
A TORN SOUL: THE DUTCH PUBLIC DISCUSSION ON THE COLONIAL PAST IN 1995

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Introduction

The Dutch cherish a comforting self-image that presents the nation as a well-mannered, civilized, and tolerant community of burghers. Dutch history, as it is taught at school, reinforces this assumption. The Eighty Years War against Spain (1568–1648) is described as a struggle for political independence and as the defining conflict that served to establish the Protestant religion as the basis for public life. The rebellion against Spain was accompanied by a great freedom of expression, both in the printed form as well as orally, which attracted many dissenters from other countries to settle in the Dutch Republic.

The seventeenth century is still celebrated as the Golden Age in Dutch history. During that era, maritime trade throughout and beyond Europe boosted the national economy. Wealthy merchants stimulated arts and sciences to flourish. The trading network of the VOC (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie), built on a combination of diplomacy and physical force, encompassed large parts of Asia. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, however, the Dutch naval presence in those regions rapidly eroded, and the Dutch were transformed from a nation of active traders to become a nation of bankers. In 1795 the French occupied the country, and after the defeat of Napoleon the Republic was turned into a monarchy. As all the nineteenth century European revolutions and World War I bypassed Holland, a kind of lethargy spread through the nation. Although after 1850 a modernization of the economy was gradually initiated, before the Second World War the low countries were still predominantly agrarian. The country's social fabric was neatly divided and supported by rigid "pillars" of belief, its foreign policy strictly neutral, and its economy in part

dependent on the profits drained from its main colony, the Dutch East Indies. Rapid industrialization after the Second World War generated new prosperity, which resulted in the creation of a welfare state.

It is difficult to establish what historical attributes can be persuasively assembled into a collective self-portrait of the Netherlands' citizenry.¹ As I see it, three aspects still dominate Dutch national identity as perceived by the Dutch themselves. Rooted in the experience of the Eighty Years War, a strong urge toward independence exists. The Netherlands might be called tiny both in the number of its citizens and in geographical expanse, but through their magnificent deeds the people continue to assert their own destiny. Alongside historic accomplishments as explorers and thinkers, the Dutch commitment to tolerance, fostered by a long humanist heritage, also figures as a defining characteristic of the country's self-image. Finally, the Dutch have been shaped by the Protestant ethic, which elevates virtues such as resilience and the entrepreneurial spirit, while also fostering an acute awareness of personal or national fallibility and guilt over wrongdoings of the past and present.² Between these three roots of the Dutch national identity continuous interactions take place; probably the most important involves the tension between complacency on the one hand and a sense of guilt on the other. Sporadic bouts of national uneasiness, incited by the commemorations of particular historic acts or periods, can turn the cold-blooded Dutchman into a temporary hothead.

General as they tend to be, observations on Dutchness are essential to understanding how and why in 1995 widespread public discussions concerning Holland's colonial past preoccupied the nation. In the year 1995 the country commemorated a great feat: four centuries before the first Dutchmen set out with their ships to procure the spices of the Indies. In this same year, it also commemorated a kind of loss: fifty years before Indonesia had proclaimed its independence from the Netherlands. Throughout the year a public debate on the colonial past took place, with occasional eruptions, culminating in the visit of the Dutch Monarch, Queen Beatrix, to Indonesia in the month of August. Newspaper articles, columns, and published letters from readers both reflected and created divergent opinions among policy makers and middle-class intellectuals. A review of Dutch newspaper sources focused on Dutch-Indonesian relations sheds light on the issues, the main actors, and the outcomes of this collective exploration of national history.

The discussions as they evolved in 1995 have to be examined in the context of certain traumatic experiences. When the Japanese invaded Indonesia in 1942, they put the entire European population, civilians and soldiers of the Dutch colonial army, around 150,000 people, into prison camps. Approximately 14 to 20 percent of those incarcerated in the camps died. When the Indonesian revolution started, the first few months were dominated by *pemuda* actions against Dutch, Eurasians, Amboinese, and

¹ The most interesting reconstructions of Dutchness have been done by Americans with Dutch ancestors. See: S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Knopf, 1987); William Collins 1987; Frances Gouda, *Dutch Culture Overseas: Colonial Practice in the Netherlands Indies 1900-1942*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 1995.

² Until the middle of the nineteenth century the Catholic minority, mainly living in the south of Holland, were tolerated but not treated on a equal basis as the Protestants. This explains the dominance of the Protestant ethic in shaping Dutch national identity.

Chinese. The number of Dutch citizens killed in the *bersiap*-period is estimated at 3,500. Meanwhile, the Dutch government tried to keep possession of Indonesia, possibly by maintaining it inside a federal political framework. This led to a military conflict with the Indonesian Republic, during which more than one hundred thousand soldiers, professionals, volunteers, and conscripts were sent from Holland to Indonesia. According to Dutch army statistics collected between October 1945 and August 1949, 2,341 Dutch combatants lost their lives³; this figure compared with the greater toll of several hundred thousand Indonesians killed.

When Indonesia's independence was recognized in December 1949, New Guinea was excluded from the transfer of power. Until 1963 a bitter struggle, essentially a war of words, persisted between the hard-headed Dutch and the passionate Indonesians. The living situations of the Dutch and Eurasians citizens still remaining in Indonesia deteriorated substantially during these years. Almost the entire Dutch segment of the population, approximately three hundred thousand people, left Indonesia before 1958. The majority fled to Holland, where they found it necessary to accommodate themselves and, usually, to accept a lower social status than they had enjoyed in the colony. In 1951 4,500 Amboinese soldiers were shipped out of Indonesia with their families for a "temporary stay" in the Netherlands; for these people, residence in Holland proved to be permanent, not temporary.

Although at present Indonesia seems remote, the many individuals who have lived or fought in Indonesia maintain a substantial presence in Holland. What's more, the ugly circumstances that prevailed during the period of time when many of them left Indonesia help explain why memories of the past would be so burdened with emotion and remorse. A review of the public discussions that took place in Holland during 1995 can reveal not only characteristics of Dutchness, but also a wide range of pained and often evasive personal reactions to the nation's colonial history.

The Dutch War Veterans and a Deserter

In mid-December 1994, the Foreign Affairs Minister in the current tripartite coalition government, H. A. F. M. O. van Mierlo, announced that he had given permission for an entry visa to be issued to Johannes "Poncke" Princen, a man who deserted from the Dutch army in Java in 1948, chose to ally himself with the Indonesians, and supposedly killed Dutch soldiers in combat. For forty-six years a visit to the Netherlands was denied him, but now, for "humanitarian reasons," the Minister had decided to allow the old and sick Princen to visit his relatives in his country of origin. The year before, Van Mierlo's predecessor had still refused Princen a visa because of his contested role in the Indonesian revolution.

