
“If I am caught, burn this notebook to ashes,” wrote Sutarso Nasrudin, a member of the Siliwangi division of Indonesia’s National Armed Forces (TN1), on the notebook’s last page. Its destruction, he hoped, would protect his colleagues, whose names and photos were in it. Now, 72 years later, the notebook’s contents and Nasrudin’s life story adorn the opening passages of a catalog titled *Revolusi! Indonesië Onafhankelijk* (Revolution! Indonesia Independent), published in the Netherlands. Nasrudin would have never imagined his notebook to be exhibited in Amsterdam. For years, it collected dust under piles of similarly abandoned documents. It eventually resurfaced as evidence of an epic albeit sparingly discussed past, and a testament to Nasrudin’s fate. “The owner was executed, anno 1948” was stamped on the notebook’s cover (p. 10). In 2004, Nasrudin’s book was purchased by the Royal Netherlands Institute for Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV). It became part of an outstanding collection now kept at the Leiden University Library (pp. 9–13). In 2022, Nasrudin’s story and his “record of friends” was viewed by thousands at the similarly named exhibition *Revolusi! Indonesië Onafhankelijk*, held from February 11 to June 5 at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

Thousands of personal items were confiscated by the Dutch army in Indonesia between 1945–1949. They included documents, posters, paintings, photographs, cameras, and even protective amulets, sometimes pinned to the belts of Indonesian freedom fighters. Surprising stories appear in both the exhibition and the catalog of *Revolusi!, amidst substantial representation of the different aspects and historical narratives covered. The catalog’s ten essays, written by Indonesian and Dutch curators and historians, create a separately important archive. They depict the cruel darkness of colonialism, the painful grey zone between collaboration and merely the accusation thereof, and the sum of deaths on both sides in the face of the volatile struggle for Indonesia’s independence. In its wake came violence—inevitably.

These ten essays approach this watershed moment—following 350 years of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia—as more than the result of military strength (of either army), or the accomplishments of politicians. Rather, the period is treated as one of orchestrated resistance bursting forth from all directions—the power of the pen, the persuasion of paintings, posters, and photographs, amalgamated with wit, sweat, and the indomitable will to achieve independence. For either side, the stakes of this struggle were different. “This revolution was not a war between two nations. The Netherlands was defending colonialism in Indonesia—as more than the result of military strength (of either army), or the accomplishments of politicians. Rather, the period is treated as one of orchestrated resistance bursting forth from all directions—the power of the pen, the persuasion of paintings, posters, and photographs, amalgamated with wit, sweat, and the indomitable will to achieve independence. For either side, the stakes of this struggle were different. “This revolution was not a war between two nations. The Netherlands was defending colonialism in Indonesia—as more than the result of military strength (of either army), or the accomplishments of politicians. Rather, the period is treated as one of orchestrated resistance bursting forth from all directions—the power of the pen, the persuasion of paintings, posters, and photographs, amalgamated with wit, sweat, and the indomitable will to achieve independence. For either side, the stakes of this struggle were different. “This revolution was not a war between two nations. The Netherlands was defending colonialism in Indonesia—as more than the result of military strength (of either army), or the accomplishments of politicians. Rather, the period is treated as one of orchestrated resistance bursting forth from all directions—the power of the pen, the persuasion of paintings, posters, and photographs, amalgamated with wit, sweat, and the indomitable will to achieve independence. For either side, the stakes of this struggle were different. “This revolution was not a war between two nations. The Netherlands was defending
nial interests. For Indonesians, it was a war for independence—its form still to be defined (…)" (p. 42). Indeed, the Dutch went all out with mass and systematic violence, but gave their campaigns anodyne titles such as *Operation Kraai* (Operation Crow) in Java and *Operation Ekster* (Operation Magpie) in Sumatra (p. 186). Atrocities were also committed by Indonesians. According to the Netherlands’ Institute of Military History (*nimh*), more than 5,281 Dutch soldiers died between 1945–1949, while 97,421 Indonesians lost their lives (p. 192). What the Dutch called “police actions,” were “military aggressions” for the Indonesians. For the Ambonese, Menadonese, Eurasians, and Indo-Chinese—all groups stigmatized as traitorous—it was the time of “preparedness.” The corresponding Indonesian word, *bersiap*, was the call of Indonesian fighters before attacking Japanese camps during and after the Japanese Occupation.

