

The Decolonization War in Indonesia, 1945-1949: War Crimes in Dutch Veterans' Egodocuments

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Gert Oostindie

KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, Leiden, the Netherlands

Ireen Hoogenboom

KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, Leiden, the Netherlands

Jonathan Verwey

KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, Leiden, the Netherlands

Abstract

Between August 1945 and December 1949, the Netherlands deployed some 220,000 military in the Indonesian decolonization war. Both during and long after this war, the Dutch government has denied that its armed forces engaged in war crimes, apart from a limited number of identified transgressions characterized as 'exceptional'. This position has increasingly been criticized by scholars and in public debates, but it remains a daunting task to present conclusive evidence. This paper, based on an exhaustive analysis of all published egodocuments of Dutch soldiers and veterans, is a first attempt at quantification and confirms earlier suggestions that war crimes formed a structural ingredient of Dutch warfare. This extensive and unique corpus also discloses valuable information about the context in which such crimes were perpetrated.

Key words

Indonesia, Netherlands, decolonization, counterinsurgency, war crimes, egodocuments

You need to be hard as stone here and you mustn't let all the suffering and misery get to you. It is really horrible! I heard the crying and screaming of wounded women and children. That is the worst, but it is inevitable. [...] Every three minutes we moved our shellfire fifty meters and this way we set all houses on fire. [The Republican soldiers fled, but they ran into our machinegun fire.] It must have been hell down there. All people trying to escape were mowed down by machine guns. In spite of everything I thought this was too radical!¹

This shocking report on the assault on a Javanese village was penned down by a Dutch conscript soldier, Harry Brummans, during his country's last colonial war, fought in Indonesia. Between August 1945 and December 1949, Indonesia went through both a revolution and a decolonization war. During these years, the Dutch government deployed nearly 220,000 troops in the archipelago, over

¹ Conscript soldier Harry Brummans, in his diary posthumously published by his daughter Lisette Schoeren-Brummans, *Indië 1947-1948: Een prachtig land in oorlog* (Soest 2014), pp. 113, 143-4, 146-7. All translations from Dutch in this article are ours. We thank the two anonymous referees for *War in History* for their extremely valuable criticism and advice on an earlier version of this paper.

160,000 of them Dutch, the remainder locally recruited. While these troops were ostensibly only mobilized to restore order and peace in times of anarchy, there was in fact a clear self-serving, colonial agenda. In 2005, the Dutch government declared that its predecessors had engaged in a war 'on the wrong side of history'. This moral and political reassessment is now widely accepted in the Netherlands, but controversy lingers on the question to what extent the Dutch army engaged in war crimes or, in the widely used euphemism, 'excessive violence'. Backed up by veterans, the Dutch government to this very day has not revised its position, first formulated in 1969, that such 'excesses' were an exceptional feature in Dutch warfare.

This article confirms the opposite suggestion made in earlier scholarship that war crimes were not exceptional, but rather became a structural ingredient of Dutch warfare, never officially sanctioned by the military leadership under General Simon Spoor and his staff, but increasingly condoned as part and parcel of the routines of a gradually hardening counterinsurgency. It is based on a first-ever exhaustive analysis of all available egodocuments of Dutch troops published during and, mainly, after the conclusion of the war, and includes a very cautious attempt at quantification. The totality of this corpus of some 100,000 pages provides information on a broad variety of topics beyond warfare as such, ranging from attitudes towards Indonesians and the Indonesian struggle for independence, through Dutch army culture and issues such as stress and sex, to repatriation, the veterans' reintegration into Dutch society and the emergence of a shared feeling of being misunderstood and unduly criticized for alleged war crimes. All of these themes are discussed in a Dutch-language monograph, recently published in Indonesian too.²

The present article has a more narrow focus. Following a short introduction on the war and its aftermath and on the unique corpus of egodocuments used, the article focuses on the issue of war crimes as reported by these (former) servicemen and the context in which such crimes were perpetrated. Extensive citations from the egodocuments are used not only to illustrate the issues at hand, but also to give an impression of the intimate and often graphic character of these documents. As we will discuss below, the corpus itself is highly diverse, not only in the type of egodocuments, but equally in the information given and the sentiments expressed by their authors.

The War and its Aftermath in the Netherlands

The Indonesian Revolution was anything but a linear process heralded in by a uniform Republican government under Sukarno, but rather a chaotic period full of conflicts between the political and military leaders on the Republican side; of constant internal confrontations between the Republican government in Yogyakarta, radical communist and Islamic groups, and criminal gangs; and of political antagonisms between the Republican government and the political elites of the peripheral parts of the archipelago. Consequently, the war of decolonization was far more complex than a

² Gert Oostindie, in cooperation with Ireen Hoogenboom and Jonathan Verwey, *Soldaat in Indonesië: Getuigenissen van een oorlog aan de verkeerde kant van de geschiedenis* (Amsterdam, 2015). Translated as *Serdadu Belanda di Indonesia 1945-1950: Kesaksian perang pada sisi sejarah yang salah* (Jakarta, 2016).

straightforward conflict in which the former colonial power confronted a unified Indonesian front in a vain attempt to reassert its grip on the archipelago.³

The Japanese occupation from early 1942 to August 1945 presaged the end of the Dutch East Indies colony. Two days after the Japanese capitulation, on 17 August 1945, Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta proclaimed the Republic of Indonesia. Initially, British troops of the allied South East Asia Command under Lord Louis Mountbatten were in charge of the maintenance of the post-Japanese order, notably in cooperation with the defeated Japanese army. Violence was rampant during the so-called *bersiap* period and was directed both against ethnic groups associated with colonial rule – Europeans, Eurasians, Chinese – and executed between various Indonesian groups. The British were incapable of restoring order and moreover increasingly doubtful whether re-installment of the Dutch colonial order was feasible and desirable at all. They withdrew from Indonesia in the second half of 1946.

Meanwhile the Dutch colonial government had returned from exile in Australia and had started rebuilding the colonial army (Koninklijk Nederlands-Indisch Leger, KNIL). As the KNIL proved far too weak to restore the colonial order, the Dutch government started to recruit large numbers of volunteers and soon also conscripted soldiers for the Koninklijke Landmacht (KL) and Koninklijke Marine (KM). In total, almost 220,000 men – and a few hundred women – would serve in the combined Dutch army; 160,000 of these were recruited in the Netherlands.⁴ While the Dutch were reasonably successful in re-establishing their rule in most of the so-called outer provinces, their control over the colonial heartland of Sumatra and Java remained flimsy. In two short ‘police actions’ (July-August 1947 and December 1948-January 1949) they managed to attain nominal control, only to find themselves caught in a guerrilla war and counterinsurgency that proved impossible to win.

As the war progressed, the Dutch government also became increasingly isolated internationally, even if it grudgingly accepted the transfer of sovereignty as such. A major problem was its determination to control the entire process of decolonization and to secure a lasting role for the Netherlands even after the transfer of sovereignty. As early as 15 November 1946, the Linggadjati accord concluded between the Dutch and the Republican governments could have signified a process of negotiated decolonization. The Dutch were prepared to recognize the sovereignty of the Republic of Indonesia,

³ Major studies on the Indonesian Revolution include, in chronological order, George Mc Turnan Kahin, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY, 1952); Benedict Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution: Occupation and Resistance 1944-1946* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1972); Anthony Reid, *The Indonesian National Revolution* (Hawthorn, Vic., 1974); Robert Cribb, *Gangsters and Revolutionaries: The Jakarta People's Militia and the Indonesian Revolution, 1945-1949* (North Sydney, 1991); and Geoffrey Robinson, *The Dark Side of Paradise: Political Violence in Bali* (Ithaca, NY, 1995). Recent contributions on intra-Indonesian violence include William H. Frederick, ‘The Killing of Dutch and Eurasians in Indonesia's National Revolution (1945-49): A ‘Brief Genocide’ Reconsidered’, in Bart Luttikhuis and A. Dirk Moses (eds), *Colonial Counterinsurgency and Mass Violence: The Dutch Empire in Indonesia* (London, 2014), pp. 133-154; and particularly Harry A. Poeze, ‘Walking the Tightrope: Internal Indonesian Conflict 1945-1949’, in Luttikhuis and Moses, *Colonial Counterinsurgency and Mass Violence*, pp. 176-97.

