

L. de Jong. *The Collapse of a Colonial Society: The Dutch in Indonesia during the Second World War*. Introduced by Jerouen Kemperman. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002. 570 pages.

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I was a young doctoral student working in the archives of the former Ministry of Colonies when Emperor Hirohito visited the Netherlands in 1971. I was amazed at the vehemence of the reaction of so many Dutch people—including people I knew well. For weeks before and after the visit, the Dutch press was full of anti-Japanese articles and letters. The emotions erupted into the streets of Amsterdam and the Hague, making the Emperor's visit a short and unpleasant one. The archives of the former Ministry of Colonies had only just been opened to researchers and were being prepared for eventual handover to the General State Archives. Those involved in the task were for the most part bureaucrats from the Ministry. Many of them were old colonial hands who had lived or worked in the former Dutch East Indies. A couple had been interned by the Japanese during the war, and one had suffered greatly in Manchuria. Emotions were high in the Ministry's archives. Not only were there bitter feelings toward Japan, but most of the bureaucrats held very different views of the Indonesian nationalist movement, and of Sukarno in particular, from those of a young Australian student, born after the war and ideologically sympathetic to anti-colonial movements.

The loss of empire was traumatic to the Dutch. And not just to the political elite. With over 300,000 Dutch citizens in the Netherlands East Indies on the eve of the Japanese conquest and tens of thousands more living in the Netherlands who had once lived in the colony, the Indies had much deeper roots into Netherlands society than had the colonies of the French or the English. The Netherlands was a small country, with a far higher proportion of its people who had been either living in the Indies when the colony fell to the Japanese, or who had lived in the Indies before retirement. Many had relatives or friends who had lived there. Others had been part of the postwar reoccupying forces or had brothers, sons, or friends who had been part of the five long years of eventually futile effort to recreate the "peace and order" that in the popular, as well as in the official, imagination had been the state of the colony before December 1941.

There are many lacunae in the history of Indonesia. So much documentation has been lost through the ravages of conflict, neglect, and the paucity of resources devoted to their preservation since independence. So few people have worked on original historical research. Nowhere is this lacuna greater than in the history of the Japanese occupation. Indeed, for a period so momentous for the people of Southeast Asia, we know so little beyond the "big picture." The problem is the lack of source materials. Most Japanese wartime records on the region were destroyed by the Japanese in the wake of impending defeat by the Allied forces, and in Japan itself there is little beyond policy-level documentation. The German occupation of Europe is well documented, including the horror of the concentration camps, because detailed records were preserved by the swift Allied occupation of Germany. Our knowledge of the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia will never be as deep because both the Japanese

government and the Japanese occupation forces in Southeast Asia had enough time to burn most of their records.

Enough has survived, though, to complement the memories of the survivors of those terrible years. Japan might have been seen by some Indonesian nationalists in the 1930s as at least the potential "Light of Asia," but after only a few months of Japan's replacing the Netherlands as the colonial rulers, few had any remaining illusions. Some, Sukarno and Hatta among them, remained convinced that Japan would lose the war reasonably quickly and that they should hang in there in the expectation that, at the war's end, there would be the first real chance of seizing independence. Others, like Sjahrir, took the view that fascism and militarism were greater evils than even colonialism and refused to countenance compromise with Japan. The narrative of tacit cooperation and overt resistance to Japan has been told many times elsewhere. Recent research has also looked more carefully at the impact of Japanese occupation on ordinary people as well as on political elites at the center and the peripheries.

Hundreds of thousands of Indonesians were either imprisoned by the Japanese or sent overseas as forced laborers. We know little or nothing of their experiences because very few of those who survived created written records or recorded their experiences later. Memoirs of Japanese officers and men and bits and pieces of records provide a small insight into the thoughts and experiences of the Japanese. By and large, though, we see the Japanese soldiers and administrators of the occupied Indies through the eyes of Europeans. The written remembrances of Dutch colonists who were imprisoned during the Japanese occupation of Indonesia, or who simply experienced the pain of survival during those long three years, are valuable, not only for what they tell us of the European experiences, but also for what they reveal of the sufferings of Indonesians and the attitudes of the Japanese captors. Although Southeast Asians lost their lives on the Thai-Burma railway in greater numbers than did Europeans, we have only the European remembered experiences from which to reconstruct the horrors experienced by European and Southeast Asian alike.

The letters, diaries, reports, postoccupation debriefings, and memoirs of Dutch men and women trapped in the Indies by the Japanese occupation provide the best evidence available for the impact of the Japanese occupation on the peoples of Southeast Asia, albeit through the eyes of the former European ruling class. From senior officials to minor functionaries and from those for whom the Indies had for decades been "home," we can learn a great deal about the impact of the Japanese occupation on the day-to-day lives of both Europeans and Indonesians.

