David van Reybrouck, *Revolusi: Indonesië en het ontstaan van de moderne wereld*.

Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2020, 637 pp. ISBN: 9789403183404, price: EUR 39.99 (hardback).

With *Revolusi: Indonesië en het ontstaan van de moderne wereld*, Van Reybrouck engages a large, general public with the rather complex history of the Indonesian War of Independence between August 1945 and December 1949. This has everything to do with the fact that Van Reybrouck has couched the relatively short, revolutionary period in the longer context of Dutch empire. This necessary step allows readers to understand that the revolution was no bolt from the blue. Rather, its events were outcrops and direct consequences of the racism and brutality that so characterized Dutch-occupied Indonesia. The *revolusi* was a very long *revolusi*, instead.

Another step towards fostering understanding is how the book dissects colonized Indonesia's subjugated and stratified society. The book likens it to an ocean-liner with three decks—a ship bound to sink. On the lowest deck, the have-nothing masses—a dehumanized workforce—languished under a Dutch yoke. One deck higher, the have-mores resided, eternally looking up. Equally barred from ascension, they were categorized by the Dutch as 'higher' classes and 'races'. On the first deck, languorously soaking up the sun, those who ruled were waited upon, by virtue of being (considered) European and/or worshipping at more appropriate altars. Despite strict hierarchies, decks three and two had commonalities, even with parts of deck one: Dutch colonial policy made upward mobility extremely difficult; Indonesians, and many Chinese and Eurasians suffered from its discriminatory, racist foundations.

Having set the stage, Van Reybrouck delves into the Japanese occupation between 1942 and 1945, which figures as the catalyst that finally removed the Dutch from the equation. As Japanese colonizers stared their demise in the face, Indonesian nationalists, both old and new, took the chance to channel long-cherished and broadly-supported dreams of independence. On August 17, 1945 Sukarno and Hatta proclaimed Indonesia independent. With his subsequent description of the actual revolutionary years, again Van Reybrouck's knack for clear explanations emerges. The chronological narrative deftly cuts up the revolution so that subsequent key drivers of events are assigned their own periods. Hence, the British period is followed by the returning Dutch taking control, who are then eclipsed by the United States, who subsequently deferred to the United Nations.

As these periods steam towards the revolution's historical conclusion, another of the book's major strengths shines through. The human face it lends to the long struggle for independence is both riveting and timely, not unlike Bay-

BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL-, LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE

© ROEL FRACKING, 2021 | DOI:10.1163/22134379-17704011

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 license.

Downloaded from Brill.com04/26/2023 01:20:37PM
via free access

ley and Harper's *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Asian Empire* (Bayley and Harper 2007). With more than 180 people interviewed on all sides, *Revolusi* is a very humbling personal account, lending weight to the suffering, hope, heroics, and the sheer courage of those who refused to give up. All were present during Indonesia's revolution, and also witnessed sadism, brutality, and cold-blooded murder.

For all its feats as an oral and, above all, accessible history for the public, does *Revolusi* deliver for those more intimately familiar with the Indonesian revolution, such as its historians? Not entirely. The book overstates what it accomplishes. Contrary to what Van Reybrouck has publicly said in the newspaper *Trouw*, for example, Dutch historians do recognize that the Indonesian guerilla was well-organized—like veterans, they have done so for some time. Nor do those same historians 'insufficiently realize' that the 'explosion of violence' right after 1945 against Eurasians was heavily linked to the horrors of empire, or that the revolution 'flowed from a genuine desire' for independence. The back-cover's claim, that *Revolusi* divests the revolution from 'the national perspective' (whose?), sounds a mite inflated. Such remarks seem more designed to enhance the book's impact and less to engage with existing, up-to-date debates on the subject (Brassem 2020).