⁴ This is an upwards revision of the figure usually mentioned of 200,000 troops. The Dutch contingent consisted of roughly 100,000 conscripted men, 30,000 war volunteers and some 1,000 professionals. Between 75,000 and 80,000 men served in the KNIL, most of these local recruits. The KL had some 120,000 men, the KM 20,000. For detailed figures, see <http://www.kitlv.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/C.H.C.-Harinck-J.-Verwey-Wie-kwamen-wie-zagen-wie-schreven-voor-de-KITLV-website.pdf>

though only in Java, Sumatra and Madura, as a partner in a federal United States of Indonesia, that in turn would be part of a Union with the Netherlands under the Dutch Queen. These Dutch concessions however were too much for a majority in Dutch parliament and too little for most Republicans, so the Treaty was never ratified and implemented. Over the next years the Republican government in Yogyakarta won international credibility – also in the Western World and particularly in the United States after brutally quelling the Communist Madiun revolt in September 1948. In the context of the emerging Cold War, American pressure was crucial in pushing the final armistice in the summer of 1949 and the eventual transfer of sovereignty in December 1949. By then, some 4,500 Dutch men had died, alongside an unknown, but far greater number of Indonesians – while Dutch casualties were archived with precision, there is no firm ground for the widely-used figure of 100,000 or more (up to 150,000) Indonesian killed.⁵

Already during the war, Dutch atrocities were reported and in a few cases denounced in leftist Dutch media. Reports on captain Raymond Westerling's Special Troops and their infamous cleansing operations in South-Sulawesi (1946-1947) circulated both in Indonesia and the Netherlands during the war. Occasionally combatants communicated worrisome news back home. Early 1949, *De Groene Amsterdammer* published a letter of a Dutch officer denouncing war crimes and a general culture of lawlessness, concluding that the Dutch armed forces were acting even more ruthlessly than the German army had performed during the occupation of the Netherlands.⁶ Such reports however were not published by the leading newspapers, nor backed up by political parties – except for the Communist party and dissidents within the social-democrat party – and failed to generate a public debate either during the war or in the first decades after.⁷

The occurrence of war crimes in cases such as the Indonesian decolonization war, no matter how deplorable, is not surprising. The growing body of literature on wars of decolonization as well as counterinsurgency operations has made it abundantly clear that over the past seventy years, such armed conflicts have been rife with transgressions of what are considered the conventions of regular warfare. During such post-World War Two conflicts, European states such as the United Kingdom (Malaysia, Kenya), France (Indo-China, Algeria) and later also Portugal (Angola, Mozambique) as well as the United States (Vietnam) usually justified their operations in terms of pacification for the benefit of the local population, urging their troops to constrain the use of violence and instead focus on winning the hearts and minds of the colonized population. In practice however, transgressions of the norms laid down in the Geneva Conventions have been endemic in such conflicts as they have been in other types of war.⁸

⁵ H.W. van den Doel, *Afscheid van Indië: De val van het Nederlandse imperium in Azië* (Amsterdam, 2001), J.J.P. de Jong, *De terugtocht. Nederland en de dekolonisatie van Indonesië* (Amsterdam, 2015).

⁶ *De Groene Amsterdammer* 29 February, 1949. J.A. de Moor, *Generaal Spoor: Triomf en tragiek van een legercommandant* (Amsterdam, 2011), pp. 314-6.

⁷ See Stef Scagliola on the development of the Dutch debate on the war: 'Cleo's "Unfinished Business": Coming to Terms with Dutch War Crimes in Indonesia's War of Independence', in Luttikhuis and Moses, *Colonial Counterinsurgency*, pp. 240-60; and *Last van de oorlog: De Nederlandse oorlogsmisdaden in Indonesië en hun verwerking*. Amsterdam, 2002), pp. 138-57.

⁸ Bruce Collins, 'Introduction: Case Studies in Colonial Counter-insurgency', *British Journal of Military History*, 1-2 (2015), pp. 2-7; Christian Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies: Mass Violence in the Twentieth-century World* (Cambridge, 2010); Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon, 'Further Thoughts on the Imperial Endgame and Britain's Dirty Wars', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40-3 (2012), pp. 503-14; Daniel Marston and Carter

There is no particular reason to assume that a Dutch army would have behaved any better, but it has taken a long time for this disturbing realization to gain currency in the Netherlands. Why this should be the case is a matter of debate. The Dutch have tended to think of themselves as a progressive, tolerant and humanitarian people, and as victims – during the Nazi occupation – rather than perpetrators of aggression, somehow relegating colonial history to the periphery of their own historical identity. This idea of Dutch exceptionalism might have made it more difficult to signal and accept the occurrence of war crimes in Indonesia. A more critical stance towards the colonial past is of fairly recent origin and is related not only to a broader international context – decolonization, the impact of the Vietnam war, the emergence of international human rights policies – but also to the impact of postcolonial migrations to the Netherlands, bringing colonial history literally ‘home’.⁹

There were also more tangible reasons why it took so long for a debate about war crimes to emerge. For one, as both the military and political leadership during the war had tended to silence reports of ‘irregularities’, there was an inclination afterwards to perpetuate this negation – not only because of uneasiness with the facts, but also to exonerate the previous generation. This was the more convenient as not only the right-wing and centrist parties, but also the social-democrats had supported the war. The leadership of these majority parties aimed at protecting a resentful generation of young Dutch men sent abroad for this ill-fated war against accusations made indiscriminately against the army as a whole. In turn, veterans’ organizations were especially active in protecting the reputation of the armed forces in Indonesia, and found a willing ear in Dutch politics. Furthermore, there was the influential lobby of the repatriates from the colony which sought to draw attention to the horrible violence perpetuated by Indonesians during the *bersiap* period against anyone linked to the Dutch regime.¹⁰ And finally, as of 1949 the Indonesian government has never pushed for serious scholarly research or public debate on this period, perhaps preferring the perpetuation of a founding myth based on the idea of one unified Indonesian people heroically fighting the Dutch, and excluding open discussion of war crimes perpetrated by Indonesians against colonials and even more so against compatriots. The leading museums and commemorative sites in Indonesia certainly convey this idea.¹¹

Debates about war crimes

It took two decades before the issue of war crimes surfaced in Dutch public debates, framed at the time as ‘excessive violence’. In 1969, Dutch veteran Joop Hueting spoke on Dutch television about first-hand experiences with, and his own involvement in, military actions that qualified as war crimes. At the request of the Dutch parliament, a commission conducted a brief inquiry in various government archives, submitted its report to the Dutch cabinet, which in turn conceded that the cases discussed in the committee’s report were unacceptable ‘excesses’ – the designation of ‘war

Malkasian (eds). *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare* (Oxford, 2008); Martin Shipway, *Decolonization and its Impact: A Comparative Approach to the End of the Colonial Empires* (Malden, MA, 2008).

⁹ Scagliola ‘Cleo’s “Unfinished Business”’, and *Last van de oorlog*, pp. 138-57. On postcolonial migrations and their impact on Dutch debates on the colonial past, see Gert Oostindie, *Postcolonial Netherlands: Sixty-five Years of Forgetting, Commemorating, Silencing* (Amsterdam, 2012).

¹⁰ Oostindie, *Postcolonial Netherlands*, pp. 88-97.

