



## **How the Netherlands Hid Its War Crimes for Decades**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The decades-long absence of international media interest in the Netherlands has made it possible for the country's authorities and elites to blur Dutch war crimes that took place during the 1948-49 repression of the Indonesian revolution. It is only now, when most of those who committed the crimes are dead or very old, that a major study on the Dutch post-war decolonization of Indonesia has started. This blurring of responsibility for the past is an integral part of Dutch culture.

The international image of the Netherlands is limited. Symbols associated with it usually include windmills, wooden shoes, tulips, and cheese. Asking people to name a Dutch person might yield the name of Anne Frank, though she never held Dutch nationality. Among the culturally inclined, Rembrandt and Van Gogh are likely to be mentioned.

In the absence of substantial international interest in the Netherlands, a local culture has developed that merits analysis.

Historically speaking, the greatest danger to the Netherlands has been the water of the North Sea. In 1953, a major breaking of dykes in the south of the country caused 1,836 deaths.

Important parts of Dutch culture can be explained by the fear of the sea. When the dykes break, everyone has to put in an effort. A famous Dutch story that is popular abroad (though completely invented) tells of Hans Brinker, a Dutch boy who put his finger in a hole in a dyke and thereby prevented a flood. Symbolically speaking, if the dykes break and a portion of the population does not do its share to fight the flood, everyone will drown. In such a culture, proverbs abound like "Make sure your head is not above mowing level" and "We all have to go through the same door."

It is primarily in the economic sphere that “polder culture” arose in the Netherlands. A polder is an area that was once under water but has been dried and surrounded by dykes. In polder culture, one should not go to extremes but always look for a compromise. In a reflection of this culture, Dutch employers and trade unions often reach agreement without resorting to strikes.

Dutch culture is not one of polarization, which has its advantages. Before the murders of politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002 and journalist Theo van Gogh in 2004, one has to go back centuries to find any political murders in the Netherlands.

The Dutch government usually consists of several parties. In order to function, they negotiate, sometimes for months on end, about a joint program. Once an agreement is reached, the government members stick to it.

In this era of climate change concerns, the Dutch fear of the sea is alive and well. One extreme forecast says that if all the world’s glaciers were to melt, Dutch dykes would have to be raised to an impossibly high level, and the entire west of the country would be flooded. Major towns, including the capital Amsterdam, Rotterdam and its big harbor, and The Hague, which is the seat of the King and parliament, would disappear under the water. Seventeen million Dutch citizens would have to move to the mainly sandy lands in the eastern half of the country.

In such a closed society, criticism from abroad plays hardly any role. Visitors to the Netherlands are not confronted with any reminders of its many past war crimes, some of which are extreme. To all appearances, it is a land of friendly people, not a land with a dark history.

One book about the history of the Netherlands, *The Land of Small Gestures*, says: "Dutch culture is rarely dominated by the culture of the big gesture...whoever wants to study the past of the Netherlands has to develop an eye for the culture of the small gesture and has to have an ear for the quiet tone with which deep emotions are expressed."

The Indonesian war of independence war broke out in 1948. The Dutch army, which contained an important indigenous component, committed many war crimes during that war. The Dutch called its acts of repression in Indonesia over the 1948-49 period “police actions.”

One of the first to draw attention to these war crimes was Johan Hueting, a psychologist and former soldier. He broke the taboo 20 years later—in 1969—during a television interview. After the broadcast, he received death threats from Dutch war veterans. He had to go into hiding along with his wife and

children. He would later admit that he had participated in the war crimes of his unit.

Hueting declared on TV that Dutch militaries regularly, and without military necessity, shot up Indonesian villages. They also summarily killed farmers working on their land. He said that military intelligence personnel regularly tortured Indonesian prisoners, and that Dutch infantry units killed prisoners on the occasion of "attempts to flee."

Hueting's disclosures led the Dutch government to assign a young historian, Cees Fasseur, to investigate the criminal element of the Netherlands' police actions in Indonesia. The report he produced, "The Excessennota," was shallow and unilluminating.

Dutch PM Piet de Jong wrote an accompanying letter for the hastily assembled document to parliament: "The government regrets that there have been excesses yet it maintains its opinion that the army as a whole acted correctly in Indonesia. The data collected confirms that there were no systematic atrocities." However, the government excluded from that conclusion what had happened in southern Celebes and during intelligence operations. Parliament accepted the document as it was.

It took almost another 50 years for it to become clear just how untrue the PM's statement was. Many years later, Fasseur would admit that his research had been superficial and that major additional investigations were necessary. None of the Dutch governments until that time had felt the need for more profound research. It is only now, when almost all the veterans of that war have died, that a major study is being undertaken by the Dutch Institute for War Documentation (NIOD) together with other institutes.

Raymond Westerling was the commander of a Dutch regiment of special troops. In December 1946, in the southern part of the island of Celebes, the Dutch army spent three months suppressing a local uprising. During that period, 3,500 Indonesians were killed, many of them summarily executed. The Dutch authorities only interfered when Westerling's underlings executed prisoners who had already been judged.

In 1969, Westerling gave an interview on TV. He admitted the war crimes but said he did not fear prosecution as he had the support of the Dutch government. Not a single Dutch broadcaster was willing to broadcast the interview. This was partly due to threats they had received. The interview was broadcast for the first time in 2012.