Who is Johannes "Poncke" Princen? Born in 1925, he grew up in a Catholic family in The Hague and studied at a seminary for a couple of years. During the German occupation of the Netherlands (1940-45) he tried to escape to England, but was caught and imprisoned in Nazi Germany. After the war he was called to serve as a conscript

³ P. M. H. Groen, *Marsroutes en dwaalsporen. Het Nederlands militair-strategisch beleid in Indonesië 1945-1950*. 's-Gravenhage: Sdu 1991, Appendix 12. In Indonesia itself, at the peak of the conflict in 1947, 170,000 Dutch military personnel were present. Besides Dutch land forces sent from Holland, numbering around two-thirds of the total, these included members of the Dutch navy and the colonial army.

in Indonesia, but he refused to go and fled to France. Caught again, he ended up in Java and fought on the Dutch side during the first military action. Despite his participation in combat, he was sentenced to twelve months imprisonment because of his earlier flight to France. In September 1948, Princen followed his principles, his head and his heart; he married an Indonesian woman, named Odah, and joined the Indonesian forces. He became involved in stealing weapons from the Dutch, and he also actively engaged in some fighting. It has never been established that he himself in fact killed any Dutchmen. However it is known that his Sundanese wife lost her life during a raid carried out by Dutch special troops.

After Independence in 1949, Princen stayed in Indonesia and became an opponent of both Sukarno and Suharto. In 1950 he was involved in the suppression of the Westerling coup in Bandung. During the Sukarno years he became active in politics and served as a member of parliament from 1956 onwards. From 1958 until 1960 he was imprisoned because he had protested against the Indonesian army's forceful response to the Permesta/PRRI rebellion. In 1962 Princen joined the Liga Demokrasi to protest against the dissolution of parliament, which brought him to prison once again. In 1966 he was released by the Suharto government. Together with others he founded the League for the Defense of Human Rights (LPHAM) and the Organization for Legal Aid (LBH), in which capacity he has since developed to become one of Suharto's main critics.⁴

The decision of Van Mierlo in December 1994 to grant Princen a visa provoked the Christian-democratic opposition party, CDA (Christen Democratisch Appèl), which then demanded that the issue be debated in parliament, where the Minister repeated his position that he had granted Princen a visa for "humanitarian and health" reasons. The CDA expressed its opposition by arguing that Princen's personal interests could in no way be compared to the infinitely greater "humanitarian interests" of many thousands of Dutch Indië-veterans and their next of kin. The heated exchange of views had to be interrupted because of a false bomb alarm.

After the session in parliament the conservative-liberal party VVD (Partij voor Vrijheid en Democratie), part of the coalition government, suddenly changed its position. This happened after Princen remarked in a newspaper interview that the granting of the visa could be interpreted as sign of "understanding." F. Weisglas, the party's spokesman, asked Van Mierlo to revoke his decision because "we have still a very negative verdict regarding the actions of Mr. Princen at that time and we have still a great respect for those who went to Indië." The Party for the Elderly (AOV, Algemeen Verbond voor Ouderen) characterized Princen as a "war criminal," but the use of this expression was rejected by the chairman of parliament, W. Deetman.⁵

Both the Christian-democrats and conservative-liberals criticized the Minister for his lenience towards Princen. Obviously, this criticism was inspired by the effective lobbying of veterans' organizations, such as the Veterans Platform, the Indies Platform, and the Association of Former Military Indies Sojourners (Vereniging Oud-Militairen

⁴ Volkskrant December 23, 1994 and October 10, 1995; Joyce van Fenema, *Poncke Princen. Een kwestie van kiezen.* 's-Gravenhage: BZZTôh 1995. LPHAM stands for Lembaga Pembela Hak Azasi Manusia; LBH is the Lembaga Bantuan Hukum.

⁵ *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* (henceforth NRC) December 21, 1994; NRC December 22, 1994.

Indiëgangers). They claimed that Princen was responsible for at least twenty casualties on the Dutch side during the final phase of the war in Indonesia. Some former soldiers warned that they were prepared to use violence if Princen dared to set foot on Dutch soil. Both major parties seemed prepared to conciliate the veterans' groups, for these groups represented the elderly and more conservative factions within the Dutch electorate.

The outcome of this political conflict did eventually allow Princen to pay a visit to Holland, however. But this was not the end of the public discord. On his arrival at Amsterdam airport, on December 23, 1995, Princen was met by a multitude of camera teams, protesters, and security agents. Foreign Affairs had asked Princen to keep his mouth shut and avoid making any inflammatory remarks so long as he was in the country, to avoid further troubles. Princen maintained a politic silence while the public discussion continued. Only when it came time for him to depart did he express his wish to start up a dialogue with the veterans of the colonial war.⁶ Settled back in Jakarta in January 1995, Princen stated: "I am of the opinion that now the road is clear for some sort of rehabilitation. I have been kicked, degraded, spat upon, and sneered at for such a long time, that I now claim the right to say: it is not true, I am not a war criminal."⁷

The Failed Political Debate on the Dutch Colonial Past

The public outcry over Princen's visit to Holland and the political discussions preceding his arrival incited the chairman of the Dutch parliament, Deetman, in January 1995 to call for a political and a public debate on the nation's colonial past. Himself very much interested in Indonesia, Deetman was probably moved to make this suggestion by some of the opinions that were expressed in the press during the Princen-affair. The *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* (NRC) had cynically observed how Princen created new opportunities and discussion topics for many television talk shows, where argumentative parties got a chance to batter one another, and emotions alone apparently justified some people to compare Auschwitz with Aceh. On the other hand, if Americans could come to grips with issues raised by the Vietnam deserters, and if German and Russian soldiers could together commemorate the battle of Stalingrad, why was it not possible to let a man like Princen walk the streets in Holland after forty-six years?⁸ The *Volkskrant* offered an explanation for this lack of tolerance: the deserter from a war that was lost is never honored at home because he confronts veterans with memories of their own personal sufferings, sufferings sustained in vain. Thus confrontation with such a deserter raises doubts about the legitimacy of the past governments that made the wrong choices leading to the defeat.⁹

Suggestions like Deetman's prompted some politicians to argue for a total reassessment and cleanup of the ugly past. In December 1994, Jan Pronk, the socialist Minister for Development Cooperation, pleaded for official Dutch recognition of August 17 as the true anniversary of Indonesian Independence and also for a public

⁶ *Volkskrant*, January 9, 1995.

⁷ *Volkskrant*, January 10, 1995.

⁸ NRC, December 23, 1994.

