tariffs on public transport had gone up. Decreasing purchasing power also affected the demand for luxury goods, which had still been bought by the indigenous population in the past. Among these were the better quality draperies, household utensils, and tinned food. More than under normal circumstances, people who were trying to cope with adverse circumstances pawned their possessions; not only bracelets, rings, necklaces, and other items of jewellery but also clothes. There were some who maintained that matters were even worse. People had become too poor. They had nothing left to pawn.\textsuperscript{38}

The consequence of rising prices for domestic retail trade were twofold. Increased unemployment in the estate sector and diminishing purchasing power in various regions – Semarang, Pasuruan, Kediri, Malang, Yogyakarta, Surakarta were examples – forced many \textit{warung}, small shops, to close down. Elsewhere people who had been forced out of a job or had experienced a drop in income had undertaken new economic activities. In West Java and in Madiun and Pacitan an increase in petty trade and in the number of food stalls was noticeable.\textsuperscript{39} In Madiun these activities were initiatives taken by women who had formerly worked in the \textit{batik} industry.

Especially hard hit were indigenous producers of export wares. The decreasing markets abroad for coffee, tea, rubber, copra, and forest products, and the necessity to keep local selling-prices low to compensate for high

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Oetoesan Hindia}, 13-5-1918.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Oetoesan Hindia}, 18-5-1918, 21-8-1918.
\textsuperscript{36} Schepenvorderingswet 1917:59; Handelingen Tweede Kamer 1918-19:2065; Soerabaiasch Handelsblad, cited in \textit{De Indische Gids} 1918, II:889; Koloniaal verslag 1919:261-2; \textit{De Locomotief}, 1-5-1918.
\textsuperscript{37} Neratja, 31-1-1918.
\textsuperscript{38} Neratja, 15-8-1918.
\textsuperscript{39} Koloniaal verslag 1919:265-6; \textit{Oetoesan Hindia}, 30-10-1918.
freight prices, had taken their toll. The consequences were glaringly visible. People in Tapanuli neglected their coffee plants. In Jambi, also hit by a decreasing market for rattan, the price for rubber grown by the population more than halved in the last three months of 1917. Rubber trees went untapped. From Bali it was reported that the customary sight of women carrying the coffee harvest down from the hills had become rare. In this case the NOT directives were blamed. Pleas by the Dutch government to the NOT to reconsider fell on deaf ears.

In North Celebes, a major copra-producing area, people were confronted with a lack of shipping opportunities, exacerbated by a low copra price. The situation looked alarming. There was little planting of rice, and with the disappearance of the copra market, no money to buy it. As a representative from the Minahassa in the People’s Council said: ‘As in Java and many other places in Insulinde, the economic conditions of the native population in the Minahassa are deteriorating fast, very fast’.

There were only a few products which still did well – pepper was one

---

42 Schepenworderingswet 1917:49; Koloniaal verslag 1918:31-2.
43 Volksraad 1918:206.
of them, pinang another – from which local producers in Aceh, Lampung, Bangka, West Borneo profited greatly. In the Riau Archipelago export of people’s rubber increased considerably.\textsuperscript{44}

In Java one of the sources of concern was the native tea producers. 1918 was a bad year for them. It was estimated that their income dropped to a quarter of what they had earned in normal times.\textsuperscript{45} In April some tea factories in West Java which used to buy their tea leaves stopped production. Other factories still accepted leaves from the population, but only when these were of top quality, while the price they offered was almost not a paying proposition. Driven into a corner by economic circumstances, indigenous producers had to sell their land. A report about one such case in West Java claimed that the owner received between 50 and 75 guilders per bau ($7096.5 \text{ m}^2$). Before the war the equivalent price had been between 400 and 500 guilders.

In April 1918 the colonial government decided to act. Batavia hired a tea factory in Cicurug, a region where indigenous production was high and factories had stopped buying leaves from the Indonesian producers. To defend the step Batavia pointed out that the local population could not do without its income from tea, and that if the government were not to act as a wholesale buyer, gardens would be neglected.\textsuperscript{46} Though in reaction to the government move, neighbouring tea factories increased the price they were prepared to pay to indigenous producers for their tea leaves, the government intervention had only a modest effect. A few months later \textit{Neratja} observed that Indonesian producers of tea who had once been rich had been forced to become labourers on the land they had once owned. \textit{Neratja} contrasted their fate with that of the European owners of the sugar estates which had recovered with the help of government assistance. In one and the same breath \textit{Neratja} complained that sugar now had become too expensive. Poor people could no longer afford it.\textsuperscript{47}

In Java the consequences of the war for the population at large had been somewhat hidden by the export of sugar which had continued unhampered for such a long time. Nevertheless, income had not kept pace with rising prices, and admittedly the number of Javanese and others employed in the sugar industry was small. There were about 51,000 people with a permanent appointment, about 600,000 in seasonal appointment (Carpentier Alting and De Cock Buning 1928:98). Those Javanese, and they were the majority, who only produced just enough rice for their own consumption, were badly stricken by the mounting prices, the more so when they had no secondary crops to sell.

