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'The Eurasian Question' : the colonial position and postcolonial options of colonial mixed ancestry groups from British India, Dutch East Indies and French Indochina compared

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8 Chaos and options in the de-colonisation period

8.1 Introduction

On 15 August 1945, atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Japanese capitulated and the Second World War ended in Asia. Soon after, independence was proclaimed in the Dutch East Indies and French Indochina. From that moment onwards, a confusing, chaotic and violent period for Eurasians began: the *Bersiap* and colonial war in the Dutch East Indies and *La guerre d'Indochine* (the First Indochina War) in French Indochina.¹ Indo-Europeans and *Métis* were explicitly targeted during these violent periods and their status remained uncertain for some time. For many of them, this uncertainty drove them to leave the former colony. Independence in British India, although it was prepared a long time in advance, still came rather unexpectedly. In February 1947, the British Cabinet confirmed that Britain would leave India by June 1948 (and did so by August 1947). Lord Mountbatten decided that there was no alternative to the Partitioning of British India into Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India and a rapid exit of the British from India.² The British withdrew even before the violent chaos accompanying Partition broke out. The Anglo-Indians, however, did not form a primary target during the Partition struggles, and therefore most of them wanted to stay in India at least initially.

8.2 British India: A relatively smooth transition

When the Statutory Commission convened in 1930, the president of the AIAIA, Sir Henry Gidney, had already handed in a proposal which advocated that Anglo-Indians should be given job reservations and other rights. Apart from the already mentioned employment reservations in governmental services like the railway, customs, postal and telegraph services, these benefits included representation in State Legislative Assemblies, where their population numbers were high enough, provision of two seats in the *Lok Sabha*, part of India's bicameral parliament, and an allocation of grants for Anglo-Indian schools on the condition that at least 40 per cent of the schools would be made up of non-Anglo-Indian students.³ All these were important incentives for Anglo-Indians to stay in newly independent India. Therefore, in the initial phase after decolonisation, the former colonial status quo was maintained for the majority of the 300,000 Anglo-Indians who were living on the Indian subcontinent. Anglo-Indians, who were not a target during the Partition riots, kept doing the same jobs (mostly in

the railway sector), and continued to live in the same houses in the same neighbourhoods.⁴

Although most Anglo-Indians initially stayed in India, at least 50,000 of them emigrated before 1970. Half of this group resettled in Britain in the late 1940s and 1950s. The majority of those who departed, left India after 1960 when the guarantees for employment ended.⁵ These migrants made their decisions against the advice of Anglo-Indian leaders such as Frank Anthony.⁶ He criticised those Anglo-Indians with fairer skins and argued that they should 'stop aping the British' and think of newly independent India as their home. Already in 1926, Anthony's predecessor, Henry Gidney had stated that Anglo-Indians should 'regard themselves as Indians'. The local press commented on this statement and considered it a thorough 'change of heart' for Anglo-Indians.⁷ However, for many Anglo-Indians, ideas of home revolved around an actual family location, not connected to a specific country, neither the UK nor India. They saw themselves as colonials living in a foreign land which they had chosen as a home. However, in cultural terms, Anglo-Indians kept regarding themselves as British or European people, not as Indians.⁸

While the constitution guaranteed limited minority rights for Anglo-Indians, it also identified the community as having historical affiliations with the British. The constitution emphasised the colonial legacy of the Anglo-Indians in newly independent India, and this could make their adaptation to the newly independent country difficult.⁹ Frank Anthony was often praised for his leadership of the AIAIA. He developed into a skilled mediator of Anglo-Indian and Congress interests. His friendships with the Indian presidents Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi (both from the Congress Party) promoted the interests of the Anglo-Indian community at large.¹⁰ Frank Anthony was closely involved with the negotiations that led to the composition of two sections of the constitution of independent India. These regulated the fundamental right of minorities, including Anglo-Indians, to establish and administer educational institutions of their own choice. He was also involved in the negotiations for two other privileges: continued job reservations and political representation.¹¹ In 1952, Anthony was quoted in an article of the overseas edition of the *Hindustan Times* saying that on the one hand those Anglo-Indians who realised that India was their home would inevitably inspire trust and confidence and have opportunities which they could never hope for in any other country. But on the other hand, he also brought to the fore that:

