Comments on the BMGN forum on the Indonesia research (ODGOI)

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GERT OOSTINDIE, BEN SCHOENMAKER AND FRANK VAN VREE

In response to the BMGN forum dedicated to the research programme on Dutch violence during the Indonesian War of Independence (ODGOI), we would like to address the four points on which the authors' criticism focuses: the research question and programme design; cooperation with Indonesia and the inclusion of Indonesian perspectives; dynamics within the Dutch research group; and the terminology used. We conclude this contribution by looking to the future.

In deze repliek op het BMGN-forum over het onderzoeksprogramma over Nederlands geweld tijdens de Indonesische Onafhankelijkheidsoorlog (ODGOI) willen wij ingaan op vier punten waarop de kritiek van de auteurs zich voornamelijk richt, namelijk: de vraagstelling en de opzet van het programma; de samenwerking met Indonesië en ruimte voor Indonesische perspectieven; de dynamiek binnen de Nederlandse onderzoeksgroep; en ten slotte de gebruikte terminologie. Wij besluiten deze bijdrage met een blik op de toekomst.

Introduction[1]

Science thrives on open debate, and for that reason alone we are grateful to the editors of *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* for their initiative in organising a discussion forum on the design, process and outcomes of the research into Dutch violence during the Indonesian War of Independence.[2] We are writing this reply at the request of *BMGN – LCHR* in our role as former research leaders; in the process we have also involved several other researchers from the programme.

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We are pleased to note that the *BMGN – LCHR* editorial board and the majority of authors who contributed to the forum appreciate the results of the research, including its political and social significance for the Netherlands. That said, this response will focus primarily on the critical comments, which we generally consider to be constructive. However, we note that the forum contributions to *BMGN – LCHR* are mainly limited to the summary volume *Over de grens/Beyond the Pale/Melewati batas* and a few sub-studies. While this may have been unavoidable to some extent, it fails to do justice to the dozen or so books published in the context of the programme in 2022 and 2023.[3] Furthermore, important themes explored in this series are not given sufficient exposure (Figure 1). This is reflected in some of the criticism in the *BMGN* forum, including with regard to the sensitive topic of the so-called bersiap.

In this brief reply, we will address the main points of the criticism without seeking to exonerate ourselves entirely. From the outset of the programme, we recognised that certain aspects could have been handled differently and better. Sometimes it was possible to make adjustments, but in other cases it was more difficult to change course once we had embarked on a particular path. At the same time, the *BMGN* forum contains criticisms that require nuance, explanation, or decisive contradiction. Our response will focus on four main points: (1) the research question and programme design; (2) cooperation with Indonesia and inclusion of Indonesian perspectives; (3) dynamics within the Dutch research group; and (4) terminology. We conclude this reply by looking to the future.

The research question and design

Several contributions to the forum note that the research programme focuses almost exclusively on issues relating to the Netherlands, and therefore derives its importance primarily from the Dutch social and political context. While this is largely true, it is not a surprising observation. The programme's primary focus on Dutch issues is explained in detail in the introductory section of *Beyond the Pale*, and is rooted in the history of its very origins. This began in 2012 with a joint call by the institutes KITLV, NIMH and NIOD for an

1 The reply can be read in Dutch on the *BMGN* website and in the printed issue 140:3 (2025). DOI: https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.24448.

2 'Forum on Decolonisation and Violence in Indonesia: Examining the ODGOI Project ("Onafhankelijkheid, Dekolonisatie, Geweld en Oorlog in Indonesië"/ "Independence, Decolonisation, Violence and War in Indonesia, 1945-1950")', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 140:2 (2025) 32-101. DOI: https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.19564.

3 All publications in Dutch are available in Open Access, see https://www.aup.nl/en/series/onafhankelijkheid-dekolonisatie-geweld-en-oorlog-in-indonesie-1945-1950.