“Nobody knows who is fighting who,” declared Tony Rafty, an Australian artist and correspondent commissioned by *The Sun* to report on Java in 1948. One of his black-and-white sketches depicts fully armed Dutch soldiers in front of a tattered Indonesian family (p. 116). Rafty illustrated the extreme inequality of the warring parties. Indonesia’s renowned founding figures—Sukarno, Hatta, Tan Malaka, Amir Sjarifudin, Sutan Sjahrir—are undoubtedly interesting. Yet “ordinary people” are emphasized in *Revolusi!*. Some of the people highlighted include photographer Soemarto Frans Mendur, who documented the events leading to the proclamation of Indonesia’s independence on August 17, 1945 (pp. 64–68); painter Henk Ngantung, who sketched the diplomatic negotiations between Indonesia and the Netherlands (p. 173); and Cas Oorthuys, whose photos reveal the underground political propaganda carried out by Indonesian artists (pp. 126–39).

The euphoria of Indonesia’s independence was accompanied by rage towards anything that appeared to be connected with foreign oppression. Accusations of being Dutch collaborators flew wildly. Many Eurasians, Indo-Chinese, Ambonese, and Menadonese people were forced to leave their familiar homeland and migrate to a new, cold, and distant one: the Netherlands. “Even selling food to Europeans was considered an act of collaboration. Helpers bringing food to the Menteng area, where most Europeans lived, were apprehended and interrogated by Indonesian fighters,” (p. 105) says Jeanne van Leur-de Loos. She was one of the first to repatriate, boarding the “Johan de Wit,” which sailed for the Netherlands on January 25, 1946 from the Tanjung Priok harbor. For these groups, Indonesia was no longer a safe and friendly place. As Letty Kwee recalls in 1946: “At midnight around one o’clock, I hid under the bed. The sounds of bullets frightened *Pappie*, Mok, and Aunt Corrie. Usually, people set off firecrackers around this time to welcome the new year. But this time, the sounds...
came from whizzing bullets passing by (...)” (p. 101). One year later, she and her family were forced to escape to the Netherlands.

Unfortunately, this catalog has not prioritized the role of women in these decisive years. One section paid attention to the diplomat Tanja Dezentje, who had brilliantly defended Indonesia (pp. 167–170), yet others like the journalist S.K. Trimurti were only mentioned fleetingly. As a journalist and activist, Trimurti was imprisoned in 1936 and 1939 by the Dutch East Indies Political Intelligence Agency (PID). Later, in 1942, she was tortured by Japanese soldiers (pp. 55–56, 68–70, 169). Apart from Trimurti, a number of women who contributed to the Independence Revolution received a paragraph or two. Also mentioned briefly is the painter Emiria Sunassa, founder of the Association of Indonesian Drawing Experts (Persagi), the first association of artists to direct their work towards Indonesian politics and independence (p. 170). Then there are those who fought on the front lines, such as Sumarsih Subiyati, the founder of the Indonesian Women’s Army (Laswi) in West Java, Andi Depu Maradja Balanipa, the founder of the Keris Muda organization in West Sulawesi, and Charlotte Salawati Daud, who took up arms against the NICA troops in South Sulawesi. In fact, in order for this edited volume to truly fulfill its goals, there is a long list of absent names for the catalog to honor.

Lea Pamungkas  
Independent scholar  
lea.pamungkas@gmail.com

Edith Koesoemawiria  
Independent scholar  
edith.koesoemawiria@gmail.com