\textsuperscript{44} Koloniaal verslag 1919:63-4.
\textsuperscript{45} Koloniaal verslag 1919:51-2; De Locomotief, 12-4-1918.
\textsuperscript{46} Volksraad 1918:59.
\textsuperscript{47} Neratja, 5-11-1918, 6-11-1918.
Europeans and their press seemed to have had little regard for the fate of the indigenous population. How the economic consequences of war affected them scarcely ever rated a mention in the European-language press. When it did the discontinuation of the haj was often used to demonstrate that it was not necessary to worry too much about a drop in the purchasing power of the population. Some Europeans completely ignored the consequences of the war for the indigenous society. In 1917 the President of the Javasche Bank still maintained that the situation of the population was very favourable. He claimed that native prosperity was permanently entrenched and would not be affected by the war. The following year he made the same observation.  

Others used the familiar colonial argument reiterating that natives were used to bad times:

Do not assume Reader that kromo can eat rice as he pleases throughout the year. He is not acquainted with such a luxury, he has never been acquainted with it. There are, even in the most favourable circumstances, always a few months in the year when he does not eat any rice at all. Then he eats secondary crops namely tuberous plants and root vegetables, like sweet potatoes, tubers, maize, peas, and the like. Then he seems equally happy and contented, at least he does not grumble and complain.

The Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij was more realistic. About 1916 it noted that because of the rising prices of foodstuffs and imports life had become more expensive for the population and that as a consequence prosperity was declining. The same can be said of the Bataviaasch Handelsblad. It concluded in early 1918 that conditions for the few thousand members of the European community were better than those for the people in Holland, but that millions of Indonesians were really suffering. A reader of De Locomotief made a similar observation. At the end of December 1917 he wrote that bad times had arrived for many families. How would the population for whom many essential goods had become too expensive to buy react? It ‘would be all too sad’ if food were to be among these items.

The Malay-language press generally sketched a gloomier picture. Its journalists claimed that the high price of food had forced people to cut down meals to only once or twice a day; that some could no longer afford any rice and had turned to maize, when this was available, and cassava; and that side

49 De Locomotief, 6-11-1917.
50 Verslag 1917:1123.
51 Bataviaasch Handelsblad, cited in De Indische Gids 1918, I:747.
52 De Locomotief, 22-12-1917.
dishes were skipped. *Oetoesan Hindia* concluded that the Netherlands Indies had entered a ‘season in which everything was expensive’. In another issue *Oetoesan Hindia* wrote that it was the Takdir Toehan, the Divine Decree of the Lord, that almost all over Java people were confronted with hunger and expensive foodstuffs. Leaders of the nationalist movement made the same observation. They stressed – at times overstressed – the misery war had brought upon the ordinary people. Tjokroaminoto pointed out that all goods, especially those which were counted among the necessities of life for the population, had become expensive. He spoke about ‘the poverty which had become chronic and the economic breakdown of a very large part of the native population in Java’.

The blame for the alleged decrease in rice consumption again went to the Chinese. They were accused of hoarding and were consequently called capitalists and egoists. At various places members of the Sarekat Islam went into the countryside to investigate how bad circumstances were and to advise the farmers on how to cope. In Jombang they were pleased with the result: almost no farmer any longer sold his rice to ‘the leech alias the middleman of the Chinese race’. Sometimes there were rather ugly incidents. In Leuwiliang Javanese women looted the shop of a Chinese because he refused to lower the price of the rice he sold.

The colonial administration denied that the situation was as alarming as the nationalist press and leaders depicted. Nevertheless, how a continued supply of rice could be assured had remained one of its top priorities; especially, as a Dutch man wrote, ‘because of the spirit of the population’ (Van Heekeren 1919b:139). Javanese agreed. During a meeting in Surabaya in April 1918, when a member of the Minahassa Union drew attention to the high price of butter he was jeered: ‘Rice, rice! We do not need butter! The stomach of a son of the soil demands rice!’

In spite of restrictions and obstacles, the import of rice had only increased in the course of the war: from 443,307 tons in 1913 to 741,576 tons in 1917.

---

53 *Oetoesan Hindia*, 20-8-1918, 21-8-1918.
54 *Oetoesan Hindia*, 8-5-1918.
56 *Volksraad* 1918-19:543.
57 Significantly, one of the few press reports about the arrests tells of an indigenous Indonesian apprehended at the Batavia railway station of Meester Cornelis for carrying thirty kilos of rice (*Neratja* 31-1-1918). Chinese on their part organized relief actions for regions where a famine threatened.
58 *Oetoesan Hindia*, 8-5-1918.
59 *Neratja*, 31-1-1918, 2-2-1918, 12-2-1918.
60 *Volksraad* 1918:38.
61 *Oetoesan Hindia*, 2-5-1918.
Java it had even doubled (Lulofs 1919:7). The entry into the war of Siam on the side of the Associated Powers in 1917 created an additional reason for people to ponder about cutting off of imports. All rice-producing regions in Southeast Asia had entered the Associated camp, and thus, as it was said, would follow economic directions from London. The ‘Entente circle’ around the Netherlands Indies had been closed.

The colonial authorities began to worry in earnest when Burma instituted a ban on the export of rice in October 1917. More expensive rice had to be bought in Siam, and this was reflected in an increase in rice prices on the domestic market. High prices affected not only the city dwellers. Other victims were the many farmers who could hardly make ends meet, or who were in the habit of selling their crop before harvest for a low price because of dire financial circumstances. Nevertheless, Batavia still refused to fix a maximum price for rice on the domestic market. It considered this would not be in the interests of the population. What was done was to instruct the civil servants in Java to make an inventory of the food supplies and to prepare for the day rice could no longer be imported in the Netherlands Indies.

