

**Notes from symposium on
teaching the decolonisation of Indonesia/Dutch East Indies (1945-9)
held on Friday 3 November 2017 at Landgoed Bronbeek**

1. Welcome – Gerdi Verbeet (*Chair of National Committee of 4 and 5 May*)

One of Verbeet's History teachers could always reliably be distracted by being asked to tell his students about his experiences during the Second World War and just after in the Dutch East Indies, but it was clear that her generation's teachers weren't able to be objective about this period of history, which hadn't 'set' yet. She emphasised the power of stories, and the current policy direction of the National Committee of 4 and 5 May, which was 'come and tell us your stories'.

Stories, though, weren't sufficient: students also need reflection. History was valuable because it helped us reflect on the present (for example, in understanding the relationship between the Second World War and the current political situation in the Middle East. History sharpened the mind.

The end of the colonial era had been traumatic for the Netherlands. Gaining knowledge of what happened would help students to think about good and evil, and the substantial grey area in between. It was helpful that surrounding countries were represented at the symposium, because this would help hold up a mirror to the Dutch national experience of decolonisation.

In answer to a question about the specific position of the National Committee of 4 and 5 May on decolonisation education, Verbeet stated that her major concern was that memories of the Second World War should not become a divisive factor in Dutch society. She wanted all students to experience several remembrance commemorations before they left school, so that what happened in the 1930s and 1940s could be connected to the present-day, and so that all children could get a 'wake-up call' before they voted for the first time.

2. Conversation about the digital teaching initiative – Cees van der Kooij and Paul Holthuis

Van der Kooij and Holthuis were working on an initiative to consider what future history lessons might look like, and what possibilities there might be in delivering teaching and resources digitally. There was currently a great difficulty in finding suitable textbooks and other teaching resources, and it was hoped that the initiative might be able to help with this.

It was necessary to teach children to think for themselves, and in particular to think about what they would have done in a particular historical situation (for example, in the 'police actions') – and even to discuss whether the use of particular terminology (for example, 'police actions') was correct. Although the initiative couldn't tell teachers what to do or

encroach on their professional agency, it could hope to provide materials that would steer good practice. It was hoped that the resources would be ready by the end of December.

In answer to a question about whether eyewitness testimony or the accounts of survivors would be included, van der Kooij and Holthuis noted that while such material would certainly be valuable in principle, in practice access to primary research data from Indonesia was still in its infancy and so there were difficulties in assembling sufficient material of this sort.

In answer to a question about what was the target audience, van der Kooij and Holthuis confirmed that the teaching material was intended for the use of students in the third year of secondary school.

In answer to a question about whether other decolonisation or wider conflict situations should be included in the teaching of this period, van der Kooij and Holthuis expressed the view that this should be a subject for consideration in the new syllabus, and that meanwhile in a situation where there would likely only be time for about three lessons on the topic, it would be necessary to make choices.

3. What is the use of teaching about decolonisation? – Professor Dr Remco Raben

Raben would speak to four questions: (i) Why was colonialism relevant?; (ii) Why was colonialism so complicated?; (iii) How can teachers share colonialism?; and (iv) What role should colonialism play in public debate?

(i) Why was colonialism relevant?

The whole western world had been programmed by its colonial/post-colonial context. Firstly, Indonesia was affected by it. Secondly, the Netherlands was affected by it. Thirdly, there was a significant worldwide impact, including the general legacy of 'the west' as an imperialist/post-colonial entity. Fourthly, the post-colonial debate was still affecting the Netherlands and the world.

(ii) Why was colonialism so complicated?

History continued to be fragmented by the legacy of colonialism. It often received minimal coverage in national histories, and there were competing narratives. It was hard to determine moral coordinates, and victims sometimes literally became perpetrators (as in the case of some actors in the decolonisation of Indonesia). Colonialism, at least in the case of the Netherlands and Indonesia, was only ever a minority experience – only a small proportion of the domestic population was directly involved and, though it may over time have become a shared myