Trauma and the last Dutch war in Indonesia, 1945-1949

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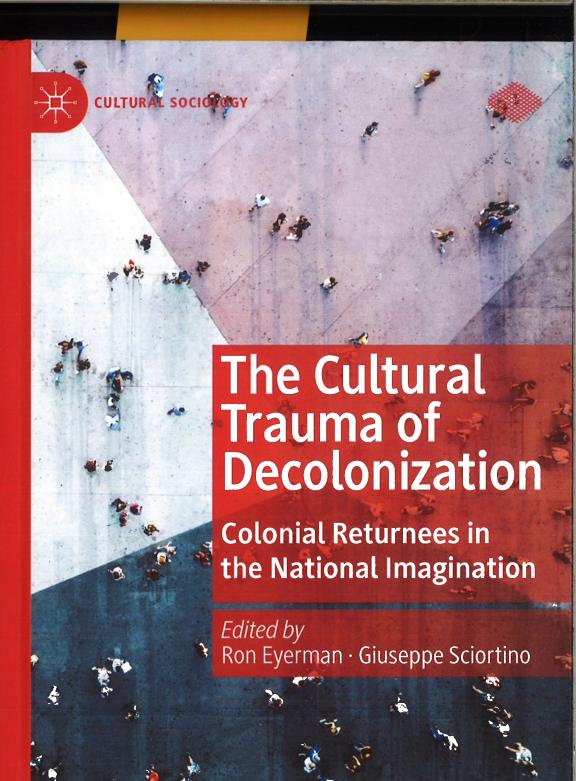# The Cultural Trauma of Decolonization

Colonial Returnees in the National Imagination

Edited by
Ron Eyerman · Giuseppe Sciortino

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Gert Oostindie

Throughout the 1940s the Netherlands was at war and was thrice humiliated and defeated.[1] Within a few days in early May 1940, Nazi Germany crushed the Dutch army and started a five-years' occupation. Early in 1942, it took the Japanese only a few weeks to defeat the Dutch army in the Dutch East Indies and take control of the vast colony. And in spite of years of brutal warfare alongside protracted negotiations after the Japanese capitulation in 1945, the Dutch had to accept the independence of Indonesia in 1949.[2] Neither this, nor the first round of postcolonial migrations to the

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[1] I am deeply grateful for the comments made on previous versions of this paper by the participants in the Yale and Trento workshops, and especially to Ron Eyerman and Rémy Limpach for their critical reading of the last version of this paper.

[2] Excluding Dutch New Guinea, which was only ceded in 1962.

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Netherlands that accompanied "the loss of the Indies" had been seriously anticipated in the 1930s.

All of this caused trauma at the collective and the individual level, both during these years and decades after. But as this chapter attests, there is little evidence that the various actors in this history produced coherent discourses of cultural trauma that resonated both inside and outside of their communities. Rather than experiencing cultural trauma over the ending of some 350 years of colonialism, Dutch society by and large seems to have moved quickly into a mode of glossing over their colonial past. First it was the unexpected legacies of colonialism that needed to be dealt with: decolonization and postcolonial migrations. While in the immediate post-World War II years cultural trauma was associated with the five years of Nazi occupation, it would take a half century longer before Dutch society hesitantly engaged in debates about its own past as an active agent of colonialism, and hence, racism.

DUTCH COLONIALISM, COLONIAL SOCIETY AND DECOLONIZATION

Starting with high ambitions in the early seventeenth century, the Dutch colonial empire was literally all over the globe in the early modern period. After the Napoleonic Wars, Great Britain confiscated a significant part of the empire, leaving the Dutch with some minor Caribbean colonies plus the archipelago that would eventually become the Republic of Indonesia, which today, with some 270 million, is the world's fourth most populous nation. Whereas in earlier centuries the actual Dutch presence in the archipelago had been limited to specific economically attractive cities and regions, in the century after 1815, Dutch "pacification" policies ended up subjugating virtually all of the peoples of what became an embryonic Indonesian state.

Pacification was a brutal affair. The 1825–1830 Java War possibly cost some 200,000 Indonesian casualties, and the Aceh Wars fought between 1873 and 1914 cost well over 100,000. In between these wars there were many other smaller colonial wars alongside an aggressive policy of coopting local aristocrats to accept the expansive colonial regime. Whoever or whatever stood in the way was removed in order to secure the stability and profitability of the colonial state. This, indeed, was classical colonialism and made the Dutch East Indies a massively profitable colony to the Dutch.

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Around 1900, an "ethical policy" was introduced akin to the French *mission civilisatrice* or British ideas about the white man's burden. This turn did not detract from the foremost significance attached to the colony: its contribution to the Dutch economy. On the eve of World War II, many in the Netherlands still thought of the colony as "the cork that keeps our economy floating." That claim was exaggerated, but surely the vested interest in the colony was serious.

With the expansion of the colonial state came significant migration. A migration circuit emerged in which increasing numbers of Dutch and other Europeans settled in the colony to work in colonial businesses, the state bureaucracy, or the colonial army, while others returned home, possibly to enjoy the fruits of their colonial ventures even if many others ended up just as poor as they had been at the start of their colonial adventure. But what was "home," really? Some of these repatriates were indeed first-generation settlers, but many others had a generations-long pedigree in the colony. The *Indisch* community that developed from the later nineteenth century onwards in cities such as The Hague—acquiring the epithet of "widow of the Indies"—was creolized to a degree that locals found remarkable, if not despicable.