¹¹ E.g., the Monumen Nasional, Army Museum Satriamandala, Museum Joang 45, Museum Perumusan Naskah Proklamasi, all in Jakarta; Benteng Vredenburg, in Yogyakarta; and Monumen Korban 40.000 Jiwa in Makassar.

crimes' was avoided – but also concluded that these had not been typical of the behavior of the Dutch troops as such. Rather, the cabinet led by former navy officer Piet de Jong concluded in its reaction to the so-called *Excessennota* (Report on Excesses) that the overall behavior of the Dutch military during this episode – deliberately not qualified as a war but a problem of internal order within a Dutch colony – had been professional and correct.¹²

In the decades since the publication of the 1969 *Excessennota*, a dozen scholarly books have appeared on the Dutch military during this period. Methodologically and conceptually, the most ambitious study was *Ontsporing van geweld* (Derailment of Violence), published in 1970 by Jacques van Doorn and Wim Hendrix, two former conscripted military men who had taken up careers as sociologists. Van Doorn and Hendrix proposed an explanatory framework that accounted for the systematic deployment of 'excessive violence' in the context of unpredictable guerrilla warfare and the absence of an effective leadership demarcating to ordinary soldiers the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Based on their own experiences and more so by systematically collecting first-hand field reports from fellow soldiers, they sketched a situation in which excessive violence became an integral part of counterinsurgency strategies. According to Van Doorn and Hendrix, ordinary soldiers gradually became entangled in a vicious circle, a 'trap of violence'.¹³

Van Doorn and Hendrix were rightly applauded both for providing shocking evidence of the scope of war crimes – though they too refrained from using these exact words – and for developing a convincing explanatory framework, but their study does not attempt to offer a systematic appraisal of the frequency of 'excessive violence'. In other words, they offered a plausible explanation for an ultimately vaguely-defined explanandum. Of all studies on the Dutch military role published since, only the study by Petra Groen has focused entirely on the use of various strategies and forms of military violence by the Dutch troops. But on the basis of her research, she does not propose firm conclusions on the frequency of 'excessive' violence either. Either way, both Van Doorn and Hendrix as well as Groen assume that war crimes were underreported in military reports. We must therefore conclude that the available archival sources by definition provide incomplete evidence of their frequency.¹⁴

Recent historical research has tended to reject the earlier political framing of the period with its downplaying of Dutch violence. Thus it has now become widely accepted to substitute the designation of 'war' and 'war crimes' for the earlier euphemisms of 'police actions' and 'excesses'. In addition, the war is now conceptualized in the broader context of other decolonization wars and counterinsurgency operations. Archival research has uncovered new evidence of war crimes as well as indications about tacit complicity of persons higher in the chain of command. With some notable exceptions – particularly the Swiss historian Rémy Limpach – the participants in these debates are mainly Dutch scholars. Most of these are working in Dutch academia, but a significant minority in the NIMH, the historical research institute of the Ministry of Defense. In addition, investigative

¹² 'The government deplores that excesses have taken place, but remains of the opinion that the army in its entirety acted correctly in Indonesia. The evidence collected confirms that there was no such thing as systematic cruelty.' Letter by Prime-Minister De Jong to Dutch parliament, 29 January, 1969 (Handelingen Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal 1968-1969, appendix 10008, nr. 1).

¹³ J.A.A. van Doorn and W.J. Hendrix, *Ontsporing van geweld: Het Nederlands-Indonesisch conflict* (Zutphen, 2012 [1970]), p. 229.

¹⁴ P.M.H. Groen, *Marsroutes en dwaalsporen: Het Nederlands militair-strategisch beleid in Indonesië 1945-1950* (The Hague, 1991), pp. 236-9.

journalists have been particularly active over the past years in uncovering specific cases of Dutch misconduct.¹⁵

Dutch public debates about this period have evolved over time from widespread support during the war itself for the Dutch policy of restoring the colonial order or at least retaining the lead in a process of negotiated decolonization, to the current position that the Dutch at the time had maneuvered themselves, in the words of Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Ben Bot in 2005, in a position 'on the wrong side of history'. This public announcement on behalf of the Dutch government, expressed in Jakarta as Indonesia was commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the declaration of independence, marked a caesura in a painful process of reappraisal in Dutch society and politics. 'We should have known better' is now the virtually undisputed orthodoxy, expressed as the new official governmental position at a time when most of the generation of politicians and veterans who had played an active role during the war had withered or receded from the public stage on account of their age.

But recognition that the Dutch should not have waged this war in the first place has not implied any sort of official declaration on war crimes. Over the past decades, no Dutch government has ever revoked the official position of 1969 that deplorable 'excesses' had been highly exceptional and hence did not reflect negatively on the conduct of the Dutch armed forces as such. Recent official Dutch apologies, first expressed in 2011 regarding the summary executions of the male population of the village of Rawagede in West-Java in December 1947, are still explicitly restricted to specific war crimes, and not meant to be an apology for Dutch warfare against the Indonesian population as such. Moreover, these official gestures were enforced through legal procedures against the Dutch state rather than the result of a process of self-criticism discussed in parliament.¹⁶

The Corpus

Egodocuments produced by Dutch servicemen and veterans are an invaluable source to enhance our understanding of this war, including the issue of war crimes. Of course, egodocuments are both a promising and a problematic source for historical enquiry. Whether aiming to document their

¹⁵ L. de Jong, *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Volumes 11, 12 and 14* (The Hague, 1984-1986, 1988, 1991); J.A. de Moor, *Westerling's oorlog: Indonesië 1945-1950: De geschiedenis van de commando's en parachutisten in Nederlands-Indië 1945-1950* (Amsterdam, 1999); Willem IJzereef, *De Zuid-Celebes affaire* (Dieren, 1984); Scagliola, *Last van de oorlog*; and more recently de Moor, *Generaal Spoor*; Louis Zweers, *De gecensureerde oorlog: Militairen versus media in Nederlands-Indië 1945-1949* (Zutphen, 2013); Tom van den Berge, *H.J. van Mook: 1894-1965: Een vrij en gelukkig Indonesië* (Bussum, 2014); Luttikhuis and Moses, *Colonial counterinsurgency*; Rémy Limpach, 'Business as Usual: Dutch Mass Violence in the Indonesian War of independence 1945-49', in Luttikhuis and Moses, *Colonial Counterinsurgency*, pp. 64-90; Thijs Brocades Zaalberg, 'The Civil and Military Dimensions of Dutch Counter-insurgency on Java, 1947-1949', *The British Journal for Military History* 1-2 (2015), pp. 67-83; Oostindie, *Soldaat in Indonesië*. After the completion of this paper, Limpach published his extensive monograph *De brandende kampongs van General Spoor* (Amsterdam, 2016), based on an unpublished 2015 Swiss PhD thesis.

¹⁶ Bart Luttikhuis, 'Juridisch afgedwongen excuses Rawagedeh, Zuid-Celebes en de Nederlandse terughoudendheid', *BMGN* 129-4 (2014), pp. 92-105; see also Chris Lorenz, 'Can a Criminal Event in the Past Disappear in a Garbage Bin in the Present?: Dutch Colonial Memory and Human Rights: The Case of Rawagedeh', in Marek Tamm (ed.), *Afterlife of Events: Perspectives of Mnemohistory* (Basingstoke, 2015); and Scagliola, 'Cleo's "Unfinished Business"'.

experiences, observations and feelings exclusively or primarily for themselves, as in private diaries, or for others, as in letters, memoirs or interviews, individuals consciously or unconsciously select and possibly distort past facts, thoughts and emotions in the act of writing or narrating. Oral testimonies, moreover, may reflect a particular dynamic between the individual giving testimony and the interviewer. Individual testimonies are by definition also idiosyncratic. Only the availability of a large sample of such sources may enable a researcher to reconstruct a more representative image. The contents and tone of egodocuments also tend to vary depending on the time of writing, as the distance separating the testifier from the period discussed becomes longer, and possible new ideas and conventions evolve about what is acceptable to think and (publicly) express about the past.

Self-narratives produced by soldiers during or after wars have additional problems as they tend to downplay the actual levels of violence, as Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker argue in their study on the Great War.¹⁷ During wars, soldiers may be reticent in writing about violence – whether ‘regular’ or ‘excessive’ – for a number of reasons, varying from not wanting to make their loved ones at home worry too much, to concealing moral transgressions unthinkable back home. In memoirs, the silencing of observed or perpetrated war crimes might reflect embarrassment, but also concern about possible legal or moral indictment by others.