Anglo-Indians had certain fears particularly about the future of their language and their way of life. The educational policies of states like Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh made it impossible for minorities to maintain education institutions of their choice, as guaranteed under article 30 of the Constitution.¹²

Anthony added that although he was not a Congress Party supporter, there was no alternative to the Congress Party if democracy was to survive in India.¹³

Despite all this praise, Frank Anthony also received a lot of criticism from the Anglo-Indian community. For example, rumour had it that he had never visited a slum where poor Anglo-Indians lived. Many people within and outside the community said that Anthony and the AIAIA were not active enough in helping poor Anglo-Indians. They claimed that scholarships were never granted to the Anglo-Indian poor. Further-

more, they said that the poor themselves were never consulted about what measures they saw as important in overcoming their poverty.¹⁴

8.3 Dutch East Indies: Occupation, war and uncertainty

The Japanese capitulation did not mean instant relief for the internees in the camps. Instead, according to an eyewitness, it led to disaster for a not-yet-defeated people.¹⁵ The arrival of the British liberators took several weeks and in some places even months. When the British troops came, they did not have adequate equipment. They were aware of the anti-colonial atmosphere, but their motto was to distance themselves from the fighting parties. However, they could not maintain order and they became involved in the struggle. The Indonesians considered the British troops as accomplices of the Dutch, who would help to restore colonialism. The British suffered great losses and decided to leave the Dutch East Indies between June and December 1946.¹⁶ Furthermore, the prisons in which hundreds of people were held, including Dutch and Indo-European people, Chinese and indigenous people, did not open their gates. When these people eventually did come out of the prisons, they were incarcerated again in 'protection' camps.¹⁷ Many internees kept relying upon the loyalty of indigenous people, whom they knew personally from before the war. This trust was based on the harmonious circumstances in which they had lived together in households. For many Indonesians, the end of Japanese occupation had an economic consequence: it meant that they could work in European households again.¹⁸ Despite this rather harmonious picture, a more aggressive Dutch colonial mentality was revived in many camps. The Dutch internees expressed this sentiment in texts, e.g.: 'those bloody natives, who do they think they are? We will get even with them! Just you wait!'¹⁹

In the absence of the British troops, the period after the Japanese capitulation turned into an historical abnormality. The Japanese were a defeated army, that could not 'really' surrender and withdraw, but still had to exercise control, since the liberators had not arrived yet. The (Indo-)European internees had to stay in the camps tentatively in order to be protected from young radical nationalists, the *pemoedas* and *pe-lopors*. Japanese soldiers, who first had closely guarded the (Indo-)Europeans from fleeing the camps, now confusingly protected them until the British troops came to liberate them.²⁰ The Japanese did not act in a similar way everywhere in Indonesia. In Surabaya, the Japanese let Indonesians disarm them without any resistance, but in Bandung the Japanese fought severely with the Indonesian nationalists. These regional differences show how confusing the immediate post-war period was.²¹

British soldiers were sent to the Dutch East Indies to control areas formerly occupied by Japanese troops.²² In many areas of the Dutch East Indies, these British soldiers were from British India, Gurkhas mostly, who often did no more than disarm the Japanese. They found the situation in the Dutch East Indies, in which the Dutch did not want to give their colony independence, unacceptable. This is understandable from their point of view since the British had already promised and prepared India for independence. The Gurkhas did not want to fight against Soekarno. Things got

worse when numerous of these soldiers deserted and joined the side of the Indonesian revolutionaries.²³