To keep the food situation under control, the export of rice from Palembang and Sumatra’s West Coast to other parts of the Archipelago was forbidden on New Year’s Eve of 1917. Bans for other regions and for maize and cassava products followed. The contract between the KPM and the colonial government of British India in February gave some relief. It also permitted the KPM to strike back at its critics. Pointing out in an influential economic magazine that it asked a low freight price for the shipping of rice, importers and traders were blamed for the high prices of rice in the Netherlands Indies. Private organizations also tried to do their bit. Early March 1918, when rice imports from Burma had once more become possible, Insulinde, the Indische Bond, the SDAP, and a number of other European organizations announced that they had succeeded in buying rice in Rangoon and that they would sell this rice at a low price.

The seizure of Dutch ships quashed all optimism there still might have been. In some places, like Manado, people panicked when they realized that the requisitioning had put a halt to the import of rice. The crisis that threatened laid the colonial government open to attacks that it had failed to act with competence and resolution. Action should have already been taken in the wake of August 1914, when it had become clear how vulnerable the colony

---

62 Bataviaasch Handelsblad, cited in De Indische Gids 1918, I:80.
63 Volksraad 1918:330.
64 De Indische Financier, cited in De Indische Gids 1918, II:874.
65 Neratja, 7-3-1918.
66 Volksraad 1918:207.
would be if rice imports were to fall away.\textsuperscript{67}

To prevent a sky-rocketing of prices, the colonial government instituted a maximum price for rice and wheat on the very day news of the seizure of Dutch freighters reached the Netherlands Indies; this time showing no hesitation about doing so. A week later the stock of tinned milk was confiscated in Batavia and other cities to assure the supply to hospitals, children, and the sick. The decision to confiscate milk had been taken in a panic. Within days, the measure was abrogated when it was realized that there was still a supply large enough to last for five months.

To be able to enforce a maximum ceiling price of rice, Batavia earmarked special funds to allow central and regional authorities to buy up rice through the intermediary of village heads. \textit{Oetoesan Hindia} endorsed the government policy. It appealed to farmers to sell their rice to the government, and not to the (Chinese) capitalists, who, the newspaper claimed, were the reason why food was so expensive.\textsuperscript{68} As an additional precaution, legislation to combat the forcing-up of prices was tightened.

Impressed by the seriousness of the situation, Van Limburg Stirum called together an emergency meeting with the \textit{Residents} in Java in early April. He revealed that without imports the annual shortage of rice would amount to 400,000 tons for Java and Madura, and 300,000 tons for the rest of the Netherlands Indies. There was still some stock, which meant that shortage in 1918 would be 550,000 tons if rice could no longer be imported. The situation looked ‘very alarming’.\textsuperscript{69} The general public was told a different story. It was assured that not all was as bad as it looked. There were still sufficient stocks of food.

Leaders of the nationalist movement were also concerned. Abdoel Moeis wrote in \textit{Neratja} that the season of famine was just around the corner.\textsuperscript{70} After a meeting with representatives of local boards, the central board of the Sarekat Islam concluded that with the requisitioning of the Dutch freighters it ‘absolutely no longer had any faith that rice could still be obtained from abroad as it used to be’.\textsuperscript{71} The Sarekat Islam suggested that the government should be given a monopoly in the rice trade. It should buy up rice stocks and the crop in the fields, and sell the rice to the population at an affordable price. Batavia refused to acquiesce in this. It feared that such a drastic step would create too much unrest; a prospect it was not willing and probably would not be able to handle. The suggestion was also said to be impracticable. Most Javanese

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{De Taak} and \textit{De Locomotief}, cited in \textit{De Indische Gids} 1918, II:1003.
\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Oetoesan Hindia}, 21-6-1918.
\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Handelingen Tweede Kamer} 1918-19:2077.
\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Neratja}, 4-4-1918.
\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Neratja}, 30-3-1918.
farmers were small peasants who harvested only a small amount of rice, just sufficient for their own family. If the government were to buy up their rice, it would almost immediately have to be resold to them.\(^7\)

As with almost every measure taken by the colonial administration, the fixing of a maximum price met with criticism. Some considered intervention in the free market an infringement of personal freedom.\(^7^3\) Others were sure that price control would not work. The small retailers from whom the poor bought their rice would ignore it. Larger traders would simply sell second-grade rice as a more expensive variety.\(^7^4\) Yet others claimed that because of the maximum ceiling price traders would be hesitant to buy rice from the Javanese peasants. Even worse, a fixed price would deprive the small farmer of the opportunity to make a nice profit at last. European traders with their lawyers and connections could continue to make war profits; the Javanese peasant had nobody to defend his interests.\(^7^5\)

Things did indeed go wrong. Batavia had to admit that enforcing a maximum price was ‘a matter that was completely new’ and that it had ‘no experience whatsoever’ in this field.\(^7^6\) In Batavia the price fixed was lower than the existing market price, which put the retail traders in a difficult position. The price was even lower than the market price outside Batavia. Traders bought rice in Batavia and sold it for a higher price outside the city. To make such a trade impossible, the transport of rice from one regency to another was forbidden. Even in Batavia itself it was difficult to enforce the maximum price. State companies and the army bought up rice at a higher price. This had been done, it was explained, because of the ‘extraordinary circumstances’.\(^7^7\) Traders also ignored the price limit set. One of the reasons for them to do so was that they themselves had bought rice at a price higher than which they were allowed to sell. If rice was not sold openly at a higher price, one of the tricks to circumvent the maximum price indeed was to sell cheaper rice as a more expensive variety. In other cases local authorities acted too hastily. In Semarang the municipality sold rice at a price lower than that on the market. It turned out to be a fiasco. There was no shortage of rice in the town, while people considered the rice offered to be too poor a quality for the price asked.\(^7^8\)