Figure 1. An impression of the twelve studies that appeared as part of the research programme. Cover of the brochure for booksellers and press, Januari 2022. © Design by Bart van de Tooren. Published by Amsterdam University Press.

in-depth investigation into Dutch military operations in Indonesia between 1945 and 1949. The call was addressed to the government and parliament, and the main argument was that recently published journalistic and scientific research, as well as the court ruling on the Rawagede massacre, showed that the government's position that there had only been isolated incidents of excessive violence by the Dutch armed forces during the war in Indonesia, which it had maintained since 1969, was no longer tenable.

When, after much hesitation and partly in response to Rémy Limpach's book *De brandende kampongs van Generaal Spoor* (The Burning Kampongs of General Spoor), the Dutch government finally decided at the end of 2016 to allocate funds for such an investigation, it made perfect sense that the issue of violence by the Dutch armed forces would be the focal point. While this did limit the scope of the programme, as several critical reviews pointed out, the central question concerning the nature of Dutch military action was broadened through discussion and growing insight to encompass the context in which that action could be explained. This included the historical context of colonialism, as well as the international, political, legal, and military contexts in the Netherlands and Indonesia at the time. Additionally, it was decided to analyse Dutch actions from an international comparative perspective.

The broader colonial context, in particular, has been the subject of serious criticism since the inception of the research and, once again, in several contributions to the *BMGN* forum. Because of its focus on the years 1945-1949, the programme is accused of paying insufficient attention to the profound impact of three centuries of colonialism, and of studying the military action of that period too much as an isolated phenomenon. Given the significant difference in expectations expressed in some of these criticisms, it is difficult to refute this. Thematic and chronological limitations are inherent in scientific research, and this programme is no exception. Nevertheless, the impact of the colonial context and traditions is examined in detail wherever possible throughout the study, beginning in the introductory section of *Beyond the Pale*, and also in *Tales of Violence* by Remco Raben and Peter Romijn (2023), for example. In both the final work and the various sub-studies, compelling arguments are presented to show that persistent colonial thinking was a major factor in Dutch political, military, and legal actions during this period.

Following the government's decision to allocate funds for new historical research, the original 2012 research design was further developed by the management of the three institutes and discussed with officials from the relevant ministries. For the NIMH, this was Piet Kamphuis, who was Ben Schoenmaker's predecessor at the time. It is a persistent misunderstanding that certain programme components were imposed during this process. The only new component introduced during these discussions, for which additional funding was provided, was the sub-programme 'Getuigen en

Tijdgenoten' ('Witnesses and Contemporaries'), which will be discussed further later on.

The desire to cooperate with Indonesian historians was explicitly expressed by the institutes themselves, while the bersiap theme was considered an obvious element in the programme from the outset. This was not only because the bersiap played a significant role in the debates at the time and in the subsequent culture of remembrance in the Netherlands, but also because it was used as an argument to justify the Dutch policy of recapture and the violence that accompanied it. Despite the suggestion that bersiap research reflects an overly Dutch perspective, the outcome of *Het geluid van geweld. Bersiap en de dynamiek van geweld tijdens de eerste fase van de Indonesische revolutie, 1945-1946* (Resonance of Violence: Bersiap and the Dynamics of Violence in the First Phase of the Indonesian Revolution) by Esther Captain and Onno Sinke convincingly dispels common Dutch perceptions of this episode. While many critics in the Netherlands have failed to recognise the innovative nature of this work, historians in Indonesia were surprised by the scope of this comparative study of violence in the first phase of the War of Independence. Notably, prominent historian Hilmar Farid considered this research to be of great importance for the Indonesian debate about the violence during the War of Independence.[4]

Once the grant had been awarded and the research group formed, the draft research programme was discussed within the Dutch group and with the Indonesian colleagues, resulting in a number of changes. The most significant change was the Indonesian colleagues' indication that they wanted to pursue their own research agenda. Rather than focusing on Dutch military violence, they wanted to explore the socio-cultural history of the Indonesian Revolution, including gender issues, a topic which they considered to be much more interesting and relatively unexplored. The 'Regional Studies' sub-programme therefore had two strands: socio-cultural and political research projects by Indonesian historians, and case studies by Dutch historians examining the characteristics and dynamics of violent action in several regions. These were ultimately brought together in the collection *Revolutionary Worlds/Dunia Revolusi* (2023).