In the chaotic post-war situation, the *pemoedas* and *pelopors* took advantage of the existing power vacuum and patrolled the streets searching for anything Dutch or colonial. Indo-Europeans became 'outlaws' in their eyes and were brutally killed. The harbour town of Surabaya witnessed the most violent and traumatic episode.²⁴ One of several incidents contributing to the escalation was the flag incident. Some Dutch men, anxious to raise the Dutch flag which had been lowered by the Japanese for three and a half years, hoisted their flag on the roof of the former Oranje Hotel in the centre of Surabaya. Numerous armed Indonesians with bamboo spears appeared and stripped the Dutch flag of its blue banner, making it the red and white flag of the Indonesian Republic. Opposite the hotel there was a Red Cross aid post containing several Dutch ex-interned soldiers. When they saw the violation of the Dutch flag, they attacked the *pemoedas* and this led to a bloody fight.²⁵ This incident was the immediate cause of heavy violence directed at Indo-Europeans in Surabaya. Because many Indo-Europeans had remained outside the camps, this made them an easy target during the *Bersiap*-period. Another consequence of not being interned was that Indo-Europeans could not depend on allied help and on evacuation from unsafe areas. The organisation *Recovery of Allied Prisoners of War and Internees* (RAPWI) was founded on 18 August 1945, but was only meant for the evacuation of internees from Japanese camps.²⁶ Due to the racist *colour line* (resulting in a radical 'whites-only' policy) in Australia they could not go to that country either. Indo-Europeans were also an easy target because they were regarded as a threatening alternative for the new Indonesian republic. This *Indische* alternative was not a return to colonialism, but instead a decolonised Indonesia in which Indo-Europeans would take the leading roles.²⁷

Dutch propaganda initially depicted the Indonesian uprising as a movement which was Japanese inspired and whose leader ought to be tried as a war criminal for collaboration with the Japanese. Therefore, in some areas on Java, conquered by the nationalists, Indo-Europeans (also those who had stayed outside the camps) were interned again, under the guise of protection from the radical Indonesian nationalists. This time they were guarded by Indonesians, and pre-war colonial roles were turned upside down once again.²⁸ This crisis lasted for months in some parts of Java. Just as Dahler and Boogaardt had tried to convince the Indo-Europeans to join the Asian or Indonesian camp during Japanese occupation, pamphlets again encouraged Indo-Europeans to join the Indonesian camp. Already at the beginning of 1945, Soekarno reassured the Indo-Europeans that their rights as a minority would be guaranteed in independent Indonesia.²⁹

On 25 March 1947, the agreement of Linggadjati (named after a small mountain village in mid-Java) was signed. The Netherlands acknowledged *de facto* the sovereignty of the Indonesian Republic over Java, Madura and Sumatra. Next to that, a draft of a federal nation and a Dutch-Indonesian Union (a sort of Dutch commonwealth) was approved. Although this appeared to be a success, politicians on both sides interpreted the agreement differently. That situation eventually made the agreement unacceptable for both parties. Indonesians also looked at their neighbour's policies in Vietnam. For example, while the Dutch kept insisting that during a transition period

Indonesia would be part of a Dutch commonwealth, the Indonesians wanted to have free-state status, based on their positive impressions of what the French had offered the Vietnamese.³⁰ Not only British, Dutch and French policy makers looked at each other for inspiration, but also indigenous inhabitants of the former colonies regarded the possibilities of their neighbours with interest. In reality, the French authorities had not offered the Vietnamese much more than the Dutch gave the Indonesians. Due to different interpretations of the agreement, the implementation of Linggadjati did not turn out to be a success. On Java in particular, the unrest and brutal actions of *pemoedas* and *pelopors* continued. The Dutch government decided that military action was necessary to restore colonial order in the Dutch East Indies. They had not expected such aggressive Indonesian opposition. In July 1947, the first ‘police’ action took place under the code name *Operatie Product* (Operation Product), because it was primarily focused on reconquering economically lucrative sites, such as sugar enterprises and factories.³¹ The Dutch colonial rulers presented this as a purely internal problem and framed it in the press as ‘police actions.’³² Historians agree that the situation on Java in the period 1945-1949 was a civil, revolutionary war, comparable to the situation in other decolonisation wars such as in French Indochina and Algeria. Recent extensive research has shown that violent conduct was happening on a structural, systematic scale rather than incidentally, which Dutch politicians had asserted earlier.³³ During this period about 44,000 Indo-European and European people with a Dutch passport repatriated to the Netherlands.³⁴