The main goal Batavia set itself was to increase the production of rice and other food crops. Van Limburg Stirum personally impressed upon the

\(^7^2\) De Locomotief, 2-4-1918, 6-4-1918; Volksraad 1918:58.
\(^7^3\) De Locomotief, 13-4-1918.
\(^7^4\) De Locomotief, 17-4-1918.
\(^7^5\) De Locomotief, 10-5-1918.
\(^7^6\) Volksraad 1918:330.
\(^7^7\) De Indische Gids 1919, II:883.
\(^7^8\) De Locomotief, 16-5-1918.
Residents of Java that they had to convince their staffs of the utmost importance of food production. All other interests had to bow before this. Javanese farmers were advised not to grow tobacco or other export products which no longer yielded a profit. They should concentrate on the planting of food crops. Rewards were held out to Javanese civil servants who really flung themselves into increasing food production.

In their effort to circumvent the imminent food crisis the authorities also tried to change the diet of the Indonesian population. If all else failed, substitute staples would have to do the trick. A campaign was started to have people eat less rice and more cassava (which they liked less than maize). Civil servants outside Java were informed that if the local population was not yet familiar with cassava as a staple, Batavia was more than happy to send a trial packet. The sooner people changed their eating habits the better. The Director of Agriculture wrote to the Residents in Java that care had to be taken to see that people should not start eating alternative foodstuffs only after rice had become unavailable. Rice was a product that could be stored for a long time. Its major substitute, dried cassava roots, could not. After a while dried cassava roots tended to ‘disintegrate into powder’. It can be deduced from the words of his successor that it was hoped that cooking instructions would help. He had come to Java on the Noordam and was of the opinion that there was no reason to complain in the Netherlands Indies. War bread in Holland tasted more like putty than real bread. With this in mind, he tried to convince the People’s Council that there was nothing wrong people ate cassava or maize in times of shortage of rice, providing that ‘there is enough food and they learn to prepare it in a tasty way’.

There was no lack of suggestions. A reader of the Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad wrote that sago formed a good alternative to rice. In Java ‘Ambonese soldiers could teach the population how to eat the eat sago’. Others were dubious. Sago was a blessing as well as a curse. It was a curse because it was easy to produce and had made those who had sago as their staple lazy and lacking in initiative. Consequently, people living in sago-producing regions could not be counted upon to increase their harvest. They could not be tempted by money to work extra hours. Perhaps, a solution would be to involve prisoners in the production.

The suggestions that eating habits be changed did not have much effect as

79 De Locomotief, 5-4-1918.
80 De Locomotief, 16-4-1918, 2-5-1918; Oetoesan Hindia, 3-5-1918.
81 De Locomotief, 2-5-1918.
82 De Indische Gids 1919, II:881.
83 Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad, cited in De Locomotief, 5-4-1918.
84 De Locomotief, 30-5-1918.
long as the necessity to do so was not clearly felt. In the cities people refused to part with their rice. With ‘some amazement’ it was also observed that Chinese in Sumatra refused to eat maize instead of rice. At times the appeals completely misfired. In Surakarta where the food situation looked particularly alarming in the hinterland, the Sunan issued a proclamation drafted by the Dutch *Resident*. Rich and poor were asked to have only one meal a day (in the evening) with rice, maize, or cassava and eat other foodstuffs at other meal times. The statement was read at markets and the *Resident’s* request was also brought to the attention of the workers on the estates in view of the ‘present, extremely abnormal times’.

To issue such an appeal was not a prudent step, especially not at a time when Javanese rulers, civil servants, and notables had become an object of criticism in nationalist circles, and not only there. Even Dutch-language newspapers made fun of the ‘fatherly proclamation’. *De Locomotief* suggested that the rulers should also address their advisors, the Dutch authorities. They should ensure that such Dutchmen and their servants and pets no longer ate rice, bread, or potatoes. They should also stop consuming large quantities of biscuits, macaroni, vermicelli, or other rich people’s foods. It was these Dutchmen who could afford a slimming, not the ordinary Javanese. They were already undernourished because of the present difficult circumstances. To ensure that Europeans heeded the food restrictions, they should be weighed once a month. After a few months, if their well-fed corporations did not shrink, this was proof of the fact they still had a hidden supply of food.

Part of the Malay-language press seized upon the proclamation to attack the Javanese rulers. Intentionally or not, the proclamation was sometimes presented as an order to eat only one meal a day. It was also subtly insinuated that the police would enforce the order. Malay newspapers used the proclamation to point out how much the Javanese suffered from taxation and other demands imposed on them by the colonial government. The blame for their tribulations was set squarely on the shoulders of the own rulers and civil servants who condoned and shared in this. The weekly *Medan Boediman* explained that once upon a time the rulers had cared for their people. They had supported them in bad times with goods and prayers. This was no longer the case: ‘the rulers do not care about the people and consequently the people do not care about the rulers’. Instead of handing over land to their subjects to be planted with food crops as they should, the rulers of Yogyakarta and Surakarta had

---

86 *De Locomotief*, 2-5-1918.
87 *De Locomotief*, 10-5-1918.
88 *Islam Bergerak*, 20-5-1918.
89 *Medan Boediman*, 30-10-1918.
rented out land to the capitalists for their estates. Because they blocked any improvement in the lot of the people in other ways as well, it would be best if the rulers were pensioned off. It was a view which was also voiced in the Sarekat Islam. Oetoesan Hindia attacked the Regents Association for remaining silent at a time when the people suffered. Even worse, by pretending that all was well and by not informing others about shortages of food, it was the Javanese civil servants who were to blame if the people were starving. Dutch civil servants acted differently. The Resident of Kediri was cited as an example. He had admitted to representatives of the Sarekat Islam that there was a shortage of food in his territory.