4 See Hilmar Farid, 'Dealing with the Legacies of a Violent Past', in: *Beyond the Pale: Dutch Extreme Violence in the Indonesian War of Independence, 1945-1949* (Amsterdam University Press 2022) 473-485. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048557172-006. Also, for example, in interviews, including with ANP on 17 February 2022. The contributions by Grace Leksana and Farabi Fakih to the BMGN forum also point in this direction. Grace T. Leksana, 'Reconsidering Revolutionary "Heroes" and Histories of Violence in Indonesia', *BMGN – LCHR* 140:2 (2025) 69-79. DOI: https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.19565; Farabi Fakih, 'Decolonial Dialogue and the Intricacies of Revolutionary Violence', *BMGN – LCHR* 140:2 (2025) 59-68. DOI: https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.19568.

Another important change concerned the title of the research programme. Originally called 'Decolonisation, violence and war in Indonesia, 1945-1949', it was changed to 'Independence, decolonisation, violence and war in Indonesia, 1945-1949' after consultation with the Indonesian researchers involved. This new title was abbreviated to ODGOI. Adding the word 'independence' recognised the Indonesian perspective that independence had been achieved on 17 August 1945 and had to be defended against Dutch attempts at 'recolonisation' over the next four years. Nevertheless, this did not alter the core focus of the Dutch programme, which remained centred on determining the nature of Dutch military action, particularly the extreme violence, and seeking explanations for it.

Cooperation with Indonesia, the Indonesian perspective and use of sources

The reflections in *BMGN* raise many valid points about cooperation between Indonesian and Dutch historians within and around the research programme. It is clear that this collaboration did not progress as we had imagined. The reasons for this are complex, but we must admit that we were somewhat naive in a number of respects and underestimated the potential political and practical obstacles. We would certainly approach things differently now, starting with a longer preparation period and more extensive consultation.

A salient factor in the collaboration was the explicit desire of the Indonesian historians to pursue their own line of research. This desire was also motivated by circumstances, as Dutch research was viewed with suspicion in some Indonesian government circles as a possible attempt to whitewash the Dutch reputation. This same suspicion also led to several Dutch researchers being denied access to the archives.

Consequently, the Indonesian historians with whom we collaborated were keen to establish their own research agendas and to demonstrate their autonomy from Dutch control or influence. Nevertheless, a close collaboration developed, with joint workshops, discussion meetings and publications, which ultimately enriched the entire research project considerably – as emphasised in the two Indonesian contributions to the *BMGN* forum by Grace Leksana and Farabi Fakih.[5]

This collaboration could have been considerably more intensive had it not been for the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on travel and meetings for almost two years. This circumstance appears to have escaped the attention of many critics of the programme, yet it had a significant influence on its ultimate implementation. One of the consequences of the pandemic was that much of the fieldwork, encompassing both archival research and on-

5 See note 4.

site oral history interviews, was substantially impeded. Nevertheless, several researchers, in collaboration with Indonesian colleagues, have succeeded in bringing Indonesian perspectives to the fore through oral history and the use of Indonesian literature and archives, as in *Grof geschut* (Iron Fist, 2023), the study by Azarja Harmanny, whose bibliography contains eighty Indonesian-language titles. In *Tasten in het duister* (*Stumbling in the Dark*, 2023), Rémy Limpach uses Indonesian sources to offer a reconstruction of the operations of the Indonesian intelligence services, which have hitherto received little scholarly attention. In this context, we should particularly mention the fascinating collection *Sporen vol betekenissen/Meniti Arti* (2022), edited by Eveline Buchheim, Satrio (Ody) Dwicahyo, Fridus Steijlen and Stephanie Welvaart, which is discussed in the *BMGN* forum contributions by Katharine McGregor and Grace Leksana.[6]

The collaboration between Dutch and Indonesian researchers also extended to more fundamental issues. For instance, as the programme progressed, in-depth deliberations were convened on terminology, multi-perspectivity and polyphony. These discussions not only fostered enhanced mutual collaboration but also furnished the research with a shared historiographical foundation. Whilst it may not have been immediately apparent to external observers, there was, in reality, an increasing level of collaboration between researchers in the Netherlands and Indonesia, notwithstanding the numerous obstacles and limitations that were in place. This collaboration was more extensive than some critics have suggested.