The Collapse of a Colonial Society is an English-language translation of part of a much larger Dutch-language study on the Japanese occupation of the former Dutch East Indies. It contains those parts of the original book that focused on the Dutch and Eurasian experiences of the Japanese period. The author, Louis de Jong, was a distinguished Dutch historian. The fourteen-volume study (over seven thousand pages) of the Netherlands during the second world war is an immense achievement. This English-language volume is loaded with detailed discussion of aspects of the Japanese occupation as it affected Europeans, and to a lesser extent, Eurasians. It draws on a remarkable range of published and unpublished materials from archives and personal collections. It portrays the horrors inflicted on the Dutch and other Europeans, yet at the same time shows their conviction that the Allies would win and

that life would be restored to its prewar normality. The stoicism, the courage, and the sheer determination of women and men simply to survive reminds us of the inner strength of human beings in times of horror and brutality.

Through the personal experiences of thousands of European men and women, we are confronted with the brutality of Japanese soldiers. De Jong clearly saw it as his task to detail at great length the personal remembrances of brutality and torture of hundreds of Dutch and Eurasians. It is not an easy read. True, the humanity of the occasional camp commandant is recognized, yet the senselessness of so much of the brutality is truly shocking. By and large, Japanese soldiers who occupied the Indies were not the brightest and the best—a point de Jong acknowledges many times. Yet this on its own does not explain the pleasure that many guards seem to have taken in brutalizing their captives. How do we explain this senseless and systemic torture? We know that war brings out the worst in human beings. We know that brutal behavior is not confined to any one nation. Recent conflicts in Bosnia and Iraq and the seemingly endless Arab-Israeli conflict bring the horrors of war to our television screens almost daily. And the British, the French, and the Dutch had been quite prepared to use brutal methods against noncompliant “natives” in carving out their colonies. Nevertheless, de Jong’s detailed descriptions of the conditions of individual Dutch and Eurasians held in prison awaiting trial for anti-Japanese activity does not make for pleasant reading. His description of the way in which the Japanese administered justice is chilling, and he concludes that:

What passed for justice in the Japanese military court had little or nothing to do with justice by normal standards. The court consisted of three officers—the president, as stated above, was the head of the department that had collected the incriminating evidence, the Kempeitai. The prosecutor was an officer too, as was the defending counsel, who also usually read out and explained the indictment drawn up by the Kempeitai. There was no appeal. (213)

If the historian has a moral function, as Hobsbawm has rightly argued, then as we read these pages and struggle to understand the mentality of those involved in such inhumanity, it is hard not to think of the way in which the “coalition of the willing” is treating its prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. Injustice remains injustice wherever it occurs.

The horrors of the Thai-Burma railway are well known. Prisoners of war who were sent to build this railway underwent experiences that are almost beyond understanding. The internment camps in the Indies were not as bad, if only because the internees did not have to engage in such physically demanding work, in such an inhospitable environment with such meagre rations. But the remembered histories of prison camps in the Indies, and the surviving scraps of letters and memoirs written at the time, reinforce the picture of Japanese brutality throughout Southeast and East Asia. There were internment camps in the Indies in which prisoners experienced conditions approaching those in the construction of Thai-Burma railway. The 2,200 Dutch and Eurasians moved from Surabaya to Flores or the two thousand Dutch and British prisoners of war moved to Haruka in the Molukas in mid-1943 in order to build airfields suffered very similar conditions, albeit for a shorter period. The diary of a doctor, Dr. R. Springer, is moving testimony to this living hell. In Springer’s words, “there is no humanity here any more” (402).

Yet there was humanity in the prisons and the camps. What comes through very strongly in the diaries and the memoirs of so many of the internees is that the human spirit was not so easily broken. There are a myriad of examples of individual kindnesses offered by one prisoner to another, of the preparedness of some to sacrifice their lives so others could have a chance to live, and of the sheer determination of so many to survive no matter what. Even among those who were beaten to death or who were summarily executed, there often was much dignity and strength of spirit. Although de Jong records the strength of the human spirit in the depths of the prison camp experience, he does not avoid the evidence that amidst the heights of human behavior, there was also unscrupulous behavior by some.

This is, of course, written for a Dutch audience by a conservative historian. De Jong uses the language of “collaborators” and “traitors” to describe those who worked for the Japanese occupation forces. There is no attempt to understand that Indonesians might have seen the Japanese occupation in a different light from Europeans. There is certainly no attempt to understand that Indonesians might have seen the Dutch in the Indies differently from the ways in which they saw themselves. There is no doubt in de Jong’s mind that the Indies rightfully was a Dutch colony. There is a lengthy chapter on resistance and clandestine activities that details what is known of the anti-Japanese actions of Dutch and Eurasians. In de Jong’s view, “the resistance in the Indies deserves as much respect as that in the mother country” (222). This story is written as part of Dutch history. Indonesians are seen only at the periphery. It is however a chapter in Indonesian history worth telling. De Jong tells it to great effect.

One compelling pattern throughout the individual stories in this book is the strong belief of many Dutch men and women that the war would be short and the conviction of almost all that, not only would the Allies be victorious, but that there would be a restoration of the colony as they had known it in the 1930s. It reminds us that most Dutch men and women in the Indies of the 1930s lived in an insulated world. *The Collapse of a Colonial Society* provides a stark reminder of the impact of the Japanese occupation on the Dutch, not just in the colony, but also in the homeland. They could not contemplate independence in 1940. After what so many of them experienced under the Japanese, it is little wonder that even fewer could contemplate it in 1945.