While an exclusive focus on war crimes, and even more so solely on *Dutch* war crimes, may provide a very narrow perspective on the birth of the Republic of Indonesia, it is a highly important subject in Dutch military history. The historiography of the Dutch army during the Indonesian Revolution relies on a variety of archival sources, ranging from state and particularly military records through privately published egodocuments to later recordings of interviews. The number of surviving unpublished field diaries and letters as well as photographs from the period itself is impossible to establish. As the last generation of veterans is dying, a constant trickle of such private collections is offered to archival institutions.

The number of published egodocuments is easier to establish, as these are kept in the collections of a handful of specialized archives and libraries. In an all-encompassing exploration of Dutch collections, we identified 659 unique egodocuments written by, or directly lending a voice to 1,389 soldiers once serving in the Dutch army during the war. This corpus was analyzed and disclosed in the book *Soldaat in Indonesië* (2015) which forms the basis of the present article. In the months following the highly publicized appearance of this book, only a few additional titles were brought to our attention, so we may uphold our claim that the corpus is nearly exhaustive as we write.

With some 100,000 pages, this unique corpus is extensive, but even so it does not adequately represent the Dutch army as a whole.¹⁸ The 1,389 individuals – nearly all men – speaking through these sources represent only 0.6 per cent of the nearly 220,000 servicemen who served in the Dutch army at any time between 1945 and 1950. If we exclude the locally recruited Indonesian troops, the proportion is raised to 0.85 percent of a total of some 160,000 men. While the sample seems reasonably representative of the *Dutch* soldiers on various accounts – voluntary, professional and

¹⁷ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Anette Becker, *14-18: Retrouver la guerre* (Paris, 2000). On soldiers’ self-narratives as a source for war history, see e.g. Tom Burns, ‘Combat memoirs of the Vietnam War’, *Via Litterae* 5-1 (2013), pp. 257-80; Yuval Noah Harari, *Renaissance Military Memoirs: War, History, and Identity, 1450-1600* (Woodbridge, 2004); Aaron William Moore, *Writing War: Soldiers Record the Japanese Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).

¹⁸ For an extensive discussion of the corpus, see Oostindie, *Soldaat*, pp. 310-9.

conscripted military; army units; ranks; origins in the Netherlands – it grossly underrepresents the Dutch colonial army (KNIL) and particularly its nearly 60,000 indigenous troops. Only a dozen of egodocuments in our corpus were written by Eurasians or Indonesians employed in the Dutch forces.¹⁹ As we will see, this is a significant drawback.

The composition of the corpus is diverse. The great majority of egodocuments was written long after the war. The two largest categories, each accounting for roughly 25 percent of the total number of egodocuments, are individual memoirs and commemorative records of specific army units. Post hoc published diaries make up ten percent of the total, as do publications collecting the memories of various individuals in one single volume. Minor categories are published correspondence, biographies, interviews, and the like. In sharp contrast to unpublished egodocuments, the greater part of this corpus was published many years, even decades after the war itself. Only some ten percent was published during the war, another near ten percent in the 1950s, followed by just a trickle in the 1960s and 1970s. The number of publications accelerated in the 1980s and particularly the 1990s and onwards. This late boom was triggered both by the retirement effect and a renewed interest in the war.

References to War Crimes

For the purposes of this research, we have defined war crimes as infringements of the present regulations of the Conventions of The Hague and Geneva – an intentionally anachronistic definition, bearing in mind that the Fourth Geneva Convention on rules of conduct in armed conflicts ‘not of an international character’, hence within states, was only concluded after the final ceasefire in Indonesia. On the other hand, it is quite clear that even during the war, Dutch military men were considering enemy troops as antagonists as in any other type of war, and that they were aware – also because of formal instructions – that excessive violence against either captive enemy troops or the civilian population was outside the accepted rules of engagement. As we will see below, justification of war crimes was mainly framed in terms of exceptional circumstances which made otherwise unacceptable measures inevitable.²⁰

A caveat must be made regarding the specific nature of these egodocuments. The fact that they have been published implies that at one point, mostly long after the war, authors or others responsible for the publication have made conscious decisions about the publication as such, and possibly also about the deleting of delicate fragments. It stands to reason that this may have resulted in

¹⁹ Neither have we come across unpublished egodocuments from these groups. KITLV is presently conducting interviews with Moluccan veterans living in the Netherlands.

²⁰ Geneva Convention relative to the protection of civilian persons in time of war of 12 August 1949, art. 3. Art. 3 of the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949) defined provisions for the protection of persons ‘taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed *hors de combat* by sickness, wounds, detentions, or any other cause’, and proceeded by prohibiting inflicting upon these persons murder, mutilation, cruel treatment, torture, the taking of hostages, outrages upon human dignity, summary executions, and the like. See also the contribution of Bart Luttikhuis in this issue of *War in History*.

underrepresentation of violence. This is indeed what a first comparison between published and unpublished egodocuments in the archives of the NIMH suggests.²¹

An ambiguous picture emerges. On the one hand, an overwhelming majority of 75 to 80 percent of all men speaking through this corpus does not make any references to war crimes whatsoever, or explicitly denies the occurrence of such incidents. In contrast, the remaining minority makes a cumulative 710 references to, in total, 779 war crimes. Almost half of these (368) are cases in which either an individual or groups of captive enemies or civilians were killed. A quarter (181) is made up of cases of torture and other forms of maltreatment during captivity and interrogations. Further there is the setting on fire of (parts of) villages (90 cases), theft and robbery (61). The remaining ten percent consists of widely different categories, including sexual violence mainly perpetrated against women, but also artillery and airborne bombardments on villages – the latter category contains a limited number of cases only, but by definition describes particularly lethal attacks.

Some citations may illustrate these cold figures. The many descriptions of torture during interrogation include heavy beatings, electric shocks applied to genitals, the burning of skin with cigarettes, and so on.

The use of the field telephone to induce a prisoner through electrical shocks to be more talkative, that was about the simplest measure. Suspending prisoners with their arms stretched backwards was another frequently used technique, but then the climax was to light a fire below!²²

The shooting of prisoners ‘while they attempted to escape’ could well hint at war crimes when cryptic descriptions vaguely suggest that the ‘escape’ might have been staged as an excuse for getting rid of a prisoner forming a nuisance or even a security risk as a patrol advanced in dangerous terrain. We found many such cases. Thus, in Sindaraja, North Sumatra, on 12 September 1947,

The man who was guarding the prisoners told them that they could escape (‘If you want to leave, here is your chance.’). When the prisoners escaped, he shot them.²³

There are many cases of larger groups of prisoners executed on the spot without trial. Lieutenant Paul Messing wrote in his memoirs about the killing, in various rounds, of scores of Indonesian villagers, in the end possibly some 160:

Suddenly the truck stopped and before we realized what was going on, the tailgate was opened and some dozen Indonesians were shoved off. Fire was opened immediately. From all sides hit, wounded and executed natives fell into the irrigation canal. It was a horrible scene. We were deeply impressed by this massacre, because that is how I see it. [In the next days] I began to understand that the execution we witnessed had only been the beginning of what would turn out to be much worse. One day later I got the report on the operation [...] Our own losses: one dead, two wounded. Enemy losses: some 160 dead, no prisoners, no wounded.²⁴

²¹ Preliminary conclusion as reported by NIMH researchers, Spring 2016.

²² Corporal Henk van Dalen, *Bij de inlichtingendienst op Midden-Java* (s.l., 2005), p. 108.

²³ Conscript soldier Jozef G.M. Elizen, *Genist tot in de kist* (s.l., 1992), p. 52.

²⁴ Paul Messing, in *1940-1950: 10 onrustige jaren* (Hilversum, [1996], pp. 81-2.

