
This stellar collection of original essays arrives with a rich and tangled backstory. In 1969, the Dutch Government, in response to a spate of published stories highlighting incidents of severe human rights abuses by Dutch forces during the Indonesian war of independence, issued a formal statement. “The armed forces as a whole,” it insisted, “had behaved correctly in Indonesia” (p. 100). That so-called *Excessennota*, based on a smattering of archival research, served as an official exoneration of Dutch military conduct; it relegate any abuses to the actions of a handful of wayward individuals, dismissing any notion of a systemic problem. Yet subsequent scholarship increasingly uncovered disturbing patterns of human rights violations—what this volume terms “extreme violence”—that went well beyond isolated cases of violent misbehavior by individual soldiers. Foreign Minister Ben Bot’s formal acknowledgement, in 2005, that the Netherlands “had stood on the wrong side of history,” reflected changing perceptions of the Dutch-Indonesian conflict within both scholarly circles and within the wider Dutch society (p. 12). Bot retroactively acknowledged, for the first time, the legitimacy of the Indonesian Republic’s August 17, 1945, declaration of independence and implicitly criticized the Dutch Government’s decision to deploy large-scale military might against Indonesian nationalists.

Yet many scholars believed that Bot did not go far enough, especially since he remained silent on the explosive, emotionally-laden question of human rights violations. By the turn of the century, Dutch media, scholarly researchers, and public forums were devoting increased attention to that raw, and long overlooked, historical subject. In 2012, three leading Dutch research organizations released a public plea for the initiation of a broad-based, government-funded investigation into the conduct of Dutch troops during the Indonesian conflict, with a particular focus on the nature and amount of excessive violence employed during the fighting. Finally, at the end of 2016, four years after he rejected the initial proposal, Prime Minister Mark Rutte agreed to fund such a study, to be undertaken jointly by the three prestigious research institutes that had called for it: the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), the Netherlands Institute for Military History (NIMH), and the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies.

The present volume is the product of that four-year effort. *Beyond the Pale’s* first section features three excellent essays that provide an explication of the project’s guiding principles and methodology along with overviews of the mil-
itary and political contexts for the struggle over Indonesia’s decolonization. A brief second section, termed “The Human Dimensions,” features the recollections of ordinary people caught up in the bloody colonial conflict of 1945–1949. The third section, which forms the bulk of the study, contains nine chapters. Each explores a different aspect of the overall inquiry, expertly and dispassionately probing the nature of and explanations for the excessive violence used so routinely by Dutch military units.

Those chapters range widely: from an examination of the frequent episodes of indiscriminate violence meted out to civilians to the disproportionate deployment of heavy weaponry; and from the intelligence war, with its brutal interrogation techniques, to the role of legal and judicial processes in largely failing to sanction human rights abusers. In a particularly illuminating contribution, Thijs Brocades Zaalber and Bart Luttikhuiss compare patterns of Dutch extreme violence in Indonesia with broadly similar British and French human rights depredations during their anti-colonial wars in Vietnam, Algeria, Malaya, and Kenya. The third section’s final essay offers an especially thoughtful analysis of the way that Dutch citizens and Dutch society have processed competing and conflicted memories about the Indonesian war of independence, highlighting the role played by veterans’ groups in inhibiting frank debate for too long a time.

Following an expansive conclusion that reiterates the project’s chief findings, the volume closes with an epilogue by the noted Indonesian scholar Hilmar Farid. He provides a much-needed Indonesian perspective on what is essentially a self-examination by contemporary Dutch academics of the conduct—and misconduct—of their country’s military more than seven decades ago.

The overarching finding of the project holds that the extreme violence visited upon Indonesians by the Dutch armed forces was not just commonplace but systemic and structural in nature. The study categorically refutes the apologia of 1969’s Excessennota. Dutch soldiers’ actions, the authors conclude flatly, “had been both legally and morally beyond the pale” (p. 451). The explanations offered here for the systemic misconduct of local and expeditionary units—including frequent incidents of torture, rape, execution without trial, mass detention, and the wholesale destruction of villages—are multiple and mutually reinforcing. The Dutch occupiers pursued “an unrealistic and therefore risky strategy, with insufficient resources, based on an underestimation of and contempt for the adversary, which lowered the threshold for extreme violence” (p. 442). Further, Dutch armed forces suffered from “inadequate leadership at various levels, inexperience, an overly one-sided focus on conventional warfare, and insufficient education, training, communication and dis-
cipline” (p. 442). More broadly, the contributors to this project link the routine human rights violations of the Dutch military to the colonialist mindset of the era, with its “tradition of violent oppression, racism and exploitation” (p. 463). “Dutch soldiers and government officials in Indonesia and the Netherlands,” add Remco Raben and Peter Romijn, “were guided by the colonial impulses of prejudice, paternalism, and control” (p. 344). Those impulses also derived from deep-seated convictions about their own superiority to the native inhabitants of the Indies and led, among other matters, to a failure to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants.

If this important book suffers from a major limitation, it stems from the unavailability to its researchers of documentary evidence from the still-closed Indonesian archives. Inevitably, that absence leaves the reader with the sense of a one-sided story, in which the victims of Dutch atrocities remain largely voiceless, the full consequences of the extreme violence inferred herein rather than meticulously examined. That said, *Beyond the Pale* stands as a laudatory achievement, a volume that belongs on the bookshelves of all scholars of decolonization. It relates a difficult and highly significant history with rigor, acuity, and honesty.

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