The phrase about rulers who cooperated with the capitalists was one of the ways in which the growing hatred towards the European estates manifested itself. Discussions in early 1918 about stepping up the production of rice focused on the need to reduce the acreage planted by the sugar factories. Such a solution had already been suggested as early as August 1914. Speculating then about a blockade of the ports of Java, Oetoesan Hindia had suggested that Idenburg should prepare for such an eventuality by ordering the estates to grow food crops. The idea resurfaced in public debate in 1918. The suggestion that estates be turned into sawah was highly controversial. Because of this, the food situation was a topic which, as was observed, was written and spoken about almost more than the war itself. ‘The people cannot live from sugar’, became a popular expression, also in the Dutch-language press.

The reputation of the sugar estates was bad. The Javanese and progressive Europeans put the way in which estates hired land from the population and arranged the irrigation of their fields to the detriment of local farmers on a par with outright exploitation. It was common knowledge that the war had brought the sugar estates great profits; profits in which the population did not share. In order not to alienate the more moderate members and those who propagated the growth of Indonesian trade and industry, during its second national congress in October 1917 the Sarekat Islam announced a battle against what was called kapitalisme jang berdosa, sinful capitalism, by which in the first place the sugar estates were meant. Abdoel Moeis described the sugar industry as the ‘goldmine of the big capitalists’. For the Malay press the estates formed an easy butt of propaganda. Oetoesan Hindia called the estate owners

90 Oetoesan Hindia, 8-5-1918.
91 Oetoesan Hindia, 22-4-1918.
92 Oetoesan Hindia, 11-8-1914, 19-8-1914, 12-8-1914.
93 De Indische Gids 1919:743.
95 Volksraad 1918:298.
the cruellest people on earth.\textsuperscript{96} Djava Tengah blamed the expanding acreage of the sugar estates for the fact that the population had to eat expensive imported rice.\textsuperscript{97} In Oetoesan Hindia it was argued a few months later that this sort of rice not only cost over the odds, the quality was also nothing to write home about. The rice was said to be extremely poor, to have lost most of its vitamin value because it was too old, making it a health hazard, and when cooked exuded a nasty smell.\textsuperscript{98} The way in which the sugar industry was castigated even in the People’s Council shocked the public in Holland. The words used did in a sense backfire. Not all criticism was taken seriously, people were suspicious that it was inspired by a general desire to lash out against the ‘big capitalists’.\textsuperscript{99}

Even an organization so loyal to Dutch rule as the Regents Association criticized the way the estates operated. At its meeting in November 1914, after the association had testified to its loyalty, attention had been drawn to the unrest created by the sugar estates. The warning had not been without reason. It was by no means a rare occurrence for angry villagers to set fire to sugar-cane fields or for labour unrest to erupt. Some estates even reserved a special sum of money to buy off potential trouble-makers. The estates were not unaffected by the mood of the population. By the autumn of 1916 the anxiety of August 1913 when European newspapers speculated about the prospect of a St Bartholomew’s Night reared its ugly head again. The President of the General Syndicate of Sugar Producers informed the government that, on the basis of information gathered by its informers, he was sure that a violent attack on Europeans was planned in Central and East Java. The object was nothing less than ‘a general massacre’. On behalf of the sugar estates, he asked Batavia to provide the European employees with extra weapons and ammunition. Batavia refused as it wanted to avoid a panic. No Europeans were murdered at that time. The only variation in the general pattern to be observed was an increase in visits to the mosque.\textsuperscript{100}

Undeniably unrest had reappeared in the countryside in its pre-war intensity. As in the past, members of the Sarekat Islam intimidated or boycotted outsiders, including the Chinese. A ‘social democrat and member of the SI’ wrote in October 1918 in Oetoesan Hindia that the people ‘felt so oppressed, so bled white, so humiliated, so discriminated against, so unprotected, so irritated, so enraged’, that they no longer cared a straw for the law and had started ‘to

\textsuperscript{96} Oetoesan Hindia, 24-4-1918.
\textsuperscript{97} Nieuwe Soerabaia Courant, cited in De Locomotief, 2-4-1918; Djava Tengah, cited in Koloniaal Tijdschrift 1917:1111.
\textsuperscript{98} Oetoesan Hindia, 20-8-1918.
\textsuperscript{99} Handelingen Eerste Kamer 1918-19:461.
\textsuperscript{100} Note by v.d. H.v.O. [Van der Houven van Oordt], 2-11-1916, Resident Rembang to Van Limburg Stirum, 6-11-1916, NA, Kol. Geheim, Vb. 26-7-1917 ???.
burn the forest, to burn sugar cane, to murder Europeans, to steal, etc.’.\textsuperscript{101} It was the ‘season of fire’ and of thefts and strikes on estates. Many were the instances of the burning of crops in the field and in sheds. Figures presented were horrendous. In 1917 the total number of sugar-cane fires had been 900. In 1918 1,326 fires were lit between January and the end of August.\textsuperscript{102} One sugar-cane estate had been struck by 75 cane fires in eight months.\textsuperscript{103} Theft of sugar cane, sometimes committed by large gangs of Javanese operating in broad daylight, showed a similar upward trend. One estate claimed that of some of its field 35 to 50 per cent of the crop had been stolen. The damage was estimated at 88,000 guilders.\textsuperscript{104} Railways sleepers, rails, and parts of the lorries of sugar trains were also stolen.