In the same vein, marine Bertus van Gils wrote about ‘exceptional’ but nonetheless ‘quite frequent’ killings:

The situation became more tense, no more prisoners of war were taken. Because where such prisoners were taken, they were met with heavy aggression. [...] You know, quickly load prisoners of war in a truck with a few buddies and then on to an isolated place where they were chased from the truck and shot. Sometimes they were allowed to run for their lives, but they didn’t stand a chance.²⁵

The purging of kampongs (villages) was often a bloody affair, and no risks were to be taken. The opening quotation to this article is a case in point, and so are the following passages:

The people present did not belong there and were no good [...]. Everybody who came into sight was shot immediately and there were several who did. I took care of a few myself.²⁶

Some suspect individuals ran away and we fired at them immediately, but they escaped. We did not take any risks anymore as the *peloppers* [enemy fighters] mingled with the population and it was impossible to tell the difference. As a consequence, sometimes innocent blood was shed. It was horrible, but these were the consequences of a guerrilla war.²⁷

Arson and the scourging of the earth in the context of Special Operations is exemplified in a note in Leendert Giesing’s diary written on 13 July 1949 about a patrol ordered to purge an area in Tjawi, West Java:

We moved from house to house and burned everything [...]. All living creatures had to be destroyed, sawahs were ruined and the cattle was killed in order to make life impossible for the extremists. We did our job thoroughly.²⁸

Reports on bombardments by artillery or aircraft evoke horrible scenes of civilian casualties of war:

I remember vividly that we were threatened by a significant concentration of TNI [Republican Army] troops. Air support had been requested, but that took days, really. Then two fighter planes arrived, but the situation on the ground had changed completely. I still see throngs of dazed civilians coming to the camp in search of medical help. Many wounded, they were like ghosts.²⁹

We found all kinds of other cases, including the desecration of corpses, the shooting of a civilian train, and the application of booby-traps by hiding hand grenades under corpses:

²⁵ Cited in G.J.M. de Hoogh and T. de Hoogh-Sierat, *Mijn Indische mariniers jaren: Naar herinneringen van B.J. van Gils* (s.l., [198?]), p. 283.

²⁶ Conscript soldier Wim Buiting, *Dagboek van Wim Buiting: 03-02-1927 - 22-05-1949: pionier van 5-5 R.I.: Geschreven vanaf zijn aankomst in Indië op 12 januari 1948 tot 20 april 1949* (Vriezenveen, 2006), p. 199.

²⁷ Conscript soldier Ko van Rooijen, *Tussen goenoeng en guerilla (tussen berg en vrijheidsstrijd)* (Utrecht, [1986]), p. 83.

²⁸ Leendert Giesing and Margot Wauben-Giesing, *Brandlucht en bloedspoor: Dagboek van een Indiëganger* (s.l., 2007), p. 104.

²⁹ Conscript soldier Hans Eijkman, in R.P.F. Bijkerk, M. Elands and K. Kornaat. 2010. *Oorlogen en vredesmissies: Ervaringen van Nederlandse veteranen 1940-2010*. Amsterdam, 2010), p. 80

This way they turned these corpses into booby-traps. [...] In the evening friends or family come to fetch the dead, the dead person is lifted and bang, even more dead and wounded.³⁰

These are just a few out of nearly 800 reported war crimes. We must assume that this very number represents an underestimation. Underreporting is obviously not unique to egodocuments. Studies on counterinsurgency in general, and on Dutch warfare in Indonesia in particular, tend to emphasize that excessive violence was systematically underreported in official records too.³¹ Not registering possible war crimes in daily reports would spare the perpetrators persecution and trial, and at a higher level ignorance of such facts might be a blessing in disguise for officers preferring to keep a blind eye to such acts. By definition, the extent of underreporting is impossible to establish. That it was not exceptional to omit delicate evidence both during the war itself and afterwards becomes evident from a close reading of the published egodocuments. There are recurring references to intentionally vague descriptions in contemporary reports, to misinformation, and also to the intentional burial of evidence:

A commission of the United Nations would visit in order to investigate abuses in the conditions of imprisonment and so on. Thus all prisoners were loaded into my car and we just had to drive around and not return for a long time. On its return, the commission was able to report that it had not found any prisoners in the area inspected. [...] There was something else, really strange, with these prisoners. There are new prisoners every day, nobody is released, and yet the cell is never full.³²

According to this testimony, evidence of maltreatment of prisoners is covered up by hiding the prisoners, and while apparently ever more captives are brought in for interrogation, these quarters are never filled. Sikkens, the soldier reporting this situation, does not report any specific crime, but suggests a horrible reality, not just of well-planned deception of U.N. observers, but of the routine killing of prisoners. To an unknown extent, this type of misinformation has been perpetuated since, also in the egodocuments. The unwillingness to explicitly discuss delicate issues such as war crimes is a recurring trope:

We will never forget many things that happened over there, but surely we will not speak about it with others. Someone not personally present would not understand it anyway.³³

In post-War reflections, veterans indeed often indicate that they would not report about violence during the war, nor after.

[Reporting on an engagement with Islamic troops, reputedly resulting in 300 Indonesian casualties against one lightly wounded Dutch soldier:] I did not report all of this back home, our mother would not have been able to deal with it.³⁴

³⁰ Non-commissioned officer S.M. (Math) Jalhay, *Allen zwijgen* (s.l., 1983), pp. 142-3.

³¹ Oostindie, *Soldaat*, pp. 152-9.

³² Conscript soldier Ab Sikkens, *15e Genie Veld Compagnie: 30 juni 1947-29 juni 1950: Geschiedenis van een dienstplichtig soldaat* (s.l., [1999]), p. 81.

³³ Conscript soldier Jan Minten, in Nel Verstegen-Maessen, *Spinninghe: Sevenumse Indiëgangers, de vliegende Pieëlhaas* (Sevenum, 1998), p. 129.

³⁴ Conscript soldier Theo Barten, cited in J.D. van Boeijen, *De jongens van 'Toedjoe Poeoe Doea': Herinneringsalbum van het bataljon 3-14 R.I.* (s.l., 2009), p. 425.

We were in a war over there and really these were no holidays, but quite the opposite. [...] When we were made to tell how we had to live there, no-one would believe us. We will not forget many things that happened there, but surely we will not talk about these to others either. Someone who had not been around wouldn't understand it anyway.³⁵

Assuming therefore that there was substantial underreporting and, moreover, that it is highly unlikely that veterans would fabricate memories of fictitious war crimes, it seems a logical conclusion that the number of references to war crimes in these egodocuments should be taken as a low estimate.³⁶ What additional conclusions can be drawn? A number of 779 references to unique war crimes – there is virtual no overlap between the individual cases we identified – made by 1,389 individuals makes an average of 0.56 per person. From this simple point of departure we may move into two seemingly different directions. On the one hand, one might underline that the great majority does not mention any excessive violence whatsoever and that the calculated average means that, with an average time spent in Indonesia of roughly two years, the likelihood of an individual having witnessed, let alone perpetrated a war crime was scant. On the other hand, one may also argue that some basic math leads to the conclusion that the total number of war crimes may well be extrapolated into the tens of thousands, rather than the hundred-plus exceptional cases admitted to by the Dutch government in 1969.³⁷

Our conclusion incorporates both interpretations. While it is eminently possible that the majority of Dutch soldiers did not witness, much less participate in, war crimes, it seems likely that a substantial number of soldiers did cross the line, hence adding to a repository of such cases that most likely should be counted in the tens of thousands. While not necessarily implicating the majority of troops under Dutch command, this does reflect negatively on the Dutch army as a whole. It is therefore not surprising that our conclusion evoked some strong criticism within veterans' circles. While this criticism directly – and in our view, wrongly – denounces the validity of our cautious reasoning and calculations, the broader issue is quite representative of the mentality of a broad segment of Dutch Indonesia veterans as such. Criticism of specific units or individuals is interpreted as unwarranted criticism of the army as a whole; open discussion of war crimes, no matter how nuanced, is perceived as an indictment of the entirety of the former army, from the highest commander to the lowest in

³⁵ Conscript soldier Jan Minten, cited in Nel Verstegen-Maessen, *Spinninghe: Sevenumse Indië-gangers, de vliegende Pieelhaas* (Sevenum, 1998), p. 129

³⁶ Theoretically, one might assume that members of combat troops were more interested in publishing about their experiences than men working behind the violent scenes, such as mechanics or secretarial staff. We have not been able to corroborate this assumption, but we think it is unlikely that this would necessitate a downwards revision of our calculations.