Colonial society was highly segregated and the colonial state secured the legal foundations of this segregation. The population was divided into three segments: European, Foreign Oriental, and Native. Whereas legislation in 1838 had bequeathed the entire population of Dutch citizenship, this was restricted soon after, in 1850/1854, to Europeans. The European share in the overall population was extremely low—below one percent. This segment consisted not only of first-generation immigrants and their immediate offspring, the so-called *totoks*, but also a majority of people of mixed European-Asian descent. Within the latter group, some came from families with roots dating back to the seventeenth century, whereas others had a pedigree in the colony of only two or three generations. This "Indo-European" group, often simply designated as *Indo*, was highly diverse in terms of class (income, education, command of Dutch), more so than the on average middle- or upper-class *totok* group. Consecutive governmental rulings (1854, 1892, 1910) defined all members of this group as Dutch citizens. This European group was mainly Christian, in a colony where 90% was Muslim.

The unapologetically Eurocentric category of "Foreign Orientals" included Arabs, Indians, and most of all Chinese, both the large numbers of *peranakan* Chinese that had roots in the colony dating decades and

even centuries back, and recent arrivals. Dutch citizenship was taken away from this group in 1892. Only the Japanese were subsequently "promoted" to the category of Europeans (1899). In 1910, the remaining Foreign Orientals were collectively designated as Dutch *subjects*, but not Dutch *citizens*. Within the category of Foreign Orientals, apart from ethnic divisions, there were again major class divisions.

The final category of Natives (*Inlanders*) included the overwhelming majority of the population, and an ethnically, linguistically, culturally, and of course geographically highly diverse one at that. Islam was one cultural element shared by the greater majority. Also, most of them were poor, even desperately so, and politically powerless. But within this category, we also find sometimes extremely rich local aristocracies that could wield considerable local power as long as they did not obstruct colonial policies. Like the Foreign Orientals, the Natives were explicitly denied Dutch citizenship after 1854—they were subjects, not citizens.

This legal compartmentalization of colonial society—even if it allowed for some fluidity in practice—corresponded with a broader policy of imposing difference, a policy that would deeply influence both decolonization and postcolonial migrations. The entire educational system was organized along ethnic lines, with the range and quality of schools varying with the targeted segment. Here the picture becomes a bit more fluid again, even fuzzy. The overwhelming majority of the population received very little formal education in the first place, and nothing in the Dutch language. The colonial state organized Dutch-language primary education for the European population, but in the early twentieth century also agreed to the establishment of elite Chinese-Dutch and Chinese-Indonesian primary schools that gave access to ethnically integrated secondary and tertiary education.

The result was paradoxical, though not surprising from a comparative perspective. The Dutch language and Dutch culture writ large were peripheral in the lives of most Indonesians—the cultural legacies of centuries of Dutch colonialism would later be aptly characterized as a mere "scratching the surface." So on the eve of World War II, probably only one percent of the population had gone through Dutch-language education, and the greater part of these belonged to the European segment. And yet, a growing number of Chinese and Indonesians went through the Western educational system and even made it to universities in the Netherlands. Among the Chinese this was not translated into political engagement, but among the (other) Indonesians it certainly did, as the political leadership

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of the Indonesian Revolution was partly recruited from within this native intellectual elite. A nationalist movement emerged in the early twentieth century, but met with unrelenting repression by the colonial state.

The Japanese occupation heralded the end not only of Dutch rule, but also of whatever had been present of Dutch culture in colonial times. The Dutch language was forbidden and all Dutch colonial symbols and monuments were torn down; the *totok* population was interned and the Indo population isolated. For the European community, postcolonial trauma thus emerged in the dying days of colonialism. And yet, when Japan capitulated on August 15, 1945 and Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta proclaimed the independence of Indonesia two days later, the great majority within the European segment seriously underestimated the strength of Indonesian nationalism and believed that colonial order would be restored. So did most politicians and ordinary citizens in the Netherlands. Both the fact that things took a completely different turn and the later realization that these earlier expectations had so little footing in Indonesian reality would add to Dutch postcolonial trauma.

What actually happened may be easily summarized. Prior to the war, there had been little serious consideration of colonial reform in the Dutch political arena, and the thought of independence a no-go area in Dutch politics except for the radical left, mainly the Dutch Communist party. Dutch elites concurred that the colony was simply too important to lose. Apart from the economic argument, there was the geopolitical concern that without this colony, "the Netherlands will descend to the rank of a country such as Denmark." And there was the argument of a civilizing mission: there was still so much to accomplish there, and Indonesians supposedly appreciated the Dutch guidance with its promises of stability, development, and gradual reform.

During the war, the Dutch government exiled in London was forced nonetheless to consider colonial reform and started promising the colonies "autonomy" within a semi-federal Kingdom of the Netherlands; by then, Indonesia had some seventy million inhabitants, the Netherlands only nine million (and the Caribbean colonies taken together less than half a million). After the German—and next, Japanese—defeat, the first Dutch priority in Indonesia was to reinstall its rule and work toward colonial reform from there. It soon became clear, though, that Indonesian nationalism was far stronger than had been anticipated, and Dutch politicians came to realize that a return to the pre-war status was inconceivable. By late 1946, the Dutch government seemed to acknowledge that Indonesia would become

an independent state rather soon. For all kinds of reasons, however, it would take another three years of endless negotiations, ruthless warfare, and international pressure on the increasingly isolated Dutch leadership before the transfer of sovereignty was officially signed on December 27, 1949. By then, the position of the European segment of the population had become fragile. By the mid-1950s, virtually all *totoks* and the great majority of the Eurasian *Indo's* had settled in the Netherlands. They could do so without legal restraints as they all held Dutch citizenship and hence the right of abode.[3]

"Repatriates" and Soldiers

Initially, these orphans of colonialism were designated as "repatriates." That made increasingly less sense. Of course, *totoks* really returned home, most of them deeply affected by years of Japanese internment, some also by the experience of subsequent anti-colonial resentment and violence, but in the end, they were fairly well prepared. Their lives in the colony implied a broadening of horizons, but much of their privileged expat life in the colony had been characterized by a continued orientation toward Dutch culture, language, institutions—schools, churches, and government—and leisure activities. Repatriation meant the loss of this often-luxurious expat life, which often included a host of servants, and for many also a decline in social status. Most endured significant material losses. But in the end, they were returning to a known world, could reconnect with families and social networks, and there were no strong obstacles to successful reintegration.

