CHAPTER V

The Dutch fleet

Each time international tension mounted, whether in Europe or in Asia, discussions flared up about the strength of the army and the Navy and their potential role in repelling an invasion. At one end of the spectrum stood those who argued that the Navy would never be able to defeat an enemy fleet and that the land forces would have to be relied on for the defence of the Netherlands Indies. Carried to the extreme, the consequences of this view were that the Navy only needed one or two larger vessels to show the Dutch flag abroad and to impress the natives. No money should be expended on building large well-armoured and heavily armed ships (Boeka 1903:15). Others advocated precisely the opposite. Because the Netherlands could never fit out an army large enough to drive back an invader, not even were all the forces to be concentrated in Java, all available means should be earmarked for the build-up of the fleet. Generally, whether it was in 1870, 1900, 1904 or 1914, such discussions tended to assume a fatalistic, pessimistic, and at times hysterical tone. The debate centred on weaknesses and not on strengths.

 Civilians did not put much faith in either the colonial army or the Navy. Both failed rather dismally to impress. The fleet the Dutch maintained in Netherland Indies waters was not exactly best suited to a demonstration of might. Its ships were outdated and small. Many of its sailors suffered from venereal diseases. In the Netherlands Indies about half of the crew members was affected. Nine per cent had contracted syphilis. Naval command tried to remedy the situation, but without avail. One of the rather naive measures taken had been to forbid shore leave in the evening. It did not work. The opposite was in fact observed: a significant increase.

 The social gap that separated the ordinary crewmen from the established society was great. A telling example of this was what happened during the visit of the warship Friesland to Padang in 1904. Unquestionably her arrival cheered up life in the city. The 'Music, Drama and Gymnastic Society of

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1 Indische Gids 1900, I:641.
2 For a thorough analysis of colonial defense policy between 1892 and 1920, see Teitler 1988.
3 Handelingen Eerste Kamer 1913-14:365.
the Petty Officers and Ratings’ put on a performance in the local club, De Eendracht. The audience was entertained with a comedy, ‘My lieutenant’, and comical sketches, the customary fare on such occasions in those days. The sailors made a good impression, not least because they showed a ‘decent and helpful attitude’ and had seen to it that ‘nobody, that is to say at least not the women, had to sit beside the sailors of lower rank’.

Similar remarks can be made about the army. In 1904 De Locomotief concluded that it was ‘ill-trained and exhausted by the daily fight against the internal enemy, partly unshod and improperly armed’. Around the same time the same newspaper maintained that the army would not be able to accomplish much against a foreign enemy. The army about which De Locomotief was writing consisted of European and indigenous soldiers. Neither group inspired the general public with much confidence. Many of the European soldiers had been enticed by the bounty they received on enlisting, had signed up to try to escape poverty, or were on the run from the law. Soldiers were considered riff-raff and consequently treated as such. The European soldiers hovered on the fringes of the European colonial society. Even in the eyes of the Indonesian population, soldiers were inferior to other Europeans. As a newspaper noted around the turn of the century every Dutchman was a sir, a toean, to the natives. The exception was the soldiers, who were simply called soldadoe, soldiers.

Indonesian soldiers, two thirds of them Javanese, did not fare much better in the public opinion of the European community. A note from the Department of the Colonies in 1906 observed that such soldiers came from the bottommost layers of society. Except at the times when their service was needed, all the prejudices the white European community cherished about the Indonesian population and its various ethnic groups resurfaced in full force when their performance in battle was discussed. On the eve of the Russo-Japanese War De Locomotief wrote on a number of occasions that many native soldiers came from races devoid of military qualities, imbued with no or little martial spirit. The Javanese were useless in battle. They could not take on even an ‘inferior’ internal enemy on their own and when going into battle against such opponents had to be accompanied by European soldiers. Native soldiers were dressed in European uniforms, but this did not make them good soldiers in European eyes. The fact that they went barefoot, as did the majority of the

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4 De Locomotief, 22-3-1904.
5 De Locomotief, 5-1-1904, 23-1-1904.
6 De Locomotief, 27-2-1904.
7 De Locomotief, 8-2-1904.
8 Note Department C, NA, Kol. Geheim, Vb. 13-7-1906 Q15.
9 De Locomotief, 5-1-1904, 23-1-1904.