³⁷ A statistical technique known as Multiple Systems Estimation offers a way of estimating the total number of (in this case) war crimes even in the presence of partial information. It requires the availability of two independent partial lists of war crimes. The technique looks for overlap between the two lists – the more overlap, the more likely it is that either list approaches the total number of war crimes that ever occurred. Conversely, the less overlap, the higher the total number of war crimes (and the more uncertain the result). The MSE technique uses the simple formula $N = (A*B)/M$. Here A is the number of war crimes established in our research, B the number of cases detected in an alternative research project (i.e. the *Excessennota*) and M is the number of overlapping cases. N is then the hypothesized total number of cases (war crimes). Hence $N = (110*779)/5 = 17,138$. Many caveats are in place, and this figure is presented here without any pretense at precision. Thus, the *Excessennota* lists serious and often larger cases that were brought to court, while our research lists mainly small-scale transgressions – hence the low value for M, and the high uncertainty. (The authors thank Gerry van Klinken, KITLV, for his advice on statistics.)

rank. This mistrust may partly be attributed to the supposedly frosty post-war reception of veterans, which according to the in-group perception had been devoid of well-deserved respect.

Most of the war crimes mentioned in this corpus were committed in Java, particularly Central Java, home to the Republican capital of Yogyakarta. This makes sense, as does the fact that 1949 was the peak year. The most violent periods in the entire decolonization war were probably the months the special forces operated in Sulawesi from 10 December 1946 until 5 March 1947, the two so-called 'police actions' between 21 July and 5 August 1947 and 19 December 1948 to 5 January 1949, and especially the period from January up to mid-August 1949, when after months of heavy guerrilla warfare a truce was finally agreed on as a prelude to the transfer of sovereignty on 27 December 1949.³⁸ Except for the Sulawesi operations under colonel H.J. de Vries and captain Raymond Westerling and a short period of violence in Bali, most of the outright warfare and guerrilla fighting between Dutch and Indonesian troops indeed took place on Java.

An ambiguous mission among an unfathomable people To understand the context in which such extensive 'transgressions' could occur, we have additionally analyzed what the soldiers thought of the mission they were supposed to be doing, and how they perceived and interpreted the world around them – and in particular the people that they saw on the other end of their rifles. This, inevitably, is a reflection on delicate issues of paternalism, eurocentrism, and racism, and on possible consequences of such attitudes for warfare.

While indigenous troops made up a substantial minority within the Dutch army, the great majority were Dutch nationals, departing for a faraway place that they, like most of the Dutch at the time, still perceived as a legitimate colony. Parochialism and ignorance of Indonesia must have characterized the majority of these predominantly ill-prepared young men, grown into adolescence during the Nazi occupation.³⁹ What mission did they think they were going to perform there in the first place? There is a clear development over time here. The first volunteers recruited in late 1944 and early 1945 thought they would help to complete the job the Allied forces were doing in Europe and Asia alike. These volunteers interpreted fighting the Japanese as a continuation of the war in Europe.

After the Japanese capitulation on August 15, 1945, Sukarno's declaration of independence two days later, and the outbreak of widespread mob violence disproportionally directed against the Dutch, the Eurasian (in Dutch, *Indische*) population and anyone suspected of siding with the colonial regime, the mission was reformulated as a sort of peace-keeping mission rather than as the colonial pacification mission it really was. Re-establishing peace and stability became the new objective, and it was thought that the Dutch would be welcomed in Indonesia the way the Allied forces had been celebrated upon liberating the Netherlands. The reality proved to be quite different, and as the war gradually deepened into dirty guerrilla and counterinsurgency, Dutch soldiers' comments became increasingly cynical – whether about their political superiors at home, the military command, the mission as such, or all of these together. An increasingly cynical mindset may have facilitated a lowering of inhibition regarding the use of excessive violence, the more so as in the last year of the war the number of Dutch casualties grew considerably and the impetus for retaliation grew

³⁸ Groen, *Marsroutes*, p. 230.

³⁹ Oostindie, *Soldaat*, pp. 111-5.

accordingly. As Peter Romijn has argued, new Dutch arrivals were quickly socialized into a bitter culture of violence and retribution – they learned on the job. While his analysis focuses on the first contingents made up of volunteers, throughout the corpus we see similar indications of the socialization of – younger and even less-experienced – conscripted soldiers.⁴⁰

Pre-departure ignorance of Indonesian culture, immersion into a military combat spirit heralded by the colonial KNIL, growing frustration about an evasive enemy hidden between the ordinary peasant and urban population of the colony, perhaps an absence of significant constraint within its own ranks – all of this may have played a part in producing a spirit conducive to the perpetration or at least toleration of war crimes. To what extent was racism a part of this mindset? The egodocuments do provide examples of outright racism, or post hoc allusions to this. Sergeant Mart Sytsema remembers how new Dutch arrivals were initiated by the KNIL – a predominantly indigenous army, but commanded by Dutchmen in the higher ranks:

[Soldiers from the Netherlands] were awaited in an unknown country by KNIL personnel as quartermasters. Their watchword rang: 'Shoot before you are shot at and don't trust anyone black!'⁴¹

Half a century later, conscript soldier Jaap Duppen wrote down:

I have owned the commemorative book of my battalion since 1953, and often I had to put it away in disgust because it abounds with racist terms and qualifications.⁴²

Even so, unmistakable racist observations occur relatively infrequently. Many an ill-prepared soldier found himself pleasantly surprised, not just by the Indonesian landscape, but equally by its inhabitants:

And then, the villagers. Simple people with little needs but... PEOPLE just like us. They also have their religion, their longing for love, their struggle for existence and their [...] feelings for art. They are people just like us, with the same human inclinations and needs.⁴³

Very often, comments on enemies killed in combat and even more so civilian victims are framed in a context of shared humanity, even if formulated in the paternalistic jargon in which Dutch soldiers were socialized by the military leadership and Dutch KNIL officers. It is this paternalism – with all of its condescending undertones – that characterizes much of the egodocuments, rather than explicit racism. Hateful remarks are mainly reserved for the militant enemy, for those that clearly have taken a stand against the Dutch.

Sure, there are also others among them, men that deserve our esteem. But the average TNI [Republican] soldier is a robber, a bandit, a murderer of extreme cowardice, obsessed with

⁴⁰ Peter Romijn, 'Learning on "the Job": Dutch War Volunteers Entering the Indonesian War of Independence, 1945-46', in Moses and Luttikhuis, *Colonial Counterinsurgency*, pp. 91-110.

⁴¹ Quoted in Dick Schaap, "'Zo leuk was het niet voor onze jongens overzee": Ooggetuige filmopnames "nep" patrouille in Nederlands-Indië', *Checkpoint* 6-10 (2005), p. 32.

⁴² Jaap Duppen, *Opdracht uitgevoerd: Een verhaal over de Tweede Wereldoorlog die voor de Nederlandse jongens 10 jaar duurde* (Rotterdam, 2007), p. 14.