Elsewhere people stole tobacco from the estates and set fire to tobacco sheds. Organized theft of cassava from the fields was also rampant. One estate was reported to have had 2,600,000 cassava plants, representing a value of 200,000 guilders, stolen. At times groups of people took away tens of thousands of plants at night. Sometimes, as happened in Blitar, they even ventured this in broad daylight. Kediri, which had a reputation as being a ‘difficult region’, suffered especially badly. Such thefts had started here in December 1917. Some Dutchmen blamed the local Sarekat Islam. They accused its leaders of having hinted that should people be unable to buy cheap food, they could always steal cassava. Extra guards did not help. Troops had to be sent to Kediri to guard the cassava planted on estates.\textsuperscript{105}

Managers began to complain that estates might be forced to close if thefts continued on such a large scale.\textsuperscript{106} Leftist Europeans and the leftist and moderate nationalists blamed hunger, high food prices, capitalism, and economic exploitation for the increase in thefts of agricultural produce and for the fires on sugar and other estates. Indubitably another reason for the thefts was the money thieves could make from selling sugar cane and cassava. Hatred of the sugar estates was also said to lurk in the background. In the People’s Council Tjokroaminoto pointed out that cane-fields were supplied with water in abundance. While cane flourished rice withered in adjacent fields because of lack of water. He said that cane was burnt because of anger about such injustice or in an attempt to obtain water for the rice fields.\textsuperscript{107}

Perhaps not surprisingly many Europeans had other ideas. They blamed the colonial government for its failure to maintain law and order. In the

\textsuperscript{101} Oetoesan Hindia, 22-10-1918.
\textsuperscript{102} Volksraad 1918-19:225.
\textsuperscript{103} Oetoesan Hindia, 20-8-1918.
\textsuperscript{104} Volksraad 1918:225.
\textsuperscript{105} Koloniaal verslag 1919:45-6; Neratja, 1-11-1918.
\textsuperscript{106} Volksraad 1918-19:226-7.
\textsuperscript{107} Volksraad 1918-19:549.
Soerabaiasch Handelsblad  Boon went as far as to suggest that if the Dutch authorities could no longer protect the estates, other countries with large investments in the plantation sector should be invited to intervene. Europeans interpreted what was happening as an increased threat to their person and goods. They pointed to the many burglaries of houses of European staff on estates, and to the occasional murder of Europeans. On plantations which had run into financial difficulties, staff were sometimes attacked by coolies who had not been paid. Again wild stories ran riot recounting threats to life and property. The European community demanded a strengthening of the police force, especially in Central Java and the Eastern Salient of East Java. Estate employees armed themselves with a pistol when they went out into the fields. Their companies once more turned to the government for extra protection. Such appeals were greeted with some malicious delight in Oetoesan Hindia. The rich who had so far only profited from the war, had now begun snivelling to their father to ask for protection.

To be fair, estates also took their own precautions. Private security guards had there also been in the past. In 1896 the colonial government had given them the power to arrest people, but only on the land of the estate itself. By 1918 such bodies were considered to be ineffective. The Vorstenlandsche Landbouwvereeniging (Agricultural Association of the Principalities) founded a cultuurpolitie, estate police, or cultuurbrigades, estate brigades in October 1918. Neratja claimed that the aim was to act upon villagers who had enough of the way the estates operated and burnt and destroyed crops and property. It was estimated that each estate needed a brigade of about thirty guards. Local

---

109 Oetoesan Hindia, 3-10-1918, 17-10-1918, 26-10-1918.
colonial civil servants supported the initiative. The guards should be Javanese, but as they might be on friendly terms with local villagers, each unit should be commanded by three or four policemen from North Sulawesi or Ambon. At the end of the same month, during a meeting in the Concordia Club in Malang, the Java Sugar Association suggested that European staff on the estates should always go around armed with a Browning and a revolver (which most already did). In order to be able to hit the mark, they also had to learn to shoot well. It was no use waiting till the government acted. That might be too late. ‘Before that time you might already be dead and buried, and your family reduced to extreme misery. No rot! Act! Self Help!’ Malay newspapers copied the report about Dutch fears and brave words.

Shivers of alarm spread through the Sugar Union. Its board sent out a circular. To convince the government of the necessity of additional security measures, the members were asked to report all the information they had about violent incidents. The Sugar Union was especially interested in attacks on employees ‘whether or not committed under a certain provocation’, thefts of produce from the fields, and ‘incidents of laxness or unwillingness on the part of the police’. ‘Blatantly deliberate rudeness to Europeans’, and acts of instigation by natives and Europeans should also be reported. The information was needed to prove that

in the interior respect for the authorities is declining, that the native no longer spares the life and property of Europeans, that there are incontrovertible indications of a definite rebellious spirit among the population and of an increase in explosions, in magnitude as well as in number.