Notwithstanding the challenges posed by obstacles such as the global pandemic, we could have done better. Firstly, it would have been prudent to determine the research design collaboratively from the outset. Unfortunately there was limited room for this in the political turmoil surrounding a *Dutch* lobby for financial support for a *Dutch* research project. Moreover, the Indonesian government's stance on this initiative was characterised by a degree of scepticism, and at times, even reluctance.

The dynamics of the process

In addressing the organisation and dynamics of the research process, we should specifically address the points raised in Anne-Lot Hoek's forum contribution in *BMGN – LCHR*.[7] In the passages under scrutiny, the author

6 Katharine McGregor, 'Silences and Memories of the Indonesian Revolution and Dutch Colonialism', *BMGN–LCHR* 140:2 (2025) 80-88. DOI: https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.19569; Leksana, 'Reconsidering Revolutionary "Heroes"'.

7 Anne-Lot Hoek, 'Power and the Production of History: Reflections on the Process and Outcomes of the ODGOI Project', *BMGN–LCHR* 140:2 (2025) 43-58. DOI: https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.19566.

presents a rather bleak picture of the relationships within ODGOI. In some instances, the image is even distorted, as evidenced by her claim that the researchers received minimal support and assistance. This assertion is both unfounded and confrontational in nature. The organisation endeavoured to protect and defend the researchers involved against frequent, often verbal, abuse from outside. For example, it organised resilience training for researchers.

It would be imprudent to delve into the intricacies of all the remarks concerning the internal dynamics within the programme and the research group, of which Hoek, as she herself acknowledges, was a member for a considerable period. Of particular importance are the issues that directly affect the process and have had an impact on the outcomes.

Firstly, it can be concluded that the Dutch research group exhibited a 'dual' character. On the one hand, as Hoek emphasises, the group's diversity was indeed relatively limited, particularly in terms of gender and ethnic-cultural background; on the other hand, the 28 researchers constituted a highly diverse group in terms of age, experience, scientific approaches and specialisations. Consequently, it is unsurprising that within the programme there was a range of diverse views. In the initial phase of the research, these differences gave rise to internal tensions, which came to a head around the original intention to produce a single-authored concluding synthesis. Indeed, as Hoek describes, these tensions escalated significantly at some point during the programme.

However, what Hoek's contribution fails to adequately convey is that the programme did indeed resolve this crisis in terms of both organisation and content, with the result that a joint conclusion could be presented in February 2022 and that only one researcher withdrew from the programme during the entire process – Hoek herself, who reduced her role to that of researcher in the 'Regional Studies' sub-project. The programme's capacity to surmount the internal crisis was chiefly attributable to the open, lively and ultimately fruitful discussions and the collaborative decision-making that ensued. Two pivotal moments in this process can be identified: firstly, the decision not to present the conclusions in the form of a single-authored work but in a joint collection; and secondly, the aforementioned substantive discussions on terms and perspectives, together with the Indonesian historians, which created a common ground for the final phase of the research programme. It is primarily these discussions that are referred to in various publications when it comes to the pursuit of polyphony and multiperspectivity.

