Chapter VII

The housing crisis during the years of turmoil

Paradoxically, at the height of the decolonization process when the legal ‘racial’ distinction between Indigenous, Foreign Oriental, and European people was formally rescinded, ethnic boundaries suddenly assumed enormous importance. In colonial times class was the main determinant of where people lived, whereas during the Second World War and the War of Independence ethnic and national identities had a great impact on urban space and housing. German citizens in Indonesia were interned after Germany invaded the Netherlands in May 1940, for no other reason than that they were German. Internment also affected Austrians, Czechs, and Poles, whose countries had recently been wholly or partly occupied by Nazi Germany. Two years later, Dutch people were driven from their homes by the Japanese and interned in camps. Eurasians shared the same fate if their outward appearance or income made them look sufficiently like ‘full-blood’ Dutchmen. During the early days of the Indonesian revolution, Chinese, Eurasians and other Europeans, and occasionally Ambonese and Manadonese, after being persecuted by young revolutionaries, fled to safe areas in town or formed vigilante groups to guard their neighbourhoods. Indigenous people sometimes fled from rural kampongs because their villages had been destroyed by the Dutch colonial army. After the Dutch government resumed control of the cities, it gave new Dutch arrivals who came to rebuild the country preferential treatment in the allocation of housing. In short, during the years of turmoil, 1942-1949, the stakes in belonging to one ethnic category or another were much higher than they had been before or were after: one’s ethnicity could be sufficient reason to be interned, driven out of house and home, murdered, or given preferential treatment.

The victims of murder, displacement, and expropriation of houses were classified by their ethnic or national background, but the winners in the struggle over housing usually belonged to a more narrowly defined group. For instance, all Dutch people were in principle targeted by the Japanese for internment, but Dutch houses were occupied only by Japanese military
officers and government officials, and not, say, by Japanese hairdressers and prostitutes. The war years were blighted by the persecution of broad ethnic and national categories and the rise of narrowly defined interest groups. Precisely during these years of turmoil, the way interest groups operated on the housing market emerged very clearly, because the shortage of dwellings exacerbated the struggle for housing. An acute housing shortage developed because houses had been destroyed, just at the time new waves of migrants were pouring into the cities. Powerful groups used all their clout to maintain or enlarge their share of the diminishing housing cake. This competition for housing is all the more interesting because during the Second World War and the Indonesian Revolution, the balance of power between interest groups was shifting.

Two main interest groups sharing an uneasy relationship of mutual dependence and competition were the civilian and the military authorities. In the Netherlands Indies the civil authority had been supreme in peacetime. The Regulation on the State of War and Siege (Regeling op den Staat van Oorlog en Beleg), revised in September 1939, stipulated that in time of war, military ordinances took precedence over all legislation. The Japanese introduced military rule (Gunseikanbu). After the Japanese surrender, wherever Allied forces took control, the administration was put in the hands of Allied military commanders. Administration of the civilian population was exercised by Dutchmen who were technically military commanders, but the majority of whom were recruited from the experienced pre-war civil service. These ‘militarized’ civil servants wielded extraordinary powers derived from the state of siege. During most of the time Allied forces were present, the military administration was called Netherlands Indies Civil Administration (NICA) in eastern Indonesia, and first NICA and later Allied Military Administration Civil Affairs Branch (AMACAB) in Sumatra and Java. The former position of Governor-General was now called Lieutenant Governor-General. After the Allied forces withdrew, AMACAB and NICA were renamed Tijdelijke Bestuursdienst (Temporary Administration), but without a change of personnel. After the First Dutch Offensive (Eerste Politionele Actie or Agresi Pertama, July-August 1947), the heads of the Tijdelijke Bestuursdienst were replaced by so-called Recomba (Regeringscommissaris voor Bestuursaangelegenheden, Central Government Commissioner for Administrative Affairs), of which there were five for Java and Sumatra. They were directly responsible to the Lieutenant Governor-General; although the Recombas were civilians, they were technically the top officials in the military administration, which was still in effect under the state of siege. Recombas carried out many of the functions of municipal administrations, being responsible for more than one city, until local governments were reinstalled in the course of 1948. When and where the state of siege was ended, ordinances issued by the military