⁹ *Volkskrant*, December 23, 1994.

debate on colonial history.¹⁰ Deetman argued that he was in favor of a public debate about the way in which Holland reacted towards Indonesian Independence in the second half of the 1940s. According to him it was a responsibility of the current generation of politicians to take a clear stance on what has happened in Indonesia by means of a parliamentary debate.¹¹

A public political debate never materialized. The Christian-Democratic Party promptly reacted to Deetman's invitation by saying that they did not feel the need for such a debate; after all, they had received no invitation to a debate before the Minister announced his decision to grant the visa to Princen. After consultation among their own party members, the conservative-liberals also rejected Deetman's proposition. Weisglas made the stunning remark that he could not see the use of dredging up the past: "I feel no willingness to rewrite history." The chairman of the Veterans Platform agreed with this point of view. Claiming to speak on behalf of one hundred and sixty thousand veterans, he declared that this process of stirring up of the past should come to an end. He stated: "In Holland one always seeks for the one to blame. But to what does this fuss lead? It only leads to disunity. I am jealous of Indonesia, where one distances oneself from the past and looks to the future."¹²

The progressive parties took a different stance. Already during the debate on Princen's visa, the Labour Party (PvdA, Partij van de Arbeid) supported the idea of a discussion on the events that took place between 1945 and 1950. The aim of such a discussion, according to the party's spokesman, M. van Traa, should not be to determine who was right and who was wrong, but to create a more uniform picture of the period. The progressive-liberal party, D66 [Democraten 66], to which the Foreign Affairs Minister, Van Mierlo, belongs, declared itself in favor of not only a debate in Parliament but also a larger debate in Dutch society. Members proposed congresses be organized to give the different parties the opportunity to exchange views; these congresses would preferably be scheduled in the weeks intervening between the commemoration of Dutch liberation from Nazi occupation (May 5) and the visit of the Queen to Indonesia (August).¹³

But at last the public intervention of Jan Pronk put an end to the possibility that there might be a political debate. He declared that the 1945–1950 episode had been "a useless colonial war"; politicians at that time had hidden the excesses committed and were still responsible for the deceptions and wrongdoings. In response to this incendiary declaration, Prime Minister Kok, a fellow party member, stated that he did not feel it was necessary to highlight in retrospect the mistakes and wrong actions of past governments. He also disliked the idea of imposing new guilts on those who had been in Indonesia at that time. Other party members agreed, arguing that it was too easy to judge circumstances of the past with the advantage of hindsight.¹⁴ A few days later, on television, the leaders of the four big Dutch parties jointly announced that they would not support Deetman's recommendation for a political debate on the 1945–

¹⁰ *Volkscrant*, December 27, 1994.

¹¹ NRC, January 9, 1995.

¹² NRC, January 10, 1995.

¹³ NRC, January 10, 1995.

¹⁴ NRC, January 13, 1995.

1949 events.¹⁵ Apparently this issue was considered to be so important that a personal TV message from the top Dutch political leaders became necessary to conclude the debate.

Grinding the Colonial Past Collectively

An organized, official political debate on the colonial past did not come off the ground in 1995. What did take place, however, was an extensive unofficial discussion in the media, a discussion whose outcome must have confused many Dutchmen. The public exchange of views triggered by Princen's visit took place in the space of a single month, for the publicity rush soon tapered off in February 1995. This peak was only followed by a second media spurt in August 1995, when Queen Beatrix visited Indonesia.

One could conceptualize the results of the unofficial public discussions by imagining that they opened up a set of three boxes of decreasing size that fitted into one another. When opened, these boxes revealed an increasing degree of painfulness and their contents were of an increasingly private nature. The outer box was on history and the role of commemoration. The basic question defining this large box was whether a public debate on the colonial past should take place or not. Essentially this issue addressed the way in which the Dutch deal with their national past, especially the unpleasant episodes of it. The second box, which nested in the first one, was shaped by questions concerning the period 1945–1949. It addressed the way in which the Dutch handled the war of Indonesian Independence, the decisions taken by the politicians at that time, and how the general public should judge events that took place in Indonesia at the end of the 1940s. The third, and smallest box contained the issues and unforgettable personal conflicts that individuals experienced in those years. A large number of Dutch conscripts had to operate in dangerous circumstances, in an unfamiliar terrain, with a largely, openly or covertly, hostile population. Apart from their direct engagement in battle, many were also involved in peripheral traumatic experiences. Some witnessed or carried out acts that now would be labeled as war crimes.

It is typical of the generation of Dutch citizens who were in their early twenties in 1945 that the feelings of guilt, fear, or anger these past experiences still evoke are hardly ever spoken about, even within the inner circle of their own families. Feelings of guilt were and are constantly repressed; the past in general seems to be taboo. More judgments of what happened in 1945-1949 are not welcomed, especially if these judgments are proffered by individuals who were not there at the time.

As might be expected, opinions regarding the necessity of a public debate on colonial history were incompatible and confused in 1995. On the one hand, people who witnessed or were in one way or another involved in the Dutch-Indonesian conflict almost unanimously rejected the idea of a discussion on the Dutch colonial past. Most outspoken in opposition were, again, the veterans. Typical was the utterance of veteran J. Lesterhuis in a newspaper interview:

¹⁵ NRC, January 18, 1995.

A national debate serves no interest whatsoever. They will nail us, conscripts, to the cross. Why did you go, they will ask us. But in reality the question should be reversed: why did politics send us? [. . .] This is the only question I would like to be answered officially. A national debate on the other hand would only rake through old sores.¹⁶

In their unwillingness to participate in a national debate on the colonial past, the veterans were supported by others. Oddly enough one of these was J. Verkuyl, a leading Protestant missionary in Indonesia during the days of decolonization. He had been one of the very few who at that time publicly advocated Dutch moderation toward its former colony. This now eighty-seven-year old theologian stated that at first he had been gladdened by the proposal for a cleanup of the past but, on second thought, he rejected the idea of a public debate. Such a debate would act like a flint from which the sparks would be flying around everywhere. It would be better to form a committee of wise men and ask them to issue a concluding statement, to be pronounced by parliament in the name of the Dutch people.¹⁷ The appointment of a "commission of wise men": this is a typical Dutch strategy to circumvent difficult choices by promoting consensus supposedly on the basis of expertise.

H. Wigbold, a progressive journalist who introduced the war crimes issue to television viewers in 1969, underscored this approach. A public debate was superfluous since the government should only acknowledge that Holland was wrong at that time and should never have sacrificed its soldiers to the venture in Indonesia.¹⁸ The most cynical view was expressed in a NRC editorial: it would be useless to plow once again the sawahs already gone over, driven by a kind of political masochism. The desire to undo the past by discussing it again is an illusion.¹⁹

The opposite line of reasoning was advocated by mostly younger people. Wigbold was directly challenged by another journalist, D. Berts, who argued that there was every reason to stage a public debate: if one refuses to learn from the past, one forces history to repeat itself. Also, according to him, it would be good if the Dutch would unreservedly offer their apologies to the Indonesians, irrespective of whether the Indonesians themselves would welcome such an apology and whether the oppressive nature of the present Indonesian government would make such an apology seem misdirected.²⁰ The anti-colonial novelist Graa Boomsma also joined those in favor of a public debate; at that time he was entangled in a libel suit brought against him by the veterans' representatives, the result of an interview in which he had compared the acts of Dutch soldiers in Indonesia with those of the German SS in Holland during the Second World War. Boomsma spoke of the deceptions so often concealed in collective

¹⁶ NRC, January 12, 1995.

