A native militia

At various meetings the calls to assist in the defence of the colony highlighted not so much the question of native volunteer corpses, but that of the establishment of a militia (the contemporary term for an army of conscripts). The campaign to establish a native militia came to be known as the Indië Weerbaar (Resistant Indies) movement. It was propagated in the colony with an intensity comparable to that of the Onze Vloot campaign in Holland.

Conscription had been toyed with for decades. The first suggestions for a European militia dated from the 1880s, when a militia had been advanced as an alternative to the existing citizen militias (a sort of voluntary police force). A native militia was first discussed in 1907. Between 1907 and 1914 the issue was raised from time to time. One of the persons to do so was P.C.C. Hansen. Under the pen-name of Boeka in 1909 he published an article, ‘Indië Weerbaar’, in De Indische Gids about a guerrilla war fought against a foreign invader by a Javanese voluntary militia, commanded by Javanese. One of the advantages Hansen saw was that members of such a militia were accustomed to the climate in Java. Japanese soldiers were not. In a sense it was a daring proposition. Hansen pleaded for rifle drills for the militia members. Apparently still harbouring lingering doubts about how far Javanese could be trusted, he cautioned that good care had to be taken to see that the number of rifles in circulation in Javanese society remained small (Boeka 1909).

Initially, the colonial authorities reacted pretty lukewarmly to suggestions about forming a native militia. Mounting international tension on the eve of the World War brought about a change in attitude. Batavia and The Hague came to see a native militia as a useful addition to the regular army. The many manifestations of loyalty formed yet another reason to consider the formation of such a force. That the military in the Netherlands Indies was in favour became clear in 1914 when a ‘staff-officer’, that is Major J. van der Weijden, indeed a member of the General Staff of the colonial army, wrote an article in the Java-Bode in support of a native militia. Van der Weijden tried to convince his readers that recent developments had proved that a native militia did not necessarily have to be a public danger. He explained that it would not create a force of ‘enemy soldiers’ as some feared. In his argument Van der Weijden dis-
closed that the authorities had gone far beyond concluding that conscription was possible. They had grown convinced that a militia would cement interracial solidarity: ‘Standing side to side in the defence of the Archipelago against alien violence will strengthen the bond between Dutchmen and Natives’. The manifestations of loyalty after the outbreak of the war had indubitably impressed Van der Weijden. On another occasion he wrote that these pledges ‘from all circles and layers of Native society’ had proved that the population would not turn against the Dutch were a foreign enemy to invade Java. The ‘incorrigibly anxious’ had been mistaken (Van der Weijden 1916:29).

Conscription – to be confined to Java and the Minahasa – emerged a hotly debated issue during World War One. The idea was for a militia of Europeans and Javanese, but not the Chinese. As the immediate pre-war years had shown as a group the Chinese were too restless. The Arabs were also excluded because they were distrusted for religious reasons and for the putative influence they might exert on the Muslim population. Conscription would open a reservoir of potential soldiers and would cost less than the recruitment of fresh professional soldiers. This, of course, was an important argument in its favour. Another plus point was the realization that new volunteers for the colonial army might not be forthcoming once the Netherlands Indies was actually at war (Van der Weijden 1916:21-2). Fringe benefits were deployed to convince doubters that a militia was a useful institution. One, and this was an argument advanced by Europeans and Javanese alike, was that military training would encourage discipline, neatness, and personal initiative among the Javanese. Bearing this in mind some went as far as to plead for compulsory gymnastics in the schools the Javanese children attended to prepare them for such military service.

Leaders of the Sarekat Islam and Boedi Oetomo were among those who argued that a militia was a good way to instill discipline and to improve the physical condition of the young people. Boedi Oetomo leaders expressed the hope that a militia would restore the military prowess the Javanese had once possessed in days long past. Military training might revive the *ksatria*, the warrior class, spirit of the past. Another argument frequently mentioned in favour was that the stature of the Javanese would be improved if they showed that they were prepared to make sacrifices for the defence of their country. Acceptance as trusted soldiers was presented as a way to bring the Javanese a step further on the road towards emancipation. Enhancing the role of the Javanese in the defence of the colony would, to borrow contemporary parlance, be one of the ways to ensure that the Javanese would become full human beings. This was considered so important that just after Austria-Hungary had

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1 Java-Bode, cited in De Indische Gids 1914, II:1733.