⁴³ Lieutenant A.S. van Cleef, *Een jaar in de tropen, 4 Augustus 1948-1949: Het werk en leven van 6 R.S. in woord en beeld* (s.l., 1949), p. 30.

power, an egotist without higher ideals, and a bloody scourge for the poor Javanese people, that receives this 'freedom' out of their hands.⁴⁴

What these outright enemy combatants share with the rest of the population, in the eyes of Dutch soldiers, is their unfathomable character, frequently alluded to as 'typically Oriental' – one never knows what they might be up to. From this follows a sense of insecurity, but at times also an excuse for brutal violence as 'this is the only thing they understand and respect'. Admiral C.E.L. Helfrich, born and raised in the colony, had this to say:

The Oriental highly values power and the display of power. [...] Did people really think we could reclaim our prestige by granting them concessions over and over again? Especially against Orientals? Oh, this abominable ignorance of the psyche of the Oriental, who is so oversensitive to the display of power and especially to dignity with character.⁴⁵

In the same vein, officer Co Broerse:

The things happening here are being judged in Holland by Western European standards. This is always wrong. An Oriental people live here to whom our standards don't apply but need to be adjusted. The same fact *can* according to our own standards be seen as a war crime but would be considered normal behavior here. [...] After these excesses, the Indonesian people must first be made to brought back in line forcefully. [...] Simply because these [excesses committed by the KNIL] are normal in their Oriental eyes and perhaps even command respect.⁴⁶

During the war, this Othering of Indonesians seems to have been more typical for the Dutch troops' mentality than the acceptance of the Republican objective of sovereignty and the military strategy that went with it. Only decades later had many veterans moved to the bitter position that in hindsight, Dutch policies had been outdated from the start and that they had been forced to wage a war without legitimate justification and with little chance of success.

There is another delicate dimension to this theme of race and war crimes. Dutch troops were highly impressed by the far more experienced KNIL. This colonial army, including its indigenous troops, was perceived as an indispensable protective force. At the same time, much criticism was voiced over the allegedly fierce, brutal character of the indigenous KNIL soldiers. Within the corpus, most crimes are ascribed to Dutch troops, but a disproportional share of all war crimes is attributed to the minority of locally recruited colonial troops. Thus, embedded journalist J. Veenstra observed:

Initially the [Republican] prisoners were well-treated, as these Dutchmen wish not to act in the barbaric way they observe with the KNIL troops. [...] At the end of the operations a military police unit of the KNIL, mainly Ambonese and *Indisch* [Eurasian] soldiers, had marched into the village. The Dutch agonized in view of their earlier, for them horrifying experiences with these guys. [...] It happened exactly as they had feared. The policemen went

⁴⁴ Anonymous, cited in J. Hofs, *Gedenkboek Tweede Miltrailleurbataljon 1947-1950* (Anonieme militair (s.l., 1950), p. 221.

⁴⁵ C.E.L. Helfrich, *Memoires van C.E.L. Helfrich, luitenant-generaal b.d. II: Glorie en tragedie* (Amsterdam, 1950), pp. 251, 253.

⁴⁶ Co Broerse, *Herinneringen van Co Broerse uit de jaren 1939-1950, grotendeels geput uit de vele brieven aan zijn moeder in de periode 1945-1950* (s.l., [200?]), p. 96.

about like animals. The prisoners were mistreated in disturbing ways, and tortured. Most were slain. Some had their genitals cut off. Corpses were thrown into the river. Afterwards these tough guys invaded various kampongs [small villages] and set these on fire. This is called enforcing discipline.⁴⁷

There are many such testimonies:

I sense the spirit of the Ambonese, Menadonese and Timorese stationed there. Men that would march through fire. Men that accept pain, punishment and tough treatment as utterly regular elements of their job. [...] After an assault, a number of enemies is captured. Before I know what's going on my natives are cutting off the ears of two of them. [...] I can't breathe as I witness how the men are licking the blood from their *klewang* [single-edge sword] [...] They think this is perfectly normal. I don't think so and order them to refrain from such madness.⁴⁸

Looking back, Theo Kappers, himself a Eurasian KNIL soldier, offered this explanation:

This was war for us, really war. Fratricide, Ambonese against Ambonese, Javanese against Javanese, Sumatran versus Sumatran. I served as wireless operator in Eastern Sumatra. You were shitting your pants out of fear. For us this was about our homeland, a territory and who would be in charge there. And we knew: if they win, we are out. As indeed happened. And we were fierce. Of course. Whether there was a limit to observe – not really. You are brothers and this is fratricide.⁴⁹

Caution is required here. The local KNIL troops are often referred to with the generic term of 'indigenous' or 'Ambonese', but were actually made up of a combination of soldiers from the Moluccan islands (including Ambon), Menado, Java, Madura and other places within the archipelago. It seems that Eurasian (*Indische*) soldiers were often perceived to be part of the 'indigenous' troops too. With the partial exception of the latter group, these generally low-ranking men spoke Malay rather than Dutch, and left no published records in Dutch. This means that in the entire corpus, only a few locally recruited men speak about the war and specifically about war crimes. Conversely, most allegations of crimes committed by indigenous KNIL soldiers are attributed to them by white Dutch men, some of these serving in higher ranks of the KNIL itself, a larger part by men serving in the all-Dutch units. It is evident that this imbalance may have produced distortions, not unlike the stereotyping of 'ethnic soldiers' prevalent about the Ghurka in the British army, and the *harkis* as paramilitary troops supporting the French armed forces.

Justifications: Chain of Command and The Logic of Counterinsurgency

Considering the frequency with which war crimes were committed, it is vital to inquire into the role of the supreme command: was this kind of violence part of the strategy, was it quietly accepted, or was it actively discouraged or thwarted when encountered? On the eve of large-scale military

⁴⁷ J.H.W. Veenstra, *Diogenes in de tropen* (Amsterdam, [1947]), pp. 131-2.

⁴⁸ Lieutenant Bert Schüssler, *Naar eer en geweten* (Diemen, 1998), pp. 34, 56.

⁴⁹ Cited in Tessel Pollmann, "'Ze kennen de taal, het volk, de gewoonten: Ze zijn hardhandig, maar je bent van ze afhankelijk'", *Vrij Nederland*, 27 February, 1988.

actions, Supreme Commander Simon Spoor would issue instructions ordering his men to treat captive enemies and particularly the civilian population correctly – after all, the pacification mission could not be accomplished without local support and hence implied the winning of the hearts and minds of the Indonesians. The Dutch therefore should set an example of benevolence as opposed to the regime of terror supposedly imposed on the local population by the enemy. Spoor himself, reacting to complaints from The Hague about reported transgressions, warned his staff: ‘This should be over now, and will be over.’⁵⁰

Recent research suggests that in reality, at a lower level such instructions for impeccable conduct were often discarded and that at a higher military and judicial level, transgressions were often covered up and went unpunished in order to protect the morale and reputation of the army. Limpach refers to a ‘culture of lawlessness’, while Peter Romijn concludes that ‘the military and civil authorities decided to turn a blind eye [to war crimes] for the sake of countering insurgency’.⁵¹

The egodocuments are not an ideal source to study this issue. They do not offer sufficiently reliable information to draw firm conclusions. As with many other issues, the corpus demonstrates great variety in individual experiences and observations. While some insist that officers’ instructions always urged for correct behavior, others claim just the opposite, as in these remarks from soldier Willem van Breen and marine Bertus van Gils:

We received orders and these were executed. That’s what an army is for. If cruelties were perpetrated at all, this was not because these were commissioned. [...] That kind of revenge, no matter how understandable, was never propagated or tolerated, much less ordered by the military leadership.⁵²

This was an order from the highest command that basically said that we had to burn down the place at the slightest suspicion. It was up to the officer in charge to establish where this was the case. It resulted in arbitrariness, with extremes in both directions.⁵³

Though we did find some cases in which men apparently refused to obey particularly harsh orders, there is wide consensus as to the small margins available for individual soldiers to do so. As lieutenant Menno Steenhuis recalled:

I don’t remember any case in which a soldier denounced excessive conduct of a superior or a comrade. Apparently you just didn’t do that. Neither do I remember someone being punished for excessive violence. An army in action has its own norms and routines.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ April 10, 1949, cited in de Moor, *Generaal Spoor*, p. 359.

⁵¹ Limpach, ‘Business as Usual’, 67, Thijs Brocades Zaalberg, ‘In de Oost 1946-1950’, in Ben Schoenmaker (ed.), *200 Jaar Koninklijke Landmacht, 1814-2014*, pp. 139-59 (Amsterdam, 2014), pp. 149, 157, Peter Romijn, ‘Learning on “the Job”’, p. 105. See also R.P. Budding, *Beheersing van geweld: Het optreden van de Nederlandse landstrijdkrachten in Indonesië 1945-1949* (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 63-5; De Moor, *Generaal Spoor*, pp. 197, 201, 319-9, 355, 374-86 – but also his criticism of Dutch brutalities, pp. 200-1, 247, 359.