¹⁷ NRC, January 17, 1995. In 1946, J. Verkuyl published a book on the Dutch-Indonesian conflict in which he set out his views. See: J. Verkuyl, *De achtergrond van het Indonesische vraagstuk* (Den Haag: Daamen 1946). Besides criticizing the lack of vision of Dutch government figures who had failed to introduce political reform before 1942, he set clear guidelines: a suppression of the Republic by war would be "immoral and impossible in practice"; the progress of the negotiations should be continued; Dutch influence should be used to support and even serve Indonesian authority (pp. 58–61).

¹⁸ *Volkscrant*, January 10, 1995.

¹⁹ NRC, January 10, 1995.

²⁰ *Volkscrant*, January 14, 1995.

memory and the unexpected violent responses encountered by anyone who challenged collective memory, responses of the kind that had confronted him. The goal of a debate, he wrote, should be the recognition, understanding, and psychological handling of one of the most traumatic periods in the national past.²¹ R. Haleber, a sociologist writing in the same spirit, warned against applying double standards: on the one hand the Dutch still commemorate on May 5 every year their own liberation from the German occupation in 1945, while they deny that on August 17 in Indonesia a similar event is commemorated, i.e. the liberation of Indonesians from Dutch occupation. He consequently advocated ending such manipulations of historical facts and revising the nation's commemorative celebrations to fit all the facts.²²

Regarding the necessity of a national discussion on the colonial past was concerned, it soon became clear that the struggle between those in favor and those opposed would not be resolved. Be that as it may, no discussion of any depth among a substantial part of the population followed and questions asking how the public should perceive the Dutch role in Indonesia, and how this perception should affect Dutch commemorations of historical events remained unanswered. The issues having to do with the morality of colonialism and historical awareness of one's own colonial past were more or less silenced by the generation that experienced the conflict in the 1940s, maybe to sustain the idea that what has been done in the past was "good" or at least better than what some other nations did.

The "second box" to be opened in 1995 contained discussions on the 1945–49 period. Newspaper articles focusing on the question "what really happened?" appeared in great numbers. These reiterated information that could have been discovered by the public through all kinds of popular and scientific publications over the past few years. Of these sources, the most widely read were books such as *Daar werd wat groots verricht* (There great things were performed) by the journalists C. van Esterik and K. van Twist, and the contribution of C. Smit, a lawyer, who in 1976 had published a sequel to earlier short studies, entitled *De dekolonisatie van Indonesië*.²³ Interestingly enough the Dutch Government itself has from 1969 onwards undertaken an effort to inform the public on the decolonization issue. In March 1995 the twentieth and final volume of a source edition of official documents on Dutch-Indonesian relations between 1945 and 1950 was published by P. J. Drooglever.²⁴ In connection with this substantial project, in March 1996 a lavish conference was held in The Hague organized by the Royal Dutch Historical Association (Koninklijk Nederlands Historisch Genootschap).

Far more provoking than accounts of what had "really" happened between 1945 and 1950 were other newspaper contributions that reached a verdict judging the

²¹ NRC, January 12, 1995. This is the statement read by the author during the trial in which he was accused of having insulted the veterans. Later Boomsma was acquitted.

²² NRC, January 17, 1995.

²³ Chris van Esterik and Kees van Twist, *Daar werd wat grootsch verricht of hoe het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden zijn grootste kolonie verloor* (Weesp: Heureka 1980); C. Smit, *De dekolonisatie van Indonesië. Feiten en beschouwingen* (Groningen: Tjeenk Willink 1976).

²⁴ S. L. van der Wal, P. J. Drooglever, and M. Schouten, *Officiële bescheiden betreffende de Nederlands-Indonesische betrekkingen 1945-1950*. 20 vols. ('s-Gravenhage: Nijhoff/Instituut voor Nederlandse geschiedenis, 1971-1996).

events. However, the academic experts who published their verdicts were few, and the relative taciturnity of most professional historians on this score was actually quite remarkable. Pronk gave his opinion that “a useless colonial war” had been fought; in response, the socialist Van Traa rejected his assessment and immediately advocated a new investigation by “people who know of these things and those who have been there.”²⁵ J. de Jong, a Foreign Affairs official with a doctorate in history, counted himself (with P. J. Drooglever and P. Groen) among those belonging to the “revisionist” school. Rejecting the prevailing black and white image of the period, he concluded that after 1945 no colonial war of reconquest had been waged; the events could best be described in terms of a policy of gradual decolonization. This policy, supported for a long time both by Britain and the United States, was not unethical and could be fruitfully compared with the British approach to India.²⁶ In August Drooglever published an article on the decolonization in which he reinforced De Jong’s view by claiming that the Dutch failure was only relative and the main features of their policy had not been so bad after all.²⁷ Leiden professor H. Wesseling in the meantime pleaded for an analytical approach to decolonization as opposed to a moralistic one, for which the time, fifty years later, now seemed ripe. Any historical discussion should start with a comparison focusing particularly on the many differences between the various colonial nations and their colonies.²⁸

Whereas historians tended toward complacency or demanded a post-moralistic debate, a single politician raised his voice to lodge an accusation against himself. In an interview, S. Mansholt, who as PvdA Minister of Agriculture was partially involved in shaping the Indonesia policy of the 1940s, publicly confessed guilt, saying “we have been absolutely wrong” and “no Dutchmen would have been killed in Indonesia if we had better listened to the Indonesians.” Viewing the whole situation in retrospect, Mansholt thought it would have been wiser if he had stepped down as a minister, but added that he decided otherwise at that time, although he had struggled with himself on this score.²⁹ From another corner of Dutch society, regrets also sounded. In the beginning of January 1995, the council of the Protestant churches issued a declaration stating that the churches regretted their lack of understanding at the time for the Indonesians’ legitimate pursuit of their own independence.³⁰

As was the case with the exchange of views on colonial history in general, the 1995 discussion on the Dutch-Indonesian conflict did not offer many new insights. People in Holland still seemed reluctant to reach strong conclusions concerning the manner in which they had lost their former colony, Indonesia. Despite the publication of many popular and scientific studies on the subject over the years, the nation still lacks a coherent picture. The existence of a “pulverized” historical landscape hampers not only an understanding of what happened, but why it happened.

