Colonial Counterinsurgency and Mass Violence. The Dutch Empire in Indonesia.

By Bart Luttikhuis and A. Dirk Moses (eds.)


Colonial Counterinsurgency and Mass Violence certainly deserves attention for its insight into a little known example of anti-colonial struggle. But the greater merit of the volume is its successful connection of a specific case of counterinsurgency with more general questions about the nature of (post)colonial violence and war.

Most of the articles in this collected volume were originally published as a special issue of the Journal of Genocide Studies in 2012. For the publication four contributions were added, along with an updated introduction and epilogue. The book is divided in three parts. First, we learn about the Dutch side: the first five chapters address Dutch-perpetrated violence during the era of colonial rule and in particular during the war of Indonesian independence (1945–1949). Second, we learn about the Indonesian side: the following three chapters discuss violence against Dutch and Eurasians, anti-Chinese violence, and intra-Indonesian violence, respectively. The volume closes with a large part comprising six chapters on representations and memories of the Dutch-Indonesian conflict. There is not enough space here to review every contribution in detail, but some of the recurring themes and connecting threads can be spelled out.

Colonial Counterinsurgency is above all a fine collection of ‘new’ military history. Several chapters, especially in the first two sections, offer detailed analyses of the rationales and methods of the different armed forces. For instance, in her study of Dutch military strategies and ethics over the long stretch of the nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, Petra Groen argues that military actions stemmed from a ‘strategy of awe’, employing exemplary violence, especially when the military’s moral principles were put to the test. And Rémy Limpach, Peter Romijn, and Roel Frakking all present interesting studies of the fighting dynamics which unfolded from the specific military structures in which soldiers and auxiliaries operated and the tasks they were given. They stress the importance of understanding the internal workings and daily practices of the combatant units on site (Limpach calls it ‘business as usual’; Romijn ‘learning on “the job”’) in order to explain mass violence. Their findings show that, contrary to postwar master narratives, extreme violence was common and systemic rather than a matter of a few exceptional ‘excesses’.

The authors also pay close attention to the various groups of actors implicated. William H. Frederick, Mary Somers Heidhues, and Harry Poeze draw up
narratives which reveal the multi-sided features of the conflict, showing that enemy lines during the war were anything but clear, that at times it more nearly resembled a civil war, and that violence was mostly ‘messy and complicated’ (9). This complication is reflected in the way the event was and is remembered, as the chapters by Muhammad Yuanda Zara, Katharine McGregor, and Iris van Ooijen and Ilse Raaijmakers suggest.

Finally, almost all contributions to Colonial Counterinsurgency address the complex interconnections that existed between (racist) ideologies, law, and politics during and after the war. Here, the case of the Dutch-Indonesian war becomes particularly interesting, for it was fought in the wake of World War Two and the Holocaust, when international law and human rights were being redefined in relation to ethnicity and race. Stef Scagliola’s examination of Dutch intellectual and political culture in the face of unprosecuted war crimes is a strong example. And Emmanuel Kreike’s environmental history of colonial warfare in nineteenth-century Aceh pushes the envelope further by reassessing indirect violence as ‘war against nature’ (59), an all but absent concept in international law.

I have one minor and one more substantial point of criticism about the conceptual frame of the book. The first two section headings (i. ‘Conquest and reconquest’ and ii. ‘Indonesian violence’) were an unfortunate choice; since the Dutch remain inexplicably unnamed, ‘Indonesian’ violence is emphasized. More importantly, and surely due to its initial publication in Genocide Studies, the question of whether the events under scrutiny constitute one or more genocides keeps reappearing throughout the volume but remains awkwardly unanswered. A short remark by the editors in the introduction and an attempt to tackle the issue in the epilogue do not resolve this problem.

These points notwithstanding, one gains much from reading Colonial Counterinsurgency from cover to cover, for it is a convincing example of how scholars with sometimes quite different positions can fruitfully enter into a conversation that has relevance beyond their narrow field. In doing so, this anthology has brought a high level of complexity to a hitherto simplified historical narrative.

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