No less important was the need to convince the government that ‘orally and in writing the population is incited to commit acts of violence’. The circular advised the members to act ‘dispassionately’. Restraint was necessary in view of the ‘irritability of the population which unarguably does have its natural causes, but which, because of the systematic, artificial feeding by demagogues represents a very large danger to the employees’. In short, the population ‘suffered from severe overstrain’. Only the government had the power to ‘cure’ this. In the magazine of the union the ‘(criminal) slackness’ of the colonial administration was blamed for the circumstances that had arisen. South Africa was held out as an example. There ‘no Kaffir will dare to walk on the pavement’. In Java, a Javanese would rather collide with a European than step aside.

110 Neratja, 19-10-1918; Volksraad 1918-19:228.
111 Soerabaiasch Nieuwsblad, cited in Oetoesan Hindia, 4-11-1918 and Neratja, 11-11-1918.
113 De Suikerbond, cited in De Indische Gids 1919, I:248.
As uncultivated land in Java was scarce, there was no other option but to turn for an increase in food production to the estates. As early as 1916, building on earlier experiments, the colonial government had taken steps to develop an irrigation system which would allow for better irrigation of the fields planted by the Javanese farmers, without damaging the growing of sugar cane. It had tried to convince the estates companies to build large water reservoirs on their land which would allow the land planted with food crops to be irrigated during daytime, and not only, as was the practice, at night. Because the estates had to bear the costs, the reaction had been negative. Now the time had come to contemplate more drastic measures. The estates could provide the land for additional rice fields should food production have to be stepped up. The food situation appeared so alarming in early 1918, Van Limburg Stirum seriously contemplated using the option to force sugar and tobacco estates to reserve one-quarter of their acreage for the production of rice. It was borne in mind that other estates might have to follow. Indigenous producers of export crops should be left untouched as long as possible. Should circumstances require that land of indigenous producers of export crops had to be planted with rice, the measure should be confined to those crops which no longer yielded a profit.

The scheme to reserve part of the land of the sugar estates for the production of food won the wholehearted support of the nationalist movement. During meetings of Boedi Oetomo and Sarekat Islam motions with this intent were carried, loudly applauded by those present. The Sarekat Islam wanted to go further than Van Limburg Stirum did. In April 1918 the Sarekat Islam presented Van Limburg Stirum by wire with a motion carried at a meeting of its central board with local branches and with representatives of the ISDV and Insulinde. The Governor General was asked to convert half of the sugar acreage into rice fields. This was presented as a minimum requirement. The meeting had only taken the food situation in Java into account. The rice shortages elsewhere – which the Sarekat Islam leaders said they were not in a position to calculate – might well imply that a larger acreage would have to be reserved for food production. The meeting did not confine itself to demands to do with the sugar industry. The land of tobacco, tea and coffee estates producing for the foreign market should also be turned into rice fields. The government should take the responsibility for the rice production on these additional fields, or should give financial assistance to the ‘people’ to plant them. In no way should the estates themselves be allowed to arrange the planting of food crops on their land, and profit from this at the expense of the Javanese farmers.

The scheme was opposed by the owners in Holland, who had united themselves in the BENISO. According to the BENISO reduction would disrupt the industry and would vitiate the expansion, which had cost so much effort and
money to attain in previous years. The BENISO and those who agreed with the union stressed that the volume of extra rice produced – usually putting forward much lower figures than those mentioned in the estimate of the government – bore no relation to the financial consequences for the industry, and, a point such people never failed to mention, the Javanese labour force. To demonstrate the wickedness of the scheme it was also suggested that a reduction in production could well lead to the mass slaughter of the buffaloes used for the transportation of sugar.

Dutch colonial civil servants also were not without reservations. They had calculated that a reduction by one-fifth would mean a loss in wages of 11.5 million guilders. The additional rice planted might bring in six million guilders for the Javanese. They also had started to realize that having labourers return to their villages would not solve all problems, as had been suggested it would do in the past. Even Javanese needed money; if only to buy clothes and household utensils. How much money the redundant labourers would need and to what extent fellow-villagers would support them when they returned to their village remained an ideological issue, an argument to be used when it suited a person’s own position. In 1918 leaders of the Sarekat Islam argued that the estate labourers could well be embraced by the village community. The following year it was the communists in Dutch Parliament who echoed the same sentiment.

When Pleyte informed him that the ‘general feeling’ in Holland was that only in an extreme emergency should sugar fields be turned into rice fields, Van Limburg Stirum changed his mind. On 29 April 1918, he told a deputation of the Sarekat Islam that for the time being it was not necessary to issue a directive forcing the sugar estates to plant part of their acreage with rice. The deputation had come to try to convince Van Limburg Stirum of the urgency of the food situation. Van Limburg Stirum assured them that they did not have to worry. Rice imports had been resumed. No famine loomed. There was only a shortage of food.