²⁵ *Volkscrant*, January 18, 1995.

²⁶ *Volkscrant*, January 21, 1995; See also: J. J. P. de Jong, *Diplomatie of strijd. Het Nederlands beleid tegenover de Indonesische revolutie 1945-1947* (Amsterdam/Meppel: Boom, 1988).

²⁷ *Volkscrant*, August 19, 1995.

²⁸ NRC, August 17, 1995.

²⁹ NRC, January 16, 1995.

³⁰ *Volkscrant*, December 30, 1994.

The third, innermost box of ideas to be broken open in 1995 concerned the traumas individuals experienced because of violence undergone or committed during the colonial war. Most of the veterans still were angry over the lack of understanding that had met them when they returned home. They did not like to be reminded of the fact that they may have committed war crimes. They were also critical of the Government for several reasons. They felt misled by the Dutch authorities who at the time created the impression that they were sent overseas for a "good cause," to perform a simple job of "maintaining law and order against a few insurgents." Contrary to their expectations, they had ended up in a messy war, facing gangs of armed youngsters and a hostile population. After having lost the fight, they were shipped back to the Netherlands and were eventually blamed for fighting in pursuit of a "wrong cause."

Several 1995 publications pointed out that the facilities for returning soldiers in the late 1940s were very meager or even non-existent. W. J. Hendrix, former conscript and co-writer of a book on war crimes,³¹ observed that low wages and, often, unemployment awaited the returnees. Not until 1988 were the Indies veterans honored with their own monument in the city of Roermond. Three years later the Foundation Service for Veterans (Stichting Dienstverlening Veteranen) was founded.³² In recent years cases of so-called post-traumatic stress disorder have been multiplying, often after forty years of complete silence on the part of those suffering from war traumas.³³

The issue of war crimes has long been kept in silence. This silence was in part due to the stance of political parties and coalition governments that did not want public attention to be focused on some of the very unpleasant implications of their decisions at the time. Scattered information about war crimes committed had reached the Netherlands in 1947–1948, but in the Dutch parliament no systematic discussion of the nature of Dutch military intervention had been undertaken. In 1947 the government started an investigation of atrocities allegedly committed by Dutch troops in South Sulawesi. The counter-terror activities pursued by R. Westerling and his men, which resulted in several thousand casualties, were collectively excused in a report as a "permissible action on behalf of the Dutch administration" and a "military action condoned by emergency powers." A second report in 1954 produced a more stern verdict and blamed the highest civil and military authorities in the Indies at the time for their lax attitude. Both reports remained secret, however, and the Dutch government refused to initiate any legal action against those responsible.³⁴

In 1969, the silence blanketing the war crimes issue was briefly lifted by a television broadcast in which the ex-soldier, J. E. Hueting, stated that Dutch soldiers in 1947 and 1948 had committed serious war crimes. The broadcast sparked a debate in parliament, and in reaction, the government organized a quick search of the archives, which resulted in the publication of a "Memorandum of Excesses" [*Excessennota*]. This memorandum contained a summation of those excesses discovered in the archival reports, but no analysis. The Prime Minister P. J. S. de Jong concluded that the

³¹ J. A. A. van Doorn and W. J. Hendrix, 2nd ed. *Het Nederlands/Indonesisch conflict. Ontsporing van geweld* (Dieren: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 1983). The first edition appeared in 1970.

³² NRC, January 12, 1995.

³³ NRC, January 14, 1995.

³⁴ *Volkscrant*, January 11, 1995.

government deplored the excesses that had taken place, but that on the whole the military had behaved correctly in Indonesia. The PvdA was not satisfied, however, and demanded a parliamentary inquiry into the South Sulawesi affair that would attempt to assign responsibility for the action, but this idea did not receive enough support and was rejected. Instead, those in authority elected to publish a source edition of the archives to bring to light the many political and administrative aspects of the 1945–1950 period, after which a final verdict, so it was hoped, would be attained.³⁵

Nearly twenty years later in 1988, another incident forced the nation to look inside this darkest “third box.” L. de Jong, who was writing an official history of Holland during the Second World War, had completed a volume on the Indies which was about to be published. A draft version of a chapter was leaked to the press, and it contained the phrase “war crimes” referring to acts of extreme violence on the part of Dutch soldiers. There was also a section in the book in which the military attempt to liquidate the Indonesian Republic was compared with the German occupation of the Netherlands. A lot of vehement public discussion, fueled by the veterans, followed. As a result, De Jong backed down and replaced the term “war crimes” in his book with the less definite term, “excesses of violence” (*geweldsexcessen*).³⁶

Altogether, it is no wonder that in 1995 the “war crime” issue still remained taboo. Besides some reconsideration of issues raised in 1969 and 1988 and the publication of a new edition of the “Memorandum of Excesses” by the Leiden historian, J. Bank, almost nothing of importance happened. The nation was confronted by only one event of some interest when J. van Neden, a former colonel and advisor of the Veterans Platform, admitted in an interview on television that dozens of incidents that had taken place at the time of the two “police actions” had never been reported. According to him, many cases that involved the burning of *kampongs* and the maltreatment and execution of Indonesian POW’s had occurred and gone unrecorded. These excesses, “inevitable in a situation of war,” were still in need of being scientifically researched by means of interviews with former servicemen.³⁷ As could be expected, the colonel’s public confession was not very much appreciated by his fellow comrades-in-arms. The veterans’ organizations quickly publicly dismissed his statements and rejected his recommendation for a search to uncover new facts.

It can be concluded that neither the discussion on the colonial past, nor the discussion of the 1945–1950 period, nor the exchange of views on war crimes progressed much further in 1995. Indifference and powerful pressures exist within Dutch society which preclude a firm political and historical judgment on what the Dutch did in Indonesia shortly after the end of the Second World War. In this respect politicians but also historians and journalists have failed. Many scholarly studies on Indonesia’s decolonization have been published, yet these studies have not led to a more conclusive historical judgment, nor have many of the experts’ judgments been communicated to the general public.

³⁵ This is the source edition by Van der Wal and Drooglever mentioned in note 22. The “final verdict” which this source publication was expected to facilitate is now forgotten.

³⁶ *Volkskrant*, January 21, 1995; *Volkskrant*, February 11, 1995.

³⁷ *Volkskrant*, February 11, 1995.