Extreme violence, war crimes and impunity

In the concluding *BMGN* forum contribution, Susie Protschky and Pepijn Brandon focus primarily on the terms 'extreme violence' and

'impunity'.[8] It is asserted that the initial term has not been adequately conceptualised. However, the authors do not specify what exactly is lacking in the conceptual framework of the research, despite the term in question being clearly defined and operationalised. It is important to note that the term 'extremely violent societies' was first coined by Christian Gerlach in the field of violence studies.[9] As Protschky and Brandon themselves write, the researchers within ODGOI utilise the term 'extreme violence' as a blanket term that can be used to describe many forms of violence that can be considered transgressive according to the moral and legal standards of the time. It is acknowledged that the delineation of this boundary is not always clear, and that the term 'extreme violence' is therefore characterised by a certain vagueness. However, it would be just as erroneous to attribute culpability to the researchers for this as it would be to blame the empiricist for the fact that the practice of violence was multifaceted, diffuse and complex, and that it is difficult to categorise and often difficult to reconstruct completely, partly due to the problem of incomplete or contradictory sources. It is therefore vital that such a term be 'sufficiently vague' to allow for its application.

Protschky and Brandon also raise the question of 'whether or not "war crimes" would have been a more appropriate designation for at least some of the actions by Dutch political and military authorities and Dutch armed forces' (91). This point has also been raised by other critics, often in the form of the accusation that the programme used veiled language by largely avoiding this term. In some cases, political motivations have been suspected. This is a curious accusation, given that *Beyond the Pale* and the sub-studies explicitly address murder, torture, rape, arson, excessive bombing and other grave offences. As far as we are concerned, there should be no misunderstanding that some of the violence used by the Dutch during the Indonesian War of Independence – certainly by current legal standards – deserves to be classified as war crimes. Nevertheless, the notion of extreme violence encompasses acts that are less readily classified, yet are nonetheless characterised by their problematic nature. The concept's inherent vagueness, as previously stated, engenders a broad spectrum of violent acts, exhibiting varied patterns and motivations, perpetrated under diverse circumstances. These acts are indicative of the intricacies inherent in the Indonesian War of Independence.

Ultimately, Protschky and Brandon's objection to the term 'extreme violence' seems to concern not so much its conceptual vagueness as the

8 Susie Protschky and Pepijn Brandon, 'Forum on Decolonisation and Violence in Indonesia: Examining the ODGOI Project ("Onafhankelijkheid, dekolonisatie, geweld en oorlog in Indonesië"/"Independence, Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia, 1945-1950")', *BMGN–LCHR* 140:2 (2025) 32-42. DOI: https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.19564.

9 Christian Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies: Mass Violence in the Twentieth-Century World* (Cambridge University Press 2010).

suggestion that its use seems to evoke, namely that there is also such a thing as ordinary, normal or accepted violence. By taking this course of action, the researchers would be implicitly seeking to legitimise a part of the violence perpetrated during the colonial period. Protschky and Brandon posit that the most significant – and morally acceptable – distinction that can be made is between the violence used by the coloniser and the violence used by the colonised to end that oppression. While this distinction may be considered (morally) tenable, Protschky and Brandon offer no elaboration on its implications or its practical application. It must be acknowledged that the issue gives rise to a considerable number of questions. Does this mean, for example, that torture, the arbitrary killing of prisoners, or other atrocities committed by the Indonesian armed forces in the period 1945-1950 – which were often directed against their 'own' Indonesian citizens – should be considered morally acceptable because they were committed by a party pursuing a legitimate goal? And does this mean that all Dutch violence, from an exchange of fire in response to an ambush to deliberate artillery fire on civilian targets, should be judged by the same moral standards, because the violence came from the party that fought 'on the wrong side of history'?

It is our contention that any discussion of violence and its application – in any setting whatsoever – is impossible without an ethical and legal compass. The objective of neutrality in the description and interpretation of violence is, in our opinion, an impossible undertaking. A significant guideline for the research programme was the norms, values and principles laid down in the humanitarian laws of war of the time. It should be noted that these were codified by Western colonial powers themselves, including the well-known distinction between *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. In relation to the question of *jus ad bellum*, the primary objective of the researchers was to emphasise the disparities between the Indonesian and Dutch viewpoints. The primary point of contention pertained to the question of the significance to be ascribed to the declaration of independence of 17 August 1945. This is a contentious issue that, despite the belated Dutch acknowledgement of having engaged in an 'unjust' war, cannot, by definition, be resolved retroactively.