Despite these statements of intent, *Revolusi* does not alter much of what is known about the revolution, except for giving bottom-up perspectives of 'ordinary' participants and witnesses their due weight. In many ways, this is enough and important in and of itself, and, not to mention, very appropriate. Still, the book's descriptive nature does not lend itself for novel understandings of, for instance, the ebb and flow of (inter-communal) violence. Van Reybrouck's attempts at simplification, moreover, can be as reductionist as they are laudable. In many places, one-dimensionality and style sacrifice nuance for grand statements. Everything is equally momentous. The latter flows from the book's insistence that what happened in Indonesia was singular: similar processes seemed to have happened nowhere else. Instead of embedding the revolution internationally, it is cut off in that sense. Consequently, *Revolusi* claims that the 'Third World Movement' basically commenced with the Bandung Conference of 1955.

The flowing narratives have similar flattening effects. Van Reybrouck's quip that only with the independence proclamation did 'the history of the third largest country in the world start' sounds very fateful (p. 289). Such snappy semantics, however, diminish the long and arduous preludes to the revolution itself, as well as their importance for Indonesia then and now. The federalists are also impacted by the need for narrative. They hardly feature except when Van Reybrouck needs to show the Dutch were being abandoned by even their

'most loyal allies' (p. 446). A fairer treatment of the historical record shows that the federalists, although under tremendous Dutch pressure, were not mere puppets of Dutch political designs. Instead, understanding the Republic would have the longest breath, federalists acted accordingly.

Strangely, the Republic's internal workings seem almost absent and its presence distant in Van Reybrouck's cast of key players. The Republic simply 'was'; its power evenly welcomed and felt across the archipelago's entirety (despite the large majority of informants from Java). The frequent changing of governments is relegated to the margins, along with the constant tensions between radicals and moderates and the 'social revolutions' that by early 1946 had wiped out feudal rulers in various localities. Internal dissent is largely reduced to the communist revolt in Madiun in September 1948, and even then *Revolusi* explains it as having been caused by American negotiators. It was they who had forced the Republic into signing away political and military gains with the Renville Agreement (p. 430). More indirectly, the rise in 1949 of the *Darul Islam* against the Republic is also placed on the American doorstep (pp. 419–420).

In 1996, Frederick Cooper famously cautioned that historians tend to analyze backwards from known end-points: they let victorious, anti-colonial 'nationalism [subsume] all other struggles' (Cooper 1996: 6–7). With his eye firmly on the Republic 'formally' attaining independence in December 1949, Cooper's words are lost on Van Reybrouck. His *Revolusi* was a unified mass drive towards one end-goal shared by all: independence under a unitary Republic. With total recall, informants express that they knew, from 1945 onwards and often before, what exactly the Republic and its revolution set out to accomplish. Where everybody was on board, so to speak, local variations, doubt, divergences, or roads not taken are largely lost.

For all the care Van Reybrouck has spent collating the spectacular amount of interviews, one wonders whether the book's readership had been better served by the placing of accents to enhance the carefully-constructed narratives. Accents would have made the interviews even more powerful. Still, painful questions remain: why does every new book on the subject *again* elicit a collective 'I didn't know' from Dutch readers? When will *Revolusi's* message finally remain to trump colonial aphasia? Quite possibly, forcing the exploration of the answers will prove to be *Revolusi's* most important contribution.

Roel Frakking

Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies

(KITLV), Leiden, The Netherlands

frakking@kitlv.nl

References

- Bayley, Ch., and T. Harper (2007). *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Asian Empire*. London and New York: Penguin Books.
- Brassem, E., 2020, 'Interview David van Reybrouck. David van Reybrouck is Verbijsterd over het Gebrek aan Historisch Besef in Nederland', *Trouw*, 29 November 2020. <https://www.trouw.nl/verdieping/david-van-reybrouck-is-verbijsterd-over-het-gebrek-aan-historisch-besef-in-nederland~b60e8e1f>; accessed on 26 April 2021.
- Cooper, F. (1996). *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.