The visit of Queen Beatrix to Indonesia in August 1995

Only rarely did members of the family of Orange, sovereigns of Holland since 1814, visit the Indies. When he was sixteen, Prince Hendrik made a tour of the Dutch East Indies in 1836–7. The critical letters this young man sent to his mother about the many shortcomings of the Dutch administration caused the then Governor General D. J. de Eerens many a headache.³⁸ In 1919 a committee that named itself “Queen to the Indies” was founded in order to lure Wilhelmina on a trip to the Asian tropical colony and thus promote the Ethical policy, but in vain. When Nazi Germany invaded Holland in 1940, a transfer of the seat of government to the Indies was seriously considered, but Queen Wilhelmina refused because she abhorred the tropical heat. Moreover, going from Europe to the Indies would also move her too far away from the centers of world policy. Decolonization and the strained relations between countries during the Sukarno period prevented any royal visit to take place between 1949 and 1965. Nor was Sukarno allowed to pay Holland a visit, although on various occasions he showed a keen willingness to do so. Not long after the New Order had been installed, in 1971, a visit by Queen Juliana and Prince Bernhard was carried out in response to a state visit by Suharto and his wife to the Netherlands a year before. Their tour through the Archipelago was a great success because it underscored the fact that the colonial past, one hoped, “had gone forever.” The local population cheered the royal visitors wherever they came. Since then Prince Bernhard has visited Indonesia regularly both as a private visitor and as chairman of the World Nature Fund.³⁹

If official visits of the Dutch royal family to Indonesia have been so rare, why would a visit take place precisely in August 1995? National and international public opinion could react unfavorably to the event since critics might argue that such an official visit legitimized the bleak human rights situation in Indonesia. This might be interpreted as a signal for a new phase in Dutch foreign policy since throughout the 1980s the issue of human rights was given a high profile. The Dutch stance on this issue had even provoked some conflict with the Indonesian government; after the Dili shooting, the Dutch suspended aid to Indonesia, and in reaction, Suharto refused further Dutch aid in March 1992.⁴⁰

Although their reasoning was never made public, the Dutch cabinet probably decided to send Queen Beatrix to Indonesia for two reasons. First, it wanted to normalize relations after the row of 1992. Second, there was a strong lobby at work eager to promote Dutch trade and industry. A large delegation of Dutch captains of industry, led by the Minister of Economic Affairs, J. G. Wijers, arrived to visit with the Queen for several days, and they managed to sign dozens of contracts with a total

³⁸ F. C. Gerretson and W. Ph. Coolhaas, *Particuliere briefwisseling tussen J. van den Bosch en D.J. de Eerens 1834-1840* (Groningen: Wolters 1960), pp. 134-135. The Prince was suffering from diarrhea and homesickness. Also, the Governor-General complained, he was surrounded by jealous people who infused him with wrong ideas on certain persons and subjects.

³⁹ NRC August 15, 1995.

⁴⁰ On November 12, 1991, Indonesian soldiers opened fire on a group of demonstrators assembled at the burial site of Santa Cruz in Dili, East Timor. Estimates of the number of those killed vary; the Indonesian government stated that there had been fifty casualties, but the East Timorese resistance movement calculated the number at more than 250. TV pictures of the fleeing crowd were broadcast worldwide. The incident provoked a special UN investigation, which incriminated the Indonesian army.

value of more than one billion Dutch guilders.⁴¹ A few days earlier, the Dutch cabinet had decided to reserve two hundred million in the national budget to support firms that wanted to invest in Indonesia.⁴² The so-called parallel economic mission was a result of a general reorientation in Dutch foreign policy, which has lately begun to pay less attention to development cooperation and human rights and more to economic interests. Simultaneously, the Dutch aid budget has been reoriented more to Dutch business interests and away from humanitarian support for the most impoverished.

The news coverage of the Dutch Queen's visit to Indonesia led to a new outburst of newspaper reports covering not only the visit itself, but also some of the more fundamental issues concerning the nation's history as a colonial power. By way of summation, two foci of public attention can be plotted, one having to do with the Queen's visit and the other with decolonization issues.

In the first two weeks of August preceding the Queen's departure, there was commotion stirred up by reports that a television news program was going to show evidence that in the village of Rawagedeh (West Java) on December 9, 1947 more than 430 people were killed. This was a far greater number than the 150 reported earlier.⁴³ It was Lukas Kustario, once called "the tiger of West Java," former commander of the First Brigade of the Indonesian Siliwangi division, who exposed the discrepancy and described the killings in the village:

On December 9, in the evening hours, Dutch soldiers forced their way into the village. The men were assembled on a field thirty meters wide in front of the community house. The soldiers asked where Lukas was hanging out and threatened to kill the villagers if they would not hand me over to them. When everyone remained silent, they opened fire. In cold blood. At that moment most victims fell.

Kustario added afterwards that he had counted the bodies himself.⁴⁴ The public debate about Rawagedeh erupted after a film was shown on Dutch television in which one could see veterans returning to certain locations where they professed to have killed Indonesians, including ones already taken prisoner.⁴⁵

In reaction to the statements on Rawagedeh, called the "Dutch My Lai" in one reader's letter, the public prosecutor of Arnhem started an exploratory investigation into possible war crimes (a person's legal responsibility for crimes against humanity does not lapse with the passage of time).⁴⁶ A few days later the Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a UN-document, dated January 1948, on the Dutch military action in this village. The names of individuals mentioned in the report, however, were rendered illegible. The conclusion of the UN investigation was clear: "the action of the Dutch army was intentional and without mercy." As for casualties, the report only offered estimates of the numbers: between 150 (Dutch statement) and 433 (figure given

⁴¹ *Telegraaf*, August 21, 1995.

⁴² NRC, August 17, 1995.

⁴³ NRC and *Volkscrant*, August 9, 1995.

⁴⁴ NRC, August 15, 1995.

⁴⁵ *Volkscrant*, August 5, 1995.

⁴⁶ NRC, August 10, 1995; NRC, August 12, 1995.

by the Muslim priest of Rawahgedeh).⁴⁷ Soon the whole affair blew over again; public attention reverted to Queen Beatrix's visit.

During the preparation for the Queen's visit the main issue publicly discussed was whether she should offer apologies to the Indonesians for the wrongdoings committed during the colonial period and the decolonization episode. In March 1995 an open letter to the Crown Prince was published by someone under the pseudonym Multatuli, challenging him to breach official etiquette and speak out:

Go there, stand up and speak. Say that Holland confesses guilt of the centuries of abuse and exploitation. Say after this that the new indigenous rulers do not perform any better. Nusantara is still 'a beautiful horse on which a thief is seated' (learn this Indonesian phrase by heart: *Negri Insulinde adalah se-ekor kuda yang di-tunggangi se-orang pencuri*). Read out a fitting passage from my Max Havelaar. The crowd will cheer at you. It will be a diplomatic incident. The Government will ask you and your parents to leave. I shall laugh in heaven.⁴⁸

Of course this kind of ridicule was not taken seriously, but it did raise the question of what kind of speech the Queen should give and if apologies for the past should be included in it. Again opinions differed. Some saw the visit as an excellent opportunity once and for all to end the erratic manifestations of a torn national soul. Others thought excuses were nonsense because no actions had been committed that required any excuse, nor had the Indonesians asked for apologies or confessions from their former colonial masters.