The contemporary eye-witness Jan Krijgsman (already referred to in chapter 4), who has described his experiences as a Dutch soldier in the first ‘police’ action, could not say whether the violent operations were war acts or just ‘police actions’ in his memoirs. According to him, ‘every outsider is able to understand the subtle difference between a ‘police action’ and a war; every insider is not capable of doing so’ and he considers himself an insider.³⁵ The Indonesians reacted to the first and second ‘police action’ with guerrilla warfare. The term ‘police action’ used by Dutch authorities in governmental documents sounds quite euphemistic and in fact the situation in the archipelago could be described as a full-blown war. The Dutch army found it difficult to regain control of areas, since most soldiers did not have any experience or training in guerrilla warfare.

‘Within the borders of these isles shall remain a race one calls Indo’

As a result of the Dutch colonial policy of ‘divide and rule’ there were also rivalries among Indonesians themselves. It was difficult to point out who was the enemy and who was the ally as well as who was a victim and who a perpetrator.³⁶ According to Jan Krijgsman, the guerrilla method was the worst form of war because of the unexpected attacks.³⁷ On one of his expeditions, Jan Krijgsman talked to an old Indo-European head of a sugar factory in Kalitjandi, an area Jan and his fellow soldiers had just conquered. The Indo-European factory chief foresaw great difficulties for Indo-Europeans in the future because of the police actions. Simultaneously, the option of leaving did not seem realistic to him. He noted that:

Within the borders of these isles shall remain a race one calls Indo. Neither white, nor brown. They will be the most distrusted persons of Indonesia, as they have in fact secretly always been. They are not going to Holland, young man, what would they do there? They continue to live and die here. Every bullet you shoot now is a bullet from an Indo-European and every dead person you make now, will soon be at the debit side of the book with the title 'Indo-Europeans'.³⁸

In January 1948, Indonesian and Dutch authorities signed the Renville agreement, which was an outcome of a meeting on the American warship the *uss Renville*. It was a confirmation of the agreement of Linggadjati, which was signed one year earlier. Indonesia would become independent at short notice while Dutch economic interests would be secured in the archipelago.³⁹ However, in December 1948, the Dutch government planned and executed a second 'police' action. Basically, this was meant as an attack on the bulwark of the Indonesian Republicans in Djokjakarta. Dutch soldiers temporarily arrested Indonesian nationalist leaders such as Soekarno, Hatta, Sjahrir and others.⁴⁰ A threat from the United States to immediately stop Marshall Aid for the Netherlands was needed to end this second 'police' action.⁴¹ In the context of the Cold War, the United States feared that Indonesia would become a communist country if the conflict escalated. Although this was considered by people outside colonial Dutch circles as ordinary warfare, Dutch colonial authorities viewed these actions as similar to the colonial operations they had carried out to conquer far-away areas such as Lombok and Aceh at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴²

