
Margreet van Till’s *Banditry in West Java, 1869-1942* is a new study of a mode of crime that has intrigued and divided social and economic historians for many decades. Van Till’s main aims are, firstly, to investigate the rise of banditry in West Java within the context of an expanding Dutch colonial state, and secondly, to account for the ‘relationship between popular images [of banditry] and historical reality’ (p. 2). In its explicit treatment of banditry as a prism through which to view a range of social developments in late-colonial Java, this book also speaks to a wider range of contentious issues in Indonesian and colonial studies such as histories of violence, revolution and policing, discourses of modernity and colonial reform, notions of city and countryside, and trajectories of state formation.

The first chapter establishes the setting, the colonial Residency of Batavia, whose bustling capital was at the ‘epicentre of modernization in the archipelago’. The sparsely-populated *Ommelanden* (environs) of Batavia, on the other hand, became notorious for *rampok* (violent robbery) in the nineteenth century and, in the reformist context that prevailed after 1901, when the Ethical Policy was introduced, a site of growing colonial concerns over lawlessness.

The rest of the book is divided into three parts that examine banditry from the perspectives of the robbers, the city-dwellers who feared them, and the (emerging) state that sought to eradicate them. Since few autobiographical sources produced by bandits themselves survive, Van Till uses Malay and Dutch language newspapers and official government reports throughout the book to reconstruct the ‘historical reality’ of bandits in part two, and to supplement representations of and responses to robbers by city-dwellers and colonial authorities in the third and fourth sections, respectively.

The four chapters comprising part two (‘The bandits’) survey economic conditions in West Java, the organizational structure of criminal gangs, the technologies they made use of (chiefly firearms), and their tactics, which drew on magical and mystical reputations, martial arts and cross-dressing. Van Till employs a world systems paradigm to frame her examination of the late-colonial milieu of bandits. Important conclusions from this section
are that, contrary to leading extant studies in the field, peaks in banditry in West Java were not consistently linked to economic downturns; nor did robbers target export goods from plantations; and their activities do not appear to have been organized and framed as social and political protests against ‘modernization’. Instead, cases of rampok peaked in the period when the colonial police force became professionalized (1890-1920) and were thus linked to processes of state formation; bandits were motivated primarily by the opportunities presented by an emerging money economy (‘crime pays’) (p. 51); and they operated individually in ‘co-operative frameworks that were constantly fluctuating’ (p. 66).

In part three (‘The city-dwellers’), Van Till devotes three chapters to examining how bandits from the Ommelanden were represented by urbanites in Java and the Netherlands. She extends the timeline of her study up to recent times, consults fictional sources (bandit novels and detective stories) to account for the colonial period, and examines oral traditions, theatre, and films to provide images of bandits in post-colonial Indonesia. In doing so, she reveals that notions of banditry were informed by discursive dichotomies between town and countryside, modernity and backwardness that prevailed during an era of liberal reforms and accelerated colonial expansion in the archipelago. She also traces a historic shift in colonial representations of bandits, from nineteenth-century images of brave, masculine heroes—a reputation they retain in Indonesia today—to twentieth-century views of social degenerates.

Part four (‘The state’) comprises a single chapter that investigates how authorities responded to banditry in West Java. It employs more press reports, as well as government archives, to trace the formation of a professional police force from 1903 onwards. Van Till outlines how, despite an initial rise in violent robberies during the reorganization of police forces, and inevitable conflicts over the jurisdiction of old and new authorities, incidents of banditry declined to a historic low by the end of the Dutch period, largely as a consequence of police reforms. This chapter arguably contains Van Till’s most significant contribution, namely, a lack of evidence from West Java to support Robert Cribb’s thesis (advanced in Gangsters and revolutionaries, 1991) that the pemuda of the Indonesian revolution were essentially redeployed bandits. Van Till argues that—in West Java, at any rate—revolutionary violence and banditry was produced by discontinuous historical conditions and perpetrated by different historical actors.
She attributes conflation of the two types of violence to the popular representations originating in the colonial period of the kind described in part three of her book. An intriguing theme of how concepts of modernity and its opposites cohered around banditry in the late-colonial period permeates Van Till's study, but its treatment lacks theoretical rigour. For instance, she demonstrates through critical analysis of primary sources how a peculiarly urban, colonial notion of modernity was formulated with respect to a region (the Batavian Ommelanden) and a social group (bandits) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at a time when progress and reform were on the political agenda for Europeans and Indonesians alike. Yet Van Till herself frequently invokes ‘modernity’ to describe a period of what might otherwise be considered ‘high’ or ‘new’ European imperialism—an era of accelerated territorial and administrative expansion combined with limited liberal colonial reforms. This sometimes leads to confusion between what contemporaries considered to be ‘modern’ (and for what purposes) and what Van Till understands by the term.

However, the conflation is common enough in colonial studies, and does not detract significantly from what is otherwise a valuable study. Indeed, Banditry in West Java offers some important correctives to the historiography of banditry, and to histories of violence in Indonesia, that deserve investigation by further local studies.

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Reference

Cribb, Robert