When Queen Beatrix gave her speech, on August 21, she did not offer open apologies but read out the following two crucial sentences: "Holland was at first not prepared to accept the Indonesian endeavor towards complete and immediate independence. Because of this, the separation between our countries has become a long process, that has cost much pain and bitter struggle."⁴⁹ The identities of the persons who wrote the speech are not clear, but it must have been the work of foreign affairs officials, for the most part, assisted by some prominent Dutch historians. Most political parties in the Netherlands reacted favorably to the chosen wording. Only Groen Links (Green Left), a small opposition party, declared itself to be disappointed by the lack of explicit apologies. Also the well-known Dutch publicist, Rudy Kousbroek, expressed disappointment: "what we blame the Japanese for, we now do ourselves."⁵⁰ The critics were clearly in the minority.

Meanwhile, in Indonesia a poll had been launched by the progressive weekly, *Forum*, to measure public reaction to the apology issue. According to this poll, 67 percent of the older generation Indonesians wanted Holland to apologize, and among

⁴⁷ *Volkskrant*, August 16, 1995; The source asserting that there were 150 deaths can be found in Bank, *Excessennota*, p. 83.

⁴⁸ NRC, March 3, 1995.

⁴⁹ *Volkskrant*, August 22, 1995.

⁵⁰ NRC, August 22, 1995. Rudy Kousbroek is a prolific publicist and novelist, who was born and raised in the Dutch East Indies, who through his polemical articles has become quite influential in shaping Dutch public opinion on colonial matters. One of his recent books is *Het Oostindisch kampsyndroom* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1992), which contains a number of essays that appeared on earlier occasions in the NRC newspaper and the weekly *Vrij Nederland*.

the younger generation the proportion rose to 74 percent.⁵¹ These reports on public opinion in Indonesia were published shortly before the arrival of the Queen, and were apparently intended to increase the pressure on the Dutch guests.

The question whether the Dutch royal family should be present in Jakarta on August 17, 1995 at the ceremony celebrating the fifty years' anniversary of Indonesian independence was another issue widely debated. Already in January the weekly, *Vrij Nederland*, had announced that the Queen would not be present on this date.⁵² Several reasons lay behind this decision, although these were never officially explained. One reason probably had to do with pressure from veteran groups, energized since the Princen incident and very effective in their manipulation of the press. It was announced in May that veterans were to be given an official role to play in the program during the Queen's visit to Indonesia.⁵³ The other reason was of a more fundamental nature: the presence of the Dutch Queen in Indonesia on August 17 would give the impression that the Dutch government did not recognize December 27, 1949, the date of the transfer of power, as the true starting point of independent Indonesia, but now instead recognized Indonesia's own proclamation of independence, which had been announced more than four years earlier, as the crucial date. In a symbolic way the contemporary Dutch government would thus discredit the frenetic attempts by earlier Dutch governments to hold on to Indonesia after the Second World War.

The Dutch royal visit was postponed until August 21, yet on August 17 congratulations from the Dutch government to Indonesia, offered by Prime Minister W. Kok, were broadcast on Indonesian television.⁵⁴ At the end of August, when the royal visit was concluded, discussion about whether the Queen should have arrived on August 17 and not August 21 arose again in the newspapers. The historian J. Bank asserted that the choice made was the correct one, contending that the celebration of August 17 was above all intended to serve as a public display of unity among Indonesian citizens; its function as commemoration of a historic event was less significant. The presence of the Queen on that day would thus do more to display the Dutch people's preoccupation with their own history than to accomplish anything the Indonesian hosts would desire or encourage.⁵⁵ Others, including the already mentioned Rudy Kousbroek, deplored the absence of the Queen on this crucial date because they thought one symbolic act would have put the historical record straight.⁵⁶ And of course for once Kousbroek was right: a royal presence on August 17 would have been greatly appreciated by the Indonesian government, even though it would have provoked furious reactions both among Dutch veterans' groups as well as from progressives in Holland who believed that the Indonesian officials would exploit such an event to prop up their own domestic prestige.

⁵¹ *Volkskrant*, August 21, 1995.

⁵² *Vrij Nederland*, January 14, 1995. A spokesman for the state information service is reported to have stated: "The Indonesians consider the 17th as a national celebration day. No other head of state is invited. If a country celebrates its independence, in itself we have nothing to do with that." p. 8.

⁵³ NRC, May 20, 1995.

⁵⁴ NRC, August 17, 1995.

⁵⁵ NRC, August 29, 1995.

The visit of Queen Beatrix itself was widely covered in the Dutch newspapers, which communicated the impression that the event had been marred by human rights abuses and lapses in protocol. Hardly had the royal family set foot on Indonesian soil when alarming messages started to circulate that the Indonesian government intended to execute seven prisoners, among them two former palace guards of Sukarno, Bungkus and Marsudi.⁵⁷ This message followed in the wake of the release of Subandrio, Sukarno's Foreign Affairs minister, who had been jailed for large-scale financial wrongdoings, and coincided with the pardon of 26,000 prisoners in honor of the Republic's fiftieth anniversary. Thus, according to a haunting comment in the *Volkskrant*, "two indigenous ghosts are traveling within the queen's retinue."⁵⁸

With regard to the protocol, there were reports in the Dutch newspapers that the Indonesian government, at a very late moment, changed important parts of the official program. A private lunch between the Dutch and Indonesian head of state was canceled, the Queen had to stay in a Padang hotel with the message "Indonesia merdeka" spelled out in light bulbs on the roof, and the visit to the Sultan of Yogyakarta was shortened markedly.⁵⁹ Many other rather awkward surprises were reported as well. During an official ceremony at the Indonesian military graveyard, Kalibata, seven Dutch war veterans were present but their Indonesian counterparts did not show up.⁶⁰ That same ceremony was missed by the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Van Mierlo, because his escort, consisting of only one motorcycle policeman, had an engine breakdown.⁶¹ The final meeting between Suharto, Ibu Tien, the Dutch royal couple, and the Dutch Crown Prince took only twenty-five minutes.⁶²

Were the lapses in protocol carefully orchestrated by unnamed Indonesian authorities? There have been many situations in history where Dutch-Indonesian official contacts provoked a subtle protocol battle. Or is it more likely that Dutch news reports of protocol embarrassments largely reflected the paranoia of the Dutch, a paranoia stirred up by relevant public debates during the months preceding the royal visit? One NRC editor was particularly outspoken on what had happened: in his opinion, Holland had suffered a "shattering humiliation" in Indonesia.⁶³

Concluding remarks

The year 1995 invited the Dutch newspaper readers to gaze down on a confused battlefield where advocates fought to defend their views on Indonesia and the Dutch colonial national past. In one way, the Netherlands' collective mental unresolvedness regarding its traumatic past is not unique; in other ways, it is. In America in the mid-1960s, the Vietnam war acquired unprecedented immediacy because of daily on-the-spot television coverage. But, as Andrew Martin recently observed, in the beginning of

⁵⁶ NRC, August 22, 1995.