The ODGOI programme, with its focus on extreme violence, is chiefly concerned with *jus in bello*. For us, the question of *how* the Netherlands engaged in and conducted this 'wrong' war in and against Indonesia is of great importance. With what means, what methods and what forms of violence? Our main conclusion, namely that the Dutch armed forces used extreme violence on a structural basis, is separate from the observation that the Netherlands engaged in a war with the objective of recapturing and reoccupying a former colony, as explicitly articulated in the conclusions of *Beyond the Pale*. This clinical observation does not alter the fact that, as Protschky and Brandon rightly point out, the colonial context cannot be ignored when interpreting the violence. Again, the colonial tradition of violence and the racism associated with it are indeed considered an important

explanatory factor in *Beyond the Pale*. In that respect, Protschky and Brandon are getting exactly what they want, and from that perspective their criticism is difficult to understand.

The second term that is discussed at length in Protschky and Brandon's review is 'impunity'. The assertion that impunity is cited by researchers as the sole or most important explanation for the structural use of extreme violence is, however, erroneous. In *Beyond the Pale*, it is posited that this violence must be explained by a complex set of factors; Raben and Romijn mention no fewer than nine in their study. In the same vein, Thijs Brocades Zaalberg and Bart Luttikhuis argue in the collection *Empire's Violent End: Comparing Dutch, British, and French Wars of Decolonisation, 1945-1962* (2022) that – when it comes to the causes of extreme violence – impunity 'emerged as a spider in the causal web' (16), indicating its role as an underlying factor in the interconnection of multiple elements that collectively contributed to the understanding of the extreme violence observed. The primary objective of this subproject was to undertake an international comparison of wars of decolonisation. The findings indicated that impunity – defined as a combination of allowing, concealing, looking away, tolerating, not naming and not punishing – was a crucial condition for the emergence and perpetuation of a culture in which extreme violence could thrive. This is different from identifying 'impunity' as the sole or most important explanation for extreme violence, as Protschky and Brandon argue. Finally, we do not see how emphasising the role of 'impunity' would seem to absolve individual soldiers of their responsibility for the atrocities they committed, as Protschky and Brandon argue. On the other hand this does not negate the necessity of examining the structural underpinnings of extreme violence. In order to comprehend its multifaceted nature, it is imperative to recognise the pivotal roles and responsibilities of leading military personnel, politicians, and judicial authorities. This is precisely the approach that we adopted.

The future

To mark the publication of the Indonesian translations of the collections *Beyond the Pale* and *Revolutionary Worlds* – the collection *Sporen vol betekenis/ Meniti arti* had previously been published as a bilingual work – a group of Indonesian and Dutch researchers embarked on a lecture tour of a large number of Indonesian universities in September 2023. The Dutch researchers repeatedly emphasised the extent to which the programme underlying *Beyond the Pale* was tailored to address Dutch questions, many of which were deemed less pertinent in the Indonesian context. From this perspective, *Beyond the Pale* should primarily be regarded as a belated but necessary conclusion to an era in which Dutch society and politics, as well as many historians, had clung to colonial ideas.

In that respect, *Revolutionary Worlds* stood for something different, as became clear during a symposium at Universitas Gadjah Mada in Yogyakarta. The collection was regarded as a potential resource for future research endeavours, with a focus on the exploration of novel themes and a range of multifaceted sources that transcend the confines of colonial frameworks, sources and perspectives – as the result of a long overdue joint effort in an equal collaboration between Indonesian and Dutch researchers.

If we understand them correctly, both the Dutch and Indonesian authors participating in the *BMGN* forum have put forward a comparable argument. This assertion is one with which we can only concur. From this perspective, ODGOI was no more than a first step, an attempt to 'right past wrongs' (492), in the words of Hilmar Farid in his epilogue to *Beyond the Pale*. Farid drew parallels with the restitution of museum collections acquired under colonial conditions. But that too was no more than a first step, he argued during a symposium on that theme: it is not only about the restitution of objects, but also about knowledge production, the continued critical examination of history and, when necessary, its revision, and the process of coming to terms with past injustices – and this revision is a joint task.

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