CHAPTER XIX

Rice and sugar

To Dutch people who had travelled on the Noordam it appeared as if the consequences of the Great War had almost passed by the Netherlands Indies. People in the Netherlands Indies thought differently. They were aware that they were better off than the people in Europe, but as a woman wrote to De Locomotief in March 1917 ‘is it not beginning to become alarming expensive. The price of everything is rising: food, clothing, building materials (and as a consequence more expensive rents) and earnings remain the same’.¹

War had made life only more expensive for all population groups. Duurte, dearness, was on everybody’s mind. Europeans complained about high prices and grumbled because they had to forego with luxuries like Eau-de-Cologne and some of the foodstuffs and drinks which pleased their palate most. Initially there had been substitutes. Europeans could buy ‘Edammer’ cheese and ‘Rheinwein’ from Australia and ‘Bordeaux wines’ from California. They could eat delicatessen products imported from the United States and drink beer from Japan, which people by now had started to appreciate.² Maintaining eating and drinking habits only became a problem in the later years of the war, when imports from Australia, an important source of ham, flour, cheese, and butter, and from the United States were disrupted.

The Netherlands Indies were not completely dependent on imports, a modest effort was made to set up an import substitution industry. Beer was produced locally. In Java jenever distilleries were established; in Sumatra cigar factories. Erdman and Sielcken experimented with the production of margarine from coconut oil. Another novelty was the First Medan Tea Factory, a Chinese initiative, where tea was blended and packed. A Dutch rusk factory and a vermicelli factory were opened. A special treat was guaranteed when a company succeeded in producing Haagse hopjes (coffee-flavoured butterscotch sweets). Such efforts were a drop in the ocean. Their European bias irritated nationalist leaders. In February 1918, when a chocolate and cacao fac-

¹ De Locomotief, 14-3-1917.
² De Locomotief, 14-1-1915; Koloniaal verslag 1919:261-2; Helfferich 1921:14.
tory commenced production, Neratja wondered when finally a factory which catered for the needs of Indonesians would be built. The same newspaper reacted differently when Australia issued a ban on the export of butter and cheese. This time Neratja expressed the hope that the ban would be a stimulus to start the production of these products in the Netherlands Indies.

Europeans began to worry that because of a shortage of wheat soon bread could no longer be baked. Once again it was observed that loaves of bread had become smaller. Fortunately, in Bandung an experiment to make ‘flour’ suitable for the production of bread from cassava was successful. For some time the army had already been trying to develop such a product, but in vain. Now someone had succeeded. A local reporter noted that mixed with real flour, the bread, biscuits, and cakes made from it were rather tasty. Others disagreed. There were plenty of complaints about its taste when the tapioca flour bread reached the shops. Earlier, in the middle of 1917, experiments to grow wheat in the Archipelago had been successful.

The relief afforded by all such experiments and initiatives was pretty small. In early 1918 the price of butter rose by 50 per cent within two months after Australia had imposed an export ban. The shortage that followed forced the colonial Navy to institute ‘butterless days’. No butter was served if there was jam, meat, or sardines on the table. The price of bread and tinned milk had doubled since 1914. That of other foodstuffs had also mounted: ‘Who’, an angry speaker in Ambon demanded, ‘remembers what the inside of a tin of sardines looks like?’ The prices of medicines, clothing, and textiles followed exactly the same pattern. Shoes, those markers of European status and of modernity, had become too expensive to buy for people with a modest income. Rents had risen. In some instances they had doubled by 1917.

The time was ripe for the European community to complain. In De Locomotief a reader from Blitar indignantly asked why the colonial government did not intervene? When matters affected ‘the brown brother,’ Batavia was quick to act. If the daily lives of the Europeans were put under pressure, and if the colonial government was confronted with the might of the large import companies, Batavia hesitated to take appropriate action. He posed that it was the ‘pur-sang’ Europeans who were hurt most. They could not do without European foodstuffs, or, we may conclude from the way he went on, their drinks (a bottle of Dutch gin had become four to five times more expensive).

3 Neratja, 18-2-1918, 13-3-1918.
4 De Locomotief, 21-5-1918.
5 De Preangerbode, cited in De Locomotief, 8-4-1918.
6 Nieuwe Soerabaia Courant, cited in De Locomotief, 3-6-1918.
7 De Locomotief, 21-5-1918, 25-5-1918.
8 De Locomotief, 12-4-1918, 13-4-1918.