Meanwhile, the Indo-European group was divided into a Dutch and Indonesian camp. In 1946, three new Indo-European organisations were founded. They were all to a larger or lesser extent loyal to the Indonesian side. The moderate organisation *Indonesia Merdeka* was established in September 1946. A.W.F. de Rock and Dick Hage became its leaders. In their opinion, every Indo-European in Indonesia was by birth an Indonesian citizen, so it was not necessary to change their name, dress or appearance.⁴³ The more radical counterpart of *Indonesia Merdeka* was the *Badan Oeroesan Peranakan (BOP)*. This organisation encouraged Indo-Europeans to become Indonesian citizens. They had to assimilate as soon as possible into Indonesian society. Indonesian names would help in that assimilation process. Some prominent people decided to change their names. The already mentioned P.F. Dahler changed his name to Amir Dachlan and E.F.E. Douwes Dekker renamed himself Danudirdjo Setiabuddhi. Just before the formal transfer of sovereignty at the end of 1949, a third new Indo-European organisation was set up. J.P. Snel together with F. Werbata founded the Indisch Dutch Party in 1948, in which all Indo-Europeans who had accepted the agreement of Linggadjati of November 1946 could join. This treaty was primarily focused on the foundation of a Dutch-Indonesian Union, consisting of a couple of Indonesian states and the Netherlands, similar to the British Commonwealth. Later, the name of the Indisch Dutch Party was changed into *Partai Indo National (PIN, Indo National Party)*. It argued for a second opportunity for Indo-Europeans to opt for Indonesian citizenship at the beginning of the 1950s. The PIN was a purely political party that wanted to dissolve all links with the Netherlands. The IEV evolved into a socio-cultural and ethnic association that wished to maintain connections with the Dutch culture and language. The IEV criticised Snel and its Indisch Dutch Party in its magazine

Onze Stem, describing him as a ‘political adventurer’ who was preventing the Indo-European group from becoming more unified.⁴⁴ Despite this general discord within the Indo-European group, the Indo-Europeans who were living in Semarang came up with a collective resolution against a decision of the government of the Dutch East Indies. They condemned the Dutch declaration of guaranteed civil servant jobs, which turned out to be only applicable to temporary employees with Dutch nationality.⁴⁵

In the meantime, the old orphanage of Johannes van der Steur, *Oranje Nassau Gesticht* in Magelang, had fallen into disrepair. In December 1943, during the Japanese occupation, Japanese officers had captured Van der Steur and interned him. The reason was that he had tried to prevent a number of the older male pupils from doing forced labour for the Japanese. Van der Steur survived Japanese internment but he was so weak that he died a few days after loyal orphans brought him home to his orphanage in Magelang. The successors of Van der Steur, who he himself had appointed as leaders, tried to continue his work. However, in October 1945, Indonesian extremists attacked the institution and most of the remaining Indo-European orphans were imprisoned. The nationalist extremists considered them ‘enemies of the Indonesian Republic.’⁴⁶ What happened after that attack is not entirely clear from archival documents. Representatives of the support organisation in the Netherlands did not agree on the appointment of the successors of Van der Steur. Jan Salmon had an especially negative reputation. They accused him of ‘both financial and pedagogical unreliability’ and fired him. Two other successors, E. Lesilolo and E. Tangkan, of whom the latter was the leader of the girls’ wing, disappeared. This situation was not helpful in the restoration of the institution.⁴⁷ Some representatives and board members of the pre-war institution *Oranje Nassau Gesticht* wrote a report of their journey to the old location of the orphanage in Magelang probably in the spring of 1949. The report is undated, but because other correspondence dated to April 1949 referred to it, it must have been written in that same month. According to the representatives, the site of the old orphanage in Malang was in chaos. The leaders still cared for approximately 200 children who were mainly of Indonesian ancestry, but the remaining buildings were very badly maintained and healthy living conditions were not being upheld.⁴⁸

8.4 French Indochina: From colonial war to international war

After Japanese capitulation, Ho Chi Minh declared and established Vietnam as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in September 1945. In the same month, the Viet Minh launched an attack on the neighbourhood of Hérault, where many *Métis* people lived.⁴⁹ Despite these attacks, some *Métis* also joined the revolutionary movement for an independent Vietnam. They probably did not live in that neighbourhood, however.⁵⁰ After August 1945, the Viet Minh took over power in several places, but this did not happen very smoothly in Vietnam and largely failed in the south. In Hanoi, the French were still interned by the Japanese. The Chinese troops, who would liberate them, had yet to arrive. The Viet Minh launched an anti-French campaign which included acts such as blacking out French-language signs and destroying French statues and other colonial symbols. Anti-French slogans appeared everywhere and the