For most of the Eurasian migrants, forming probably two-thirds of the entire European repatriate group, "repatriation" was an inappropriate concept. Only a small minority had ever been in the metropolis before. Judging from the great number of memoirs, novels, oral history projects, and studies produced over the decades since their first arrival, the Netherlands was a disappointment to most of them: a small country, cold and rainy, narrow-minded and even bigoted, surely not rich, and neither generous

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[3]There is a vast body of literature on Dutch colonialism and the final war of decolonization that is not referenced in this chapter. Gert Oostindie (2011) offers an overview and analysis of postcolonial migrations and their impact on Dutch society and Dutch understandings of the colonial dimension of their history and nation; much of this chapter builds on that book and on my article "Ruptures and Dissonance: Post-Colonial Migrations and the Remembrance of Colonialism in the Netherlands" (2015a). Elizabeth Buettner (2016) provides a comparative perspective with ample space for the Dutch case.

with material help; a country also without the extensive family and broader social networks that had been available in the Dutch East Indies; and a place where many endured status degradation, suffered from an insufficient command of Dutch and, as "mixed-race" immigrants, were confronted with xenophobia and racism.

Overall, the migration of these two categories of "Europeans" amounted to some 300,000 people. But migration from the Dutch East Indies did not stop there. From the upper segment of "Foreign Orientals" there were Chinese immigrants numbering in the tens of thousands. This was a highly untypical group with a migration history characterized primarily by educational and economic motives. Their overall profile was—and still is—defined as highly educated, economically successful, Christian, well-positioned, and successfully integrated locally while having maintained strong intra-group networks.

At the other end of the spectrum, a group of some 12,500 Moluccans arrived in the Netherlands in 1951. As unprivileged "natives," they would not have qualified for entrance, but an exception was made as the male core of this group consisted of roughly 4000 soldiers who had all served in the Dutch colonial army and had since embraced the cause of an independent Moluccan republic outside of the Indonesian Republic. Some of these groups also became involved in armed actions against the new Republic and were therefore in a highly precarious situation in Indonesia. They were ordered to board for the Netherlands, and much to their dismay were demobilized as soon as they set foot in the Netherlands. Their group characteristics foreboded a difficult integration process: low educational levels, little command of the Dutch language, and a strong social and political identification with the Moluccan islands rather than with the country of arrival. It did not help a bit that the Dutch government decided to provide housing in isolated camps and through a series of measures actually discouraged integration in Dutch society. As we will see, several traumas would come to characterize this community.

The story of repatriation does not end here. Over a four-year period, the Dutch government recruited 160,000 Dutchmen, most of them young conscripted soldiers, to serve in its army in Indonesia. A few thousands died, a few stayed in or around Indonesia, but the overwhelming majority were repatriated and demobilized in the Netherlands. On average, they had been away for over two years, missing out on some developments in the Netherlands and for better or worse taking aboard their Indonesian experience. Upon their return they reintegrated and talked—or rather remained

silent—about the impact of these years in their own life. But they also added their narratives to the ongoing national debates about colonialism, Indonesia, the war, and the politicians that sent them there.

TRAUMA NARRATIVES AND CLAIM-MAKING

The history briefly recounted above had a deep and for some traumatic impact, not least of all in Indonesia, itself. The Japanese occupation had resulted in a death toll of some four million Indonesians, but its end also ushered in the founding of an independent republic. The return of the Allied forces—first the British, next the Dutch—resulted in a long war in which over 100,000 Indonesians fell victim to Dutch warfare, not counting the number of civilian deaths due to starvation, intra-Indonesian violence, and the like. Of course, families of Indonesians killed or abused by Dutch soldiers continue to feel the pain to this very day, and recent reports indeed convey traumatic memories. But remarkably, there is hardly any evidence of a rhetoric of loss and suffering in contemporary Indonesia. The death toll is widely seen as the price that had to be paid for a higher cause. As a young Indonesian historian recently remarked, "For us, the period starting on August 17, 1945 is a positive one, a period of construction, and that is what matters to us!"[4]

This chapter does not discuss the damage, loss, and possible trauma inflicted upon the victims of Dutch colonialism, but rather focuses on the postcolonial migrants and returnees from Indonesia who settled in the Netherlands, and on Dutch society and politics at large. Neither will there be an extensive discussion of the legacies of Dutch Atlantic colonialism. In the field of Atlantic history, narratives of colonization, the extinction of Native populations, the African slave trade, and slavery in the Americas, and also themes such as past and present racism, are often framed using concepts referring to deep personal and collective suffering, as well as, increasingly, trauma. This framing is largely absent in Indonesian renderings of the colonial past—an observation that immediately begs other questions that will not be pursued here.

Following Jeffrey Alexander and Ron Eyerman, the concept of cultural trauma is employed as a sociological paradigm focusing on collective experiences and behavior rather than on individual suffering and trauma as a

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[4] At a workshop at the Department of History, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, November 28, 2017. See also Immler (2018).

psychologist would do.[5] In Alexander's definition, "Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel that have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander 2004: 1). Eyerman proposes to use this concept in analyzing the implications of postcolonial migrations set in motion by (violent, one presumes) decolonization: "The impact of such loss [by individuals who are forced to leave long-established ways of life] is only intensified when experienced through markers of collectivity, such as ethnic and national identification [...]. Cultural trauma refers to a discursive and dialectical process whereby the fractured foundations of individual and collective identity are re-narrated in attempts at repair."[6]

We are thus at once talking about collective suffering as a result of decolonization and the ensuing postcolonial migrations; about painful collective memories that run so deep that we may think of collective trauma as being deeply engrained in the collectivity's identity; and about the construction of a redemptive narrative that helps to overcome this trauma. Cultural trauma theorists also emphasize its performative nature. Only well-articulated, consistent, and persuasive discourses of collective trauma have a chance of first becoming a leading trope for particular communities and next acquiring a significant appeal in wider circles (e.g., national and perhaps international). This short chapter does not allow for a serious analysis of the ways the various communities have framed their particular interpretations of the (post)colonial past, but there is a growing body of scholarly literature looking into this.[7]

How does the cultural trauma approach relate to the history summarized above? We first need to differentiate between the various collectivities and their possibly diverging points of view. We may focus on the various categories of "repatriates" and soldiers introduced above, but we can take one more step and provide a fuller picture, at least of the Dutch scene. This means also looking at Dutch politics and, even if this is a highly diverse entity, Dutch society at large. (Specific institutions such as the Dutch press, academia, or churches could also have been singled out as actors, but this is

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[5] For a recent overview, see Sciortino (2018).