⁵⁷ *Volkskrant* and NRC, August 19, 1995; NRC, August 22, 1995.

⁵⁸ *Volkskrant*, August 24, 1995.

⁵⁹ NRC, August 31, 1995.

⁶⁰ NRC, August 21, 1995.

⁶¹ NRC, August 26, 1995.

⁶² NRC, August 23, 1995.

⁶³ NRC, August 29, 1995.

the 1970s the flow of images halted and a stifling silence followed, known as the "Big Chill." A kind of "cultural paralysis" set in because of the unwillingness of Americans to face what had happened and, in the words of Peter Marin, "to determine in the light of the past our moral obligations for the future."⁶⁴ Since that time, however, Vietnam has reappeared in American popular culture, confronting audiences in movies like "Platoon" (1985). On other levels, the discourse on Vietnam has evolved into a force that affects both national policy—US foreign policy—and individual identities—the changeable identification of Vietnam veterans as "crybabies, dutiful sons, dangerous misfits, or patriotic warriors."⁶⁵

To take another example, the French nightmare involving Algeria still lingers on, though dimly. The monumental *Histoire de la France Coloniale* (1990) only contains two rather confused pages on the Algerian trauma and the memory of the decolonization. It records how the former French combatants in Algeria prefer to keep silent rather than to recount their experiences, and suggests that their will to keep silent is caused by both shame, because they were defeated, and a bad conscience, because it was an unequal war. "These sentiments," the French authors maintain, "are in any case those of the French people in general."⁶⁶ France, they continue, cannot suppress this disgraceful part of its history. Yet every "honest historian" can establish that after 1962 France understood that it should continue to give aid to Algeria for humanitarian, not self-interested, reasons. Finally, the authors maintain, it is not the habit of university historians to take into account the literature of "necrophagous" publicists who live on pseudo-revelations of forgotten scandals.⁶⁷ One can ask whether these last digressions accurately reflect the collective opinion of French academic historians.

Examined in retrospect, the public exchange of ideas in Holland in 1995 showed a similarly complex chemistry of emotions. What stands out is that Holland's colonial past, the period 1945–1949 in particular, is as much taboo today as it was earlier. Why is this? It is caused first by the collective mental structure underlying the Dutch perception of their own national history. But also, certain catalysts—and plenty of these were available in 1995—energized public discussion, but ultimately failed to provoke more active explorations of Dutch colonial history.

The Dutch possess a strong historical awareness. They have been taught to think that certain collective values (tolerance, the pursuit of the "good," willingness to work) are expressed in their own national history. However, there have been periods of crisis in the past—the decolonization of Indonesia is a prime example—when the self-image of the Dutch people has been tarnished. The collective memory of these crises is painful and it heightens feelings of fallibility, to which the majority of the Dutch, thanks in part to their Calvinist traditions, are susceptible. This pain can be met in two ways, either by a refusal to acknowledge the guilty acts in the past or by a decision to spade them up and correct them in order to initiate a moral cleaning. The first response

⁶⁴ Andrew Martin, *Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), p. 10.

⁶⁵ Martin, *Receptions of War*, p. 9.

⁶⁶ J. Thobié, G. Meynier, C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, Ch. R. Ageron, *Histoire de la France Coloniale 1914-1990* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1990), p. 552.

⁶⁷ Thobié, *Histoire de la France coloniale*, p. 553.

typifies the behavior of many veterans, supported by relatively conservative politicians and historians. The second answer is chosen by younger people, socialist politicians, and progressive historians.

During the year 1995, the press acted as the major vehicle mobilizing the hidden potentials of this collective Dutch mental structure. This year was a special one because of the many commemorations taking place: fifty years after the liberation from Nazi (or, in the case of the Indies, Japanese) rule, but also fifty years since Holland's last colonial war started. It resulted in a stream of popular publications, TV documentaries, and columns in newspapers, which in turn provoked intensified public debates on certain key historical issues. During the year there were also specific catalysts that appeared which had the power to spark debate about the colonial past, i.e. the visit of the "deserter" Poncke Princen to Holland, a renewed discussion of war crimes, and the official visit of Queen Beatrix to Indonesia.

The official visit of the Dutch Monarch to Indonesia was an exceptionally strong catalyst electrifying public discourse about the past. Next to the national soccer team, the Queen holds her place as an eminent Dutch national symbol. Her visit to Indonesia in 1995 was necessarily prefaced by a number of sensitive choices with regard to the national past. On what date she should go? What she would say about former relations? Which representatives from Dutch society would she take in her retinue? How would protocol be arranged? These were all issues that provoked intense public discussion before her departure. The visit of the Queen in a way "actualized" the troublesome colonial past because it could not wholly evade, through protocol or carefully worded speeches, a clear collective position that would allow the Dutch to stand firm in the present relative to their own past.

However, the exact extent of war crimes committed remained unresolved; the Dutch people have not yet even agreed that the term, "war crimes," can be used to describe atrocities that took place in 1945–49 in Indonesia. Neither the Queen nor Dutch parliament offered apologies for the wrongs of the colonial past. Finally, professional historians in Holland have proven largely unable or unwilling to propose a more or less conclusive historical judgment on the colonial past. Such a historical judgment must include a moral point-of-view incorporating contemporary knowledge and perspectives.⁶⁸

The essence of the contents of the public discussion in Holland in 1995 encompassed particular strings of signifiers. The most painful strand joined these words—"lost war—veterans and deserters—war crimes." The signifiers that tagged discussion on 1945–49 included the words: "decolonization—political responsibility—apologies." Finally there was one strand of signifiers having to do with history, characterized by these terms: "colonial past—historical explanation—moral judgement." Some individuals spoke out on these issues, but most Dutchmen kept their mouths shut, skipped certain sections of their newspapers, and zapped their TVs to a fun channel.

⁶⁸ I am not wholly convinced by the "postmoralistic" approach proposed by M. de Keizer in her recent article "Memory as *Rite de Passage*: Towards a Postmoralistic Historiography of the Second World War," *Itinerario XX* (1996-2): 118-127. A postmoralistic approach is only possible after the phase of moralism is over. Maybe postmoralism can be applied to World War II, but as far as Indonesia is concerned, most Dutchmen are still in the phase of denial.

Finally, the year 1995 was distinguished by a non-event, when a timid public discussion found itself overwhelmed by silence.