Tjokroaminoto did not agree. A statement issued by the Sarekat Islam in March 1918 had claimed that Indonesians were suffering from lack of food and had been forced to eat inferior food (such as gadung, a kind of yam) which endangered their health and was in fact only fit for animals. It was claimed that in some places, Indonesians had died of starvation. At the meeting

114 Economisch-Statistische Berichten, 24-4-1918, p. 343.
115 De Locomotief, 18-6-1918; Bezwaren 1919:673; Volksraad 1918:57.
116 Volksraad 1918:38.
118 Neratja, 30-3-1918.
Tjokroaminoto presented Van Limburg Stirum with proof. He showed him pictures of starving people in one especially hard-hit area: Trenggalek in the south-west corner of East Java; a region which by now had become the symbol for the Sarekat Islam of the suffering of the ordinary Javanese and of what might be in store if the food situation deteriorated any further. Tjokroaminoto explained that these were photos of people who were best situated, people who could still walk to a relief centre established by Sarekat Islam members and a number of Chinese. Oetoesan Hindia reported that on seeing the photos Van Limburg Stirum’s face had become grave. Tjokroaminoto also told Van Limburg Stirum that the Sarekat Islam not only blamed the war for the food crisis, the ‘capitalists’, hoarding food, were equally culpable. The government should interfere and take the distribution and trade in rice into its own hands.\(^\text{119}\)

What had happened during the meeting was part of a recurrent phenomenon. Spokesmen of the colonial administration downplayed the effects of the war on the living conditions of the Indonesian population. They also denied that hunger had struck on a unprecedented scale. At most they were prepared to speak about food shortages, or the threat of these in the near future. Nationalist leaders told a different story. They talked about famine and highlighted the miserable conditions of the population. Members of the ISDV and the Socialists in the Netherlands Indies shared their view. In the People’s Council Cramer observed that ‘[h]unger uprisings are not rare and are often counted among the most vicious ones!’\(^\text{110}\)

No directive about a decrease in the sugar acreage was issued, but Van Limburg Stirum had created the impression that when forced to choose between sugar and rice, he would opt for the latter. He also had made no secret of the fact that when circumstances necessitated this he would give preference to the irrigation of rice fields above those of sugar cane. This was much to the dismay of the Sugar Syndicate which protested about such an idea to Van Limburg Stirum and Pleyte.\(^\text{111}\)

Van Limburg Stirum had not completely discarded the idea of a reduction in sugar production. He and his staff pondered about the possibility that, even if ships were available for transport, bad harvests in the rest of Asia could put an end to the import of rice. Another thought that haunted them was that after the war the Allied Powers would reserve all surplus rice in their colonies and in Siam to feed people in Europe.\(^\text{112}\) The sugar companies were made

\(^{119}\) Oetoesan Hindia, 4-5-1918, 13-5-1918, 14-5-1918, 15-5-1918.

\(^{110}\) Volksraad 1918:168.

\(^{111}\) Economisch-Statistische Berichten, 24-4-1918, p. 343, 1-5-1918, p. 367; Java-Bode, cited in Oetoesan Hindia, 24-4-1918.

\(^{112}\) Volksraad 1918:37.
to understand that the government would welcome a reduction in acreage. Management was asked to consider such a step. The Javasche Bank exerted extra pressure. The bank pointed to the difficulties experienced in exporting sugar and indicated that it might be less forthcoming with loans to estates which did not reduce their sugar-cane fields.\textsuperscript{123}

In some cases such gentle pressure was unnecessary. The poor export prospects did the government's work for it. Sugar and tobacco estates reduced their acreage and started to grow rice. The sugar estates did so by 15 per cent on the average (Carpentier Alting and De Cock Buning 1928:70). As had been predicted during the discussions about a forced limitation of their fields, they often only let go of their less productive fields.\textsuperscript{124} The reduction in sugar production was welcomed by members of the Sarekat Islam. For them it was proof that their agitation had worked. It was even claimed that the local population had revived and had become prosperous.\textsuperscript{125}

In Sumatra the rubber estates were ordered by their head offices to reduce production by one-third. No labourer was sacked because the managements of these estates were anxious to avert lack of manpower when peace had been restored and exports could resume their normal course. Surplus capital and labour were employed to improve drainage, and to build or improve factory buildings, warehouses and living-quarters.

The panic seemed to have subsided at the end of May 1918. Batavia concluded that the danger of a food shortage in Java had been averted. Large quantities of rice had been imported. In spite of temporary export bans abroad and in spite of the requisitioning of Dutch ships, Batavia had succeeded in importing even more rice than in the same period in 1917. A small amount of rice, 13,200 picul, taken from the government stock of imported rice, had even been sent to Suriname, to alleviate the food shortage over there.

Outside Java, the food situation had also remained under control. Nevertheless, additional measures had to be taken in Sumatra because private estates and mines had not heeded the earlier suggestion to build up a stock of food sufficient to last a couple of months. East Sumatra was an exception, but in Lampung, Biliton, and Bangka stocks were small. Estates and mining companies asking for rice from Java were urged to take measures to cut down on the consumption of rice. The Biliton Company complied by forbidding the feeding of rice to pigs and poultry and by restricting the production of rice wine. It also decided to employ between 5 and 10 per cent of its labour force in the growing of maize and cassava instead of in tin-mining. Another 500 of

\textsuperscript{123} Economisch-Statistische Berichten, 24-4-1918, p. 343.
\textsuperscript{124} De Locomotief, 3-4-1918, 3-6-1918; Volksraad 1918:298.
\textsuperscript{125} Sarekat-Islam Congres 1919:24.
its Chinese labourers were employed in dry-rice cultivation.\textsuperscript{126} In Biliton the results were disappointing, but in Bangka the rice harvest of 1918 was one-and-a-half time larger than in the previous year.\textsuperscript{127}

\textsuperscript{126} Distribution report 5 (5-22 April 1918), NA, Kol. Geheim, Mr. 1918/144x.
\textsuperscript{127} Koloniaal verslag 1919:63-6.