⁵² Willem van Breen, *Voor ik het nooit vergeet: Herinneringen van een 4-2 R.l'er op Noord-Sumatra: Gebaseerd op dagboekantekeningen over de periode van 7 november 1946 tot en met 24 februari 1950* (Hilvarenbeek, 1997), p. 64.

⁵³ Cited in de Hoogh and de Hoogh-Sierat, *Indische mariniers jaren*, p. 89.

⁵⁴ Menno Steenhuis, *Onhoorbaar groeit de padi: Front-soldaten in een verloren oorlog: Indonesië 1948-1950* (s.l., 2005), pp. 196-7.

Of course, we should keep in mind that this can also easily become a self-justification – ‘I was just following orders, this was not my own choice.’ This *Befehl ist Befehl* type of argumentation was already in disrepute after the 1945-46 Nuremburg Tribunal, and apparently not unknown:

We agreed that to some extent ‘Befehl ist Befehl’ might be an inevitable element of the military organization, but also that there should be some room for personal moral margins.⁵⁵

But in this corpus we mainly find reflections indicating doubts and also remorse expressed only decades later, some quite frank, such as the soul searching by Corporal Jan Glissenaar, about his own involvement in war crimes:

Speaking for myself, looking back, I find this really one of the darkest days of my life, that I did this. You really don’t understand exactly, if you ... speak about this today ... than you don’t understand that you do something like this, that you ever went that far.⁵⁶

But of course there were other arguments beyond the chain of command to explain, and hence ostensibly justify, transgressions. A recurring trope both in contemporary war diaries and correspondence and in subsequent memoirs is explanatory argumentation, meant to render the occurrence of *prima facie* incomprehensible and objectionable behavior less incomprehensible and hence also more acceptable. This is the context in which war crimes, usually attributed to others, are contextualized. The overarching argument is that the Dutch reading audience has no understanding whatsoever of the character of counterinsurgency warfare in a faraway tropical place. One is drawn into a setting of violence, whether one wants to or not:

Happily, not much ‘dirty business’ went on in our battalion, as far as I know at least. But which war is ‘clean’, and surely which guerrilla war? It is nearly impossible to think of any meaner type of war.⁵⁷

This is illustrated time and again by a ‘better safe than sorry’ argument:

There’s nothing as dirty as war. You can’t understand it if you’ve not been there. If we were searching for extremists, you just stuck the barrel of your gun around the corner and shot. And occasionally you might shoot the wrong one. Nothing you can do about it. It just happens.⁵⁸

But there are also quite open references to retaliation as an apparently widely accepted element of the war:

Frequently Dutch patrols were taken by surprise in guerrilla ambushes, assaults and the like. The guerrilla fighter would take prisoners that were later retrieved. To put it mildly: the

⁵⁵ Officer Bert, cited in Ger Verrips, *Mannen die niet deugden: Een oorlogsverleden* (Amsterdam, 1998), p. 85.

⁵⁶ Jan Glissenaar, *Terug naar Java: In het spoor van de politionele acties* (Aalsmeer, 1992), p. 43.

⁵⁷ War volunteer Gerben Deters, *Dagboek van een oorlogsvrijwilliger* (Ede, 1994), p. 8.

⁵⁸ Corporal Sjeng Cox, cited in Marleen Wegman, “‘Niets zo vies als een oorlog’: Indië-veteraan Sjeng Cox is blij met late erkenning”, *Checkpoint* 8-9 (2007), p. 28.

victims had not been treated nicely. [...] That ruthless and uncanny atmosphere became a breeding ground for (personal) retaliation, both ways, and hence for excesses.⁵⁹

When it turned out that a comrade had been ambushed during a patrol, was hurt and then had his vital parts cut off by these bandits while he was still alive, many a soldier went berserk. 'They will pay, these bastards!' The soul searching came later. 'Didn't we get out of line in our anger?' Among themselves the soldiers would discuss this, but such events were silenced in their letters sent home. 'They need not know'. 'Anyway, they don't understand the situation we're in every day.'⁶⁰

In conclusion, there were all types of explanations and hence justifications given for transgressions, ranging from the chain of command to the logic of counterinsurgency warfare. Even so the outcome would haunt many a veteran, decades later:

But it was a useless war. The fatherland? Forget about it. [...] And yet it eats at you. Just like rust. If you don't polish it, it continues to rust away and it destroys you.⁶¹

Conclusion

Sixty-five years after the conclusion of the Indonesian revolution and decolonization war, many questions about its complexities remain unanswered. The extensive work done with this massive corpus of published egodocuments has helped us to formulate some answers, but there is ample room for further research on the basis of this corpus.

While the main focus in this article has been on the frequency of war crimes, our corpus allows us to address broader questions. Some of these were discussed above, such as changing ideas about the military mission; the chain of command; explanations given for war crimes; or references to the supposedly exceptional harshness of indigenous soldiers. Other issues addressed in the book were not discussed in this article, such as sexual behavior and particularly the soldiers' apparent extensive usage of prostitution; trauma and post-traumatic stress; and the veterans' broadly-felt feelings of isolation and of frustration over lack of understanding upon their return to civilian life in the Netherlands. Further research into these topics will provide more insight into the culture and mentality of both the Dutch army during the war in Indonesia and its resulting veteran community in general.

As for war crimes, our conclusions are clear. Even if the greater part of the Dutch army may not have been personally involved in such transgressions, our evidence confirms that such crimes were committed far more frequently than has long been acknowledged, certainly by the Dutch government and veterans. There are indications for a 'conspiracy of silence', intentionally observed by both the political and military leadership, but to some extent equally by a veterans' community

⁵⁹ Lieutenant S.A. (Sjoerd) Lapré, *Nederlands-Indië 1940-1950: In kort bestek en enkele gevolgen o.a. de coup-Westerling en het Zuidmolukse verzet* (s.l., 1989), pp. 163-4.

⁶⁰ Conscript soldier Jan van den Berselaar, *Over Unentse soldaten overzee: 'Den Vaderlant Ghetrouwe' in Nederlands-Indie 1945-1950* (Udenhout-Biezenmortel, 2009), p. 43.

⁶¹ Conscript soldier (?) Marius Kanters, cited in Ant. P. de Graaff, *De weg terug: Het vergeten leger toen en nu* (Franeker, 1988), p. 116.

concerned that reports on particular cases would be taken as an indictment of all veterans. Over the last decades, the tide has been turning. The legitimacy of the war as such has been widely questioned, eventually also by the Dutch government. In the same vein, 'war crimes' and 'decolonization war' are increasingly substituted for the earlier euphemisms of 'excesses' and 'police actions'.

Our research in this corpus of published egodocuments discards rosy ideas about Dutch exceptionalism long nurtured in the Netherlands. But beyond this, let us not forget that it took quite some time for public debates to emerge about other decolonization wars as well. While American war crimes in Vietnam were widely discussed during the war itself, this was much less the case with the various preceding European decolonization wars. In all cases, the interests and emotions of the political and military leadership mattered, as did the veteran lobby. But a decisive turn in the Vietnam war was its extreme and simultaneous visibility in the mass media, particularly television – journalists and live coverage were crucial. This was patently absent in the Indonesian decolonization war, in which the Dutch military leadership successfully manipulated a sanitized media coverage of its colonial warfare.⁶²

⁶² Gerda Jansen Hendriks, "'Not a Colonial War': Dutch Film Propaganda in the Fight Against Indonesia, 1945-49", in Luttikhuid and Moses (eds), *Colonial Counterinsurgency*, pp. 198-213; Louis Zweers, *De gecensureerde oorlog: Militairen versus media in Nederlands-Indië 1945-1949* (Zutphen, 2013).