French *tricolore* was nowhere to be seen. Instead, the red flag with the yellow star flew over the large cities of Vietnam.⁵¹ It took another nine years before the French troops left Indochina for good after their humiliating defeat in the battle at Dien Bien Phu in April 1954. One of the reasons for this long decolonisation war was that the French held on to their colonial attitude. They were convinced that the indigenous people could be controlled again and colonial power restored.⁵² But it was not easy; they were fighting an enemy that relied on guerrilla tactics and blended in with the civilian population. This situation presented extraordinary logistical challenges and asked a serious commitment of the soldiers, who were trained for traditional warfare.⁵³

On 24 March 1945, the provisional French government under the leadership of Charles de Gaulle presented its post-war plan for Indochina. This essentially came down to the formation of an Indochinese federation, which would be part of the new French Union. This idea was connected to the policies presented at the conference on French imperial reform, convened in Brazzaville, Congo, in 1944. However, the final Brazzaville declaration stated that ‘the eventual constitution, even in the far-off future, of self-government in the colonies is out of the question.’⁵⁴ The negotiations that followed between Ho Chi Minh and French delegates ambiguously concluded that the French government recognised the DRV as a ‘free state’ within the Indochinese Federation. This was codified in the 6 March accords by Ho Chi Minh and the French representative Jean Sainteny. However, it remained vague how much autonomy the Vietnamese had and how much the French federation would have.⁵⁵ Ho Chi Minh and his DRV had to accept that Chinese troops would be replaced by French troops.⁵⁶

Kim Lefebvre, the *Métis* author, had to leave the orphanage in which she was living as a child because it was located in a warzone. The nuns who ran the orphanage wanted to evacuate Kim and all other *Métis* children to France. However, Kim’s mother learned about this plan and collected Kim from the orphanage.⁵⁷ Apparently, there was a way out for *Métis* children (and their parents) who did not see their (children’s) future in France and wanted to stay in the former colony. I elaborate on this aspect in the next chapter about the postcolonial period.

8.5 Comparison and conclusion: Prelude to thorough change

In all three colonial contexts, a chaotic and violent period began after the Second World War, which ended with formal political decolonisation. Thousands of Eurasians left with the Europeans, either temporarily to recover from the war experiences, or permanently to start a new life. Violent experiences during the Second World War and decolonisation war in the Dutch East Indies and Indochina were an important reason to leave. In both the Dutch East Indies and French Indochina, Eurasians and Europeans were interned again after Japanese capitulation, because their respective British and Chinese liberators had not yet arrived. In the Dutch East Indies, many Dutch people (including some Indo-Europeans) were sent to the Netherlands or Australia to recuperate. However, Eurasians were not allowed to stay in Australia permanently because of the country’s ‘whites only’ policy.

In French Indochina, most Eurasian children were evacuated because of the war

between the French colonial authorities and the Vietnamese nationalists. Initially they were sent to the southern part of Vietnam, and later to metropolitan France. In British India, mainly internal migrations as a consequence of the Partition took place. Because of elaborate constitutional safeguards, most Anglo-Indians initially stayed. Generous and advantageous bureaucratic regulations made the decision to stay easier, yet some Anglo-Indians left, often helped with money from the AIAIA. This organisation was criticised for only helping 'already well-to-do' Anglo-Indians. Economic status determined the opportunities Anglo-Indians had after decolonisation. Rich Anglo-Indians could decide to stay in newly independent India or move to the UK, whereas poor Anglo-Indians had few choices.