[6] Ron Eyerman, 'Post-Colonial Trauma: A Comparative Study of Return', position paper.

[7] Unfortunately, most of this literature is in Dutch. See however Bosma et al. (2012) and particularly Bosma (2012).

all beyond the reach of the present effort.) Second, we should define what exactly each of these collectivities defines as the basis for its trauma, and to whom responsibility is allotted. And finally, there is the question of what redemptive narratives each collectivity develops. In all of this, we should also take into account changes over time; not only because of aging and the changing of generations, but also because of broader political and intellectual developments in any given society, memories, convictions, narratives, and frames are in constant flux.

We may start with the Dutch *totok repatriates*. This group's foremost trauma narrative has centered on their suffering in the Japanese internment camps, for which primarily the Japanese were blamed. However, subsequently the Dutch government was also included in the narrative of blame both for not extracting more recognition, apologies, and indemnification from Japan and for early on reestablishing cordial bilateral relations with the offending nation. A second bone of contention, which only intensified over the decades, is colonial government employees' frustrations over salaries and pensions lost because of internment during the war. Here the Dutch government came under increasing attack for not providing "back pay," which was perceived as a lack of recognition and respect. As for the independence struggle and the Dutch decolonization policies, no matter how strong this group may have resented the end of the colonial era, this has never been a dominant theme in collective organizing. Even less prominent has been the process of repatriation and integration in the Netherlands—most likely because this group had the best options and networks for successful integration. In all, then, this group did produce an abundant corpus of memoires about their suffering under the Japanese, but it did not develop an internally consistent grand narrative that might serve to bind its members into a self-identified coherent community, much less one characterized by cultural trauma.

There is some convergence, but also clear contrasts, with the *Eurasian "Indo" group*. Only a minority in this community was interned during the Japanese occupation, hence the internment camps do not figure prominently. Nonetheless, there is hatred toward the Japanese for brutally ending their way of life, and hatred toward Indonesian militants for inflicting brutal violence in the early Revolutionary *bersiap* period, violence that was

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directed against alleged pro-colonial ethnic groups.[8] Japan and the Indone-
sian nationalists are blamed for breaking up what in retrospect becomes
a kind of paradise, the inherent racist character of which is forgotten or
downplayed. A new trauma for this group then becomes the passage to
the Netherlands and what today has become canonized as the "chilly" wel-
come given by the Dutch to these "repatriates." Here, there are stories of
racism and xenophobia and indignation about the Dutch lack of knowl-
edge and interest in their colonial background. There is overlap with the
totok insistence on back pay and their criticism of the Dutch government's
perceived overly conciliatory stance toward both Japan and Indonesia. But
in all of this, there is also a strong redemptive narrative: "With little Dutch
governmental support and in spite of wide public animosity, we smoothly
integrated, simply by outward accommodation." Coupled to this narrative
is a seemingly paradoxical sequence: "And no matter how much we pre-
tended to become Dutch all the way, deep down we fooled them by keeping
to our very own *Indo* culture, which today everyone in the Netherlands
appreciates!"[9] Perhaps this mixture of resentment of the chilly welcome
and pride in group achievement has elements of a cultural trauma—but
then again, it seems that this group's diversity in pre-migration characteris-
tics and post-migration experiences, coupled with high levels of exogamy,
precluded an enduring communitarian identification through the prism of
collective trauma.

Moving to the *Chinese-Indonesian community*, there simply seems to
be no trauma, no anger, no collective organization for anything but intra-
group reminiscing and networking. In contrast to the great number of
Indisch organizations founded by *totoks* and *Indo's* alike, there is little
organizational effort in the Chinese-Indonesian community, no political
fervor, no collective trauma and hence no need for a redemptive narra-
tive. The well-attended annual meetings of a recently established Chinese
Indonesian Heritage Centre are celebrations of colonial nostalgia and past
and present success stories rather than reflections on loss or injustice.[10]

[8] A late 1945, early 1946 phase in the Indonesian Revolution characterized by outbursts
of violence directed against ethnically defined victims, including Europeans, Eurasians and
Chinese.

[9] A personification of this *Indo* pride was the creative maverick and community leader Tjalie
Robinson. See Willems (2008).

[10] http://cihc.nl/.