In 1971, Westerling gave an interview over a diluted glass of whisky to the weekly *Panorama*. He spoke freely and revealed that he had court-martialed and executed 350 prisoners. The Dutch judicial authorities didn't react.

From time to time, there have been other disclosures of war crimes. The authorities always averted their eyes. Journalist and historian Ad van Liempt published a long reconstruction in the weekly *Vrij Nederland* of the mass murder of 364 Indonesians by Dutch soldiers in a village called Galoeng Galoeng (the village's name was later revealed to be Galoeng Lomnbok). To the author's surprise, there were no reactions to the article at all.

In 1995, Alfred Edelstein and Karin van Coevorden made a documentary for the broadcaster RTL about the illegal executions by the Dutch army of hundreds of men in Rawagede, a village on the west side of the island of Java. They interviewed a number of survivors. Several were surprised that after so many years there was interest in the Netherlands about what had happened in their village. They claimed that similar crimes had happened in other villages in Java. In an interview, Edelstein told me: "I had heard about it from someone with enormous guilt feelings. He was part of the unit that had undertaken the action in Rawagede. He told me the story but wanted to remain anonymous."

In 1997, Van Liempt published a book entitled *The Train of Corpses: Why 46 Prisoners Did Not Survive the Trip to Surabaya*. He said, "That book did indeed lead to reactions. A number were from furious people who had been involved in the crime. They considered it scandalous that I wrote a book about it."

He added, "In general Dutch society is extremely good at 'blurring,'" and expressed the view that all of Dutch society is based on this practice:

Our elite has been exceptionally good over the decades at using blurred language. During a visit to Indonesia by then Queen Beatrix in 1995, she showed her sadness that so many had died during those years, but was unable to offer even the most basic apology...In 2005 our then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ben Bot, said that the Netherlands—as far as Indonesian independence was concerned—"had stood on the wrong side of history." It was a beautiful expression and at the same time a very limp way to admit the truth...Human nature has difficulty admitting mistakes. In the Netherlands that attitude is very advanced. No one wants to be responsible for words that can have financial consequences.

In December 2011, the Dutch ambassador to Indonesia expressed an apology for the mass murder conducted by the Dutch military 64 years earlier in Rawagede. The Court in The Hague had already decided that the Dutch state

had to financially compensate the seven surviving widows from the Indonesian village. In 2016, then foreign minister Bert Koenders limited the Dutch apology to the summary executions.

In 2020, Dutch King Willem Alexander made a state visit to Indonesia. On that occasion, he offered an apology for the Dutch violence.

In 2016, a book finally appeared, written by Remy Limpach, that analyzed Dutch actions during the Indonesian war. In *The Burning Villages of General Spoor*, Limpach listed a large number of Dutch war crimes. To mention two almost at random, Dutch soldiers sent an Indonesian boy to climb a coconut tree so he could throw nuts down to them. After he had done this, they shot him out of the tree. Dutch soldiers also raped local women and girls.

Limpach's conclusion was that the colonial history of the Netherlands was no better than that of the French, Portuguese, British, and Belgians. His book finally convinced the Dutch government to make money available for a profound independent investigation into the war in Indonesia. The NIOD has since started research into the Dutch decolonization—after the Japanese wartime conquest—from 1945 to 1950 together with two other institutes.

There are other very negative elements in the Dutch post-war past. The main one is the radical failure of Dutch UN soldiers to protect the Muslim inhabitants of the Bosnian town of Srebrenica in 1995. The Dutch Supreme Court has decided that the Netherlands is responsible at least to some extent for part of the genocide there. Other issues refer to the killing of civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is also still unclear whether the Dutch government ordered the killing of all Moluccan hijackers on a train in 1977 in which about 50 people had been taken hostage.

It is not that Dutch historians are unaware of what is happening. In 2017, Hans Blom, who was head of the NIOD from 1996 to 2007, told me,

The Netherlands is a country where the need to make compromises was present very intensely early in its history. In addition, one can say that the Netherlands in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century developed a tradition of thinking that we are a country with very high moral standards.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it became unavoidably clear that the powerful Netherlands of the Republic of the United Netherlands was no longer a significant factor. This was despite the fact that we kept our colonies for a century and half. In the small Netherlands a self-image emerged that it is nicer to be the world's most moral nation than the most powerful.

...This attitude was also in line with Dutch interests. As a small country, one has much to gain from peace arrangements and international law. Thus, one to a certain extent protects oneself against the desire for the power of the big countries. In such a tradition of high moral self-image, it is more difficult to publicly and properly treat events where that is evidently not the case.

In 2018, the current director of the NIOD Frank van Vree told me,

The Netherlands is willing to look at the weaknesses of its society. But at the same time the obstinate thought exists that while the Netherlands has erred in many ways; all in all it has done many things better than others.

A second [issue] is that sometimes there is fear that reparations may have to be paid. There is a feeling that one should not say too loudly that one has done something wrong as that could result in financial consequences.

The feeling of "We may not have done it very well, we did it better than others" is deeply ingrained in Dutch culture. On the one hand there is acknowledgement, and on the other hand there is a glossing over.

The international media have not fulfilled their role. Their absence of criticism has enabled the Dutch to blur their colonial past for many decades, up to the point that almost all the war criminals have died or are very old.

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