The contrast with the *Moluccan community*, today probably comprising some 50,000 people, is poignant. This is a community marked by a long military history in the Dutch colonial army, even considered a "martial race" by the colonial authorities. The group's leading narrative is not about this lost war per se, but on the proverbial Moluccan support for Dutch colonialism and the postcolonial betrayal by these same Dutch. This betrayal is seen in the breaking up of the colonial army and the concomitant dismissal of the Moluccan soldiers; the failure to back the Moluccan struggle for an independent Moluccan republic (Republik Maluku Selatan, RMS); and the assumed Dutch responsibility for the faltering Moluccan integration in Dutch society. The trope of Dutch betrayal indeed may be considered the leading element in a Moluccan narrative of trauma. It is dubious, however, whether this trauma is recognized at all, let alone accepted, beyond the Dutch-Moluccan community. Ironically, the struggle for RMS has remained a powerful redemptive narrative: while in the 1970s violent actions (hijackings of trains and the occupation of schools and the Indonesian embassy) resulted only in defeat, the responsible youth still have a kind of hero status in the community for daring to pursue militant ideas. The Moluccan identification with the identity-building pursuits of the other postcolonial *Indisch* communities seems slight.[11]

The *Dutch veterans* are mainly a single-generation collectivity, now quickly fading away. During the war and its immediate aftermath, only a low proportion of all military men were reported to suffer from war-related trauma. In the decades after, until today, veterans continue to report their experience of individual trauma, yet this is not the central trope in the veterans' narrative. Rather, the focus is on anger and frustration directed against partly overlapping parties. Not surprisingly, the actual enemy was the main target of anger during the war, but there was also frustration about "weak" Dutch politicians failing to withstand international public opinion, the United Nations, and so on, and refusing to give the military commanders full powers to crush the enemy. During and particularly after the war, the Dutch government gradually became the main culprit for sending young and naïve soldiers to a war that was increasingly framed as "wrong" in the first place, as well as failing to both assist veterans with their reintegration into Dutch society and shield them from mounting accusations of war crimes. As the latter subject became a recurring theme in public

[11]On the Moluccan community, see Steijlen (2012).

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debates—and around 2010 even in Dutch court rooms—the veteran community also targeted the Dutch press and researchers for failing to understand how difficult their situation had been during the war and for refusing to believe that the soldiers had just done their duty in a professional way. While the dominant veteran narrative gradually allowed for more critical perspectives on the war, the redemptive narrative remained the same: "We were just sent there, we did our best to act humanely, only a few among us committed war crimes, we loved the country and its people, minus the 'terrorists.'" Yet, while resentment remained quite clearly a central element in veteran expression and lobbying, it would be an overstatement to say that these feelings were really constitutive for an endurable community based on shared trauma. The great majority simply moved on with their lives and were only belatedly given some sort of collective recognition by the Dutch state (Oostindie 2015b; see also Oostindie 2011: 88–91).

In all of this, the communities discussed above have addressed victimhood in highly selective ways. While they have been increasingly successful in their claim for proper commemoration of the Japanese occupation and the ensuing decolonization war, none of these collectivities has ever seriously proposed that the time might have come to also commemorate the far larger numbers of Indonesian military and civilian casualties of this period. Neither has the Dutch government, which has long prefered to keep a low profile. Instead, the government reacts to postcolonial migrants' claims only when such reaction is inevitable, rather than initiating engagement itself and thereby running the risk of divisive discussions about this episode in (post)colonial history. An analysis of colonial/postcolonial monuments in the public space erected by the Dutch state or cities since the 1950s provides a telling illustration. While dozens of such monuments were erected in memory of the European victims of the Japanese internment camps, of Dutch military casualties, and of the Moluccan soldiers of the colonial army, there is not one monument honoring the Indonesian victims of either the Japanese occupation or the ensuing war of decolonization. The only monuments explicitly denouncing Dutch colonialism deal with Dutch Atlantic history and target the trans-Atlantic slave trade and Caribbean slavery (Oostindie et al. 2011).

POLITICAL RESPONSES

It has become a cliché that the Dutch political response to the loss of empire was evidence of deep trauma. Political scientist Arend Lijphart introduced

this concept half a century ago in *The Trauma of Decolonization* (Lijphart 1966). Against strong opposition by the Indonesians, and notwithstanding reactions in international politics ranging from harsh criticism to friendly advice to give in, Dutch politicians continued to exclude New Guinea—today, Indonesian Papua—from the transfer of sovereignty. Nonetheless, in 1962 this last Asian territory was ceded after a tense period bordering on war in which a Dutch government unwilling to give in spoiled the sympathy even of its Western partners. Why this struggle for a lost cause, a former part of the colony that in itself had little substantial economic or geopolitical value? Perhaps there were minor strategic arguments, a vain hope of resettling the *Indisch* population there rather than in the Netherlands, and a belated sense of duty regarding the Papuan populations. But with compelling arguments, Lijphart maintains that the Dutch government, backed by broad segments of its population, reacted irrationally because of the deep humiliation caused by the loss of its colonial empire and harsh international criticism. Political trauma stood in the way of rational decision-making.

The Lijphart thesis has remained the leading paradigm since it was first argued, and it is often broadened to explain why it took Dutch politics, and society at large, many decades more to improve bilateral relations with Indonesia and to critically reflect on the entire process of decolonization—let alone colonialism—and specifically its own warfare in these years. And while there has been some revision of the Lijphart thesis lately, its overall validity still seems widely accepted and on solid ground (Stol 2017). Indeed, it took the passing away of the entire generation of responsible politicians before the Dutch cabinet could declare—sixty years later, in 2005—that from 1945 to 1949, the Dutch had fought "a war on the wrong side of history." And it took another decade before the Dutch government decided to generously finance an extensive research project on mass violence during the war, a decision reflecting the hesitant recognition that the Dutch army had been responsible for war crimes on a far more extensive scale than had hitherto been acknowledged.[12]

Ironically, deep-seated embarrassment over the way their predecessors had handled the decolonization of Indonesia would guide the way in which a subsequent generation of Dutch politicians managed the decolonization of the two last Dutch remnants of empire, both in the Caribbean. Suriname became independent in 1975 after negotiations in which Dutch

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[12] https://www.ind45-50.org/en.

leniency reflected a longing to make up for the previous fiasco and to accomplish a "model decolonization" instead. The fact that the six small Dutch Caribbean islands are still part of the Kingdom reflects both their own refusal to embrace the risky choice for full sovereignty and Dutch politicians' awareness that they cannot unilaterally impose independence.

However, trauma about loss of status and economic and geopolitical riches is not the whole story, nor are the later attempts to cover up the failure (or worse) of political and military leadership. Dutch debates and official gestures also, and increasingly, aim to respond to the sensitivities of the various "repatriate" communities. Initially, the Dutch government had no intention of developing such policies of reconciliation and inclusion. Both the *Indisch* community and the veterans were simply supposed to quickly (re-)integrate into Dutch society, to assimilate and to forget about the Dutch East Indies and the uncontrolled and violent ending of this history. But as collective organizing and lobbying within, and at times between each of these communities became successful after the 1970s, successive Dutch governments could not but respond. Financial concessions were made alongside symbolic gestures and national commemorations. The list is long and the compromises were uneasy, with the Dutch government affirming time and again that "this time" all accounts were settled, while community organizations were not satisfied and prepared for new rounds of lobbying. In these ongoing contestations, Dutch politicians were repeatedly reminded that the colonial past could not be shelved so easily.[13]

It has often been observed that colonial repatriates tend to lean toward rightist political parties and media in the metropolitan states. Thus, large segments of the repatriate French-Algerian *pied noir* community were sympathetic to, and even constitutive of France's Front National. In the Netherlands too, both the *Indisch* community and the veterans have encountered more sympathy from right-wing political parties and media and, conversely, have directed their lobbying activities predominantly at these institutions. Again, this is in stark contrast with the Caribbean communities that traditionally linked up more with leftist political parties.

[13]This process is analyzed at length in Oostindie (2011).

POSTCOLONIAL TRAUMA IN THE WIDER SOCIETY?

Do such governmental gestures imply that society at large was reacting in one way or another to decolonization and its aftermath? Do debates about colonialism and its legacies matter in narratives of the Dutch nation? And does the concept of "trauma" help us to understand such debates in Dutch society? None of this is immediately evident, and the theoretical concept of cultural trauma was not really developed with a view to understand or frame entire societies in the first place. Even so, thinking in terms of trauma might be helpful for analyzing what transpired in Dutch society over the past seventy years.

It should first be noted that while the Netherlands of the first half of the twentieth century may have been strongly divided among religious and political lines, it was a nearly all-white society with little immigration. Migration became an issue in the immediate postwar years for two contradictory reasons. Reasoning that the war-wrecked country was too densely populated, the government actively developed migration schemes for its own population, eventually helping some 300,000 emigrants to settle overseas in the first postwar decade. Roughly in the same period, a similar number of "repatriates" were allowed entry into the Netherlands. While the government felt that the arrival particularly of non-white migrants "rooted" in the tropical Indies was inopportune and should not be stimulated in any way, the official policy was that these migrants, as Dutch citizens, had every right to settle and should therefore be welcomed.

Something quite similar would transpire in the 1970s with Surinamese migrants "voting with their feet" against the independence of their country, and from the 1980s onwards with Antilleans taking advantage of their continued Dutch citizenship to settle in the metropolis. In all of these cases, there were strong behind-closed-doors doubts in Dutch politics and open misgivings and resentment in society. Be that as it may, a governmental framing that underlined the rights of these new immigrants as Dutch citizens prevailed. These were citizens that, unlike other immigrants, not only had the right of abode, but also could rhetorically claim, "We are here because you were there." In the end, even if they were confronted with xenophobia and racism, these migrants from the former empire benefited from what may be defined a "postcolonial bonus" (Oostindie 2011: 45–47). This bonus gave them an edge over other migrant communities developing over the same period, particularly those from Morocco and Turkey.

WIDER SOCIETY?

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Between 1945 and today, the Dutch population increased from 9 to over 17 million, some 12% of this increase comprised first-generation "non-Western" migrants and their children, either with a colonial background or from places such as Morocco, Turkey, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa. As elsewhere in Europe, migration, race/racism, and Islam have become markers of contemporary debates in society and politics alike, and these phenomena and the underlying forces of globalization have had a deep impact. Perhaps we may indeed speak of traumatic changes here—though we should be extremely cautious in using such strong terms. Some perceive the influx of immigrants, the consequent development of a multicultural society, and the presumed evaporation or even loss of Dutch national identity as disruptive to the point that one might use the adjective "traumatic." At the opposite pole, there is deep frustration over the loss of what was once heralded as the liberal and progressive tradition of Dutch society—ironically, a flattering self-framing overlooking, inter alia, a long history of racism and violence in the colonies. And between these poles there is an increasing debate raging as to what contemporary Dutch identity is and how colonial history fits with issues of migration, Islam, and race (e.g., Besamusca and Verheul 2014: 133–143).

But back to our initial questions: Did inclusive political gestures to the repatriates from the Dutch East Indies imply that society at large was reacting in one way or another toward decolonization or postcolonial migrants? This is not evident at all. Politicians may have felt the weight of responsibility to make up for failing politics, but judging from the collective memory of the so-called "*Indisch* generation," both repatriates and veterans, public interest was never particularly high. Most Dutch apparently have no clue and simply do not care. No interest, no sense of loss, no need to come to terms. It is as if colonialism had not happened at all.

There is a growing body of scholarly literature dealing with what historian Ann Stoler—speaking of France in her specific case—refers to as "colonial aphasia," the incapacity of a former colonial state and society to speak of colonial history and to accept it as part and parcel of its own past.[14] In the Netherlands too, not only activists, but also scholars have pointed out the apparent unwillingness or incapability to recognize and internalize the idea that colonialism, and hence racism and violence, is an integral part

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[14]"It is not a matter of ignorance or absence. Aphasia is a dismembering, a difficulty speaking, a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things" (Stoler 2011: 125).

of Dutch history since its establishment as an independent state (c. 1600) (e.g., Bijl 2012; Schulte Nordholt 2002). Why this should be so in the Dutch case is a matter of debate. Clearly all nations tend to downplay their own historical wrongs. But for the Netherlands, there is also this particular dominant narrative in which the nation understands itself both as an early-modern beacon of democracy and toleration, as non-belligerent and neutral in European wars ever since 1815, and as a twentieth-century victim of Nazi brutality. Neither narrative sits well with the historical realities of Dutch colonialism and of Dutchmen not only as victims, but also equally as perpetrators of violence. In recent years there have been fierce indictments of the incomplete and distorted character of the hegemonic narrative, and with some exaggeration one might even say that coming to terms with this inconvenient truth is something of a traumatic process for many Dutch participants in these debates, including institutions such as politics, academia, and the media. So far, if Dutch politics at least has produced a "perpetrator trauma" with the corresponding narratives of guilt and remorse, this is related more to the historically distant centuries of the African slave trade, Atlantic slavery, and Dutchmen whom nobody remembers, than to the more recent period of warfare in Indonesia, in which a whole generation of identifiable Dutchmen was drawn into a colonial war—which included war crimes that make a mockery of rosy ideas about Dutch exceptionalism (Eyerman 2019).

Whether we should understand this process of colonial amnesia as the result of conscious politics or of a more opaque, subconscious process is, again, a matter of debate. When it comes to the issue of Dutch war crimes during the 1945–1949 war and the responsibility of the Dutch military, judicial, and ultimately political leadership, it is becoming increasingly clear that during and immediately after the war there was a deliberate policy of covering up in order to protect both direct perpetrators and those higher up. The emerging Cold War only stimulated this process—the Dutch Communist Party had been the only political party staunchly attacking colonialism, the war itself, and particular war crimes. It is also likely that after the traumatic "loss" of the Dutch East Indies, Dutch politicians did help to relegate colonialism and decolonization to the margins of Dutch educational and cultural policies. The Netherlands reinvented itself as simply European, erasing the chapters on the colonies from its youth's history and geography textbooks, and ultimately working to "move on."

In this context, postcolonial migrants were unexpected and barely welcome reminders of a colonial history that was no longer seen as heroic and

should better be forgotten. Again, judging from what might be defined as the cultural repertoire of the *Indisch* community, this was the second traumatic experience after the unwanted departure from the colony: the encounter with a metropolis that not only did not seem to care, but also refused to acknowledge its colonial past. A similar complaint would later be voiced by postcolonial migrants from the Caribbean, all descendants from either enslaved Africans or Asian indentured laborers once brought to these colonies by the Dutch.

In reaction, postcolonial communities formulated counter-memories and advocated their inclusion in the narrative of the Dutch nation. The past two decades or so have witnessed a return of colonial history and its legacies in political and public debates, mounting interest in the fields of education, the mass media, museums, and the arts, and a series of governmental monuments, commemorations, and gestures. We may debate to what extent all of this reflects a growing *general* interest in colonialism, but at least there now seems to be more willingness in government, academia, and the media to face up to this past. And all of this is powerful enough to have provided a serious chauvinistic backlash over the past few years.

The rediscovery of colonial history is also part of a broader phenomenon of postcolonial communities' identity politics. Very crudely, in accordance with memory claims of repatriates, emic postwar imaginings of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia long referred to a paradise lost. Trauma was associated not with colonialism, but with the loss of colonial life and forced repatriation. Consequently a critical stance toward the Dutch decolonization policy and war was long marginalized. In contrast, memory claims from the Dutch Caribbean community with their focus on the trauma of racial slavery and its presumed legacies produced a totally different counter-memory. In official parlance and gestures, such highly contradictory memory claims were, and are, mostly simply juxtaposed without serious attempts to bring these various narratives into conversation. This falls short of taking colonial history and its contemporary legacy serious (Oostindie 2011: Ch. 5).

A Generational Transfer of Memory and Trauma?

Today's postcolonial communities are not the same as they were seventy years ago, and neither is Dutch society at large. The passing of generations deeply impacts all communities, adding to the diversity that already set them apart from one another in the first place. Consistently high levels of exogamy reinforced the progressive integration of the various postcolonial

communities in Dutch society. Integration does not equal assimilation, and it may even be argued that successful integration was key to making Dutch politics and media sensitive to colonial history and postcolonial identification and cultures in the first place. At the same time, Dutch society became ethnically and culturally more diverse, enabling a more open perspective on Dutch identity but also sparking more exclusionary discourses on national belonging.

Where is this process heading? We may start answering this question by looking at the broader societal context. Like all former European colonial powers, the Netherlands has experienced a contradictory process in which hegemonic national narratives have become more inclusive of postcolonial migrants and hence colonial histories, while such narratives are at the same time unsettled by exclusionary "patriotic"—and sometimes racist—narratives. However, in contrast to the United Kingdom and even more so France, there is little overlap in the Netherlands between the "postcolonial" and "Muslim" communities. This is significant in the sense that Islam and (anti)colonialism are perceived as separate entities, which is quite remarkable if we bear in mind how crucial religion actually was all along. Indeed, debates about colonial history sidestep this presently volatile issue. In short, not being Muslim and not having to talk about Islam makes it easier for postcolonial migrants in the Netherlands to articulate claims about colonial history as an integral part of national history.

In the Dutch case, talking about one's own or one's forebears' colonial history and emphasizing one's postcolonial identity seems to be more about choice, increasingly so with the passing of generations, and even more so as these generations are becoming more diverse through exogamy. Choice, in other words, in being able to decide for oneself to what extent (post)colonial roots are crucial to one's identification. This room for choice seems rooted in place, but there is an important caveat here, which is the significance society allots to "race." It seems that with regard to the *Indisch* community this is less of an issue than for the predominantly African-originated Caribbean community that did produce a resounding narrative of slavery trauma and indictments of colonialism, racism, and "white innocence" (Wekker 2016).[15]

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[15] The Netherlands has long preferred to think of itself as a colorblind society, and even when second thoughts on this became increasingly appropriate over the past decades, xenophobia was usually linked to aversion to Islam rather than to racial issues. But lately, precisely in reaction to Caribbean Dutch actions denouncing racist elements in Dutch popular culture

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As for the successive generations within the *Indisch* postcolonial community, one might assume a decreasing importance of personal trauma, if any at all. The first generation went through the ordeal of the Japanese occupation, the violence of decolonization, an undesired "repatriation," a chilly welcome, and a difficult start in the Netherlands. Many of the memories and artistic renderings of the second generation deal with their parents' pain and grudges and the impact this burden had on them—and in both generations, trauma is implicitly part of this experience. But by now the first generation is dying out, and we are already looking at the fourth and fifth generations. *Personal* trauma seems less likely here, even if there may be strong identification with the loss experienced by the first generations. At annual commemorations of the war in Indonesia that started it all, one may observe many young *Indisch* people accompanying their grandparents, but in their own lives the colony seems to live on highly eclectically and in a festive way rather than in a mode of anger or even redemption.

Within the much smaller and more tightly knit Dutch-Moluccan community, collective memory and trauma seem to be more present and more actively transferred across the generations. While there is no narrative of return within the *Indisch* community, Moluccans still cling to their annual ceremonies commemorating the unwanted landing and demobilization in the Netherlands, the proclamation of the RMS, and the rendering of homage to the young militants who had engaged in armed political struggle during the 1970s. All of this speaks of deep trauma and a self-identification across generations, factors indicating that the transition from colonial to postcolonial is the central episode in their collective history. One wonders how this will develop in a context in which the Dutch and Indonesian governments alike have long ceased to address claims for an independent RMS seriously and in which contemporary Moluccan frustration feeds just as much on faltering integration within the Netherlands.

The veteran community went through its most active time as a commemorative community in the past few decades. Self-organization became more important since the 1970s and eventually forced the Dutch government to develop a veteran policy. Trauma at an individual level referred mainly to

such as Zwarte Piet (Black Pete), social media in particular have aired a highly disturbing avalanche of anti-black racism. In much the same vein, a critical take on the Dutch slavery past is denounced as unpatriotic in these circles. It is highly unlikely that this attitude will be picked up in government, but the message such bigotry sends is appalling and may well feed frustration and even feelings of trauma within the Caribbean community.

classic post-combat stress, often experienced many decades later. At a collective level, trauma was expressed rather more in reaction to debates about the war and particularly war crimes. There was deep frustration about recent debates incriminating the veteran community for war crimes, but equally about the perceived lack of government leadership and support, both during the war and in its aftermath. Throughout its active existence the veteran community was successful in making itself heard in debates about the war, but now this unique generation is dying out. While there is some interest in the second and third generations to keep their story alive, this is afar afield from the emotional investment evident in the *Indisch* and Moluccan communities.

POSTSCRIPT

Communities remember and make memory-claims in order to express their existence as a separate group, while at the same time affirming that their histories have a right to full representation in the wider entity they belong to, usually a state that somehow is a nation too—an entity made up of narratives that should bind even if they might just as well divide.

This chapter is mainly about the diverse community of "repatriates" and demobilized Dutch veterans that made the transition from the former Dutch East Indies to the Netherlands in the mid-twentieth century. The present analysis remains somewhat detached, discussing the contours of a history stretching back at least some seventy years without discussing in any depth the piles of memoirs, archives full of interviews, and scores of films, novels, and other works of art covering similar ground with more nuance and emotion. But even so, this chapter gives an idea of how these groups articulated their own, sometimes traumatic experiences of loss and exclusion and how they claimed a place in the wider narrative of Dutch identity and history. This claim did not rest easily with a tendency—in Dutch society at large and specifically in Dutch politics—to simply forget about colonial history altogether.

And so new debates about colonialism, its place in Dutch history, and its legacy in the contemporary Netherlands emerged. This debate can only be properly understood in the broader context of the subsequent postcolonial migrations from the Dutch Caribbean; other non-colonial migrations; the transition of the Netherlands toward a multicultural society that for decades refused to understand itself as such; and the faltering process of European unification.

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This chapter illustrates that successful claims to a fair share in the narra-
tive of national history is contingent upon serious organization and lobby-
ing. Recognition may alleviate the sense of being a victim of (post)colonial
history, while the lack of such recognition may spark or strengthen feelings
of being victimized and left out. But claims need not hinge on victimhood
exclusively, or at all. Postcolonial migrants may also choose to emphasize
their ancestors' strength and creativity in overcoming the constraints of
colonialism, thus constructing a narrative of redemption and contribution
to diversity instead of victimhood.

While the Dutch case has all kinds of ideographic detail, there is an
obvious wider European dimension to this debate. Many former European
states face the challenge of dealing with their colonial past and their own
past and present record of racism. This in itself is a painful process, for as
Aleida Assman writes, "For post-imperial nations the fall from greatness
and power is difficult, because a self-celebrating narrative also functions
as a protection screen against uncomfortable memories and questions"
(Assman 2015: 178). Difficult or painful as it may be, this need not be
traumatic. There is always the reassuring option of refusing to look back
or recognize the colonial past for what it was—or to simply conclude that
those were different times and different co-patriots with whom we cannot
share responsibility today, let alone guilt. This seems to be the dominant
perspective in Dutch society, an antidote to any cultural trauma that might
arise should we link centuries of colonialism to the core characteristics of
Dutch culture.

Those states that experienced the postwar settlement of substantial post-
colonial migrant communities have generally been slightly more forth-
coming in acknowledging and rethinking colonialism than former colonial
states without significant postcolonial communities. In all cases, the open-
ness of the former metropolitan societies to postcolonial claim making
changed over time, and this process most likely will not proceed in a linear
or identical fashion in all places. It falls upon postcolonial states to assure
that open spaces for debate about the inconvenient realities of colonial-
ism and its canonization are maintained somewhere between the poles of
extreme chauvinism and the memory wars that lead to a balkanization of
memory (Buettner 2016; Oostinde 2011: Ch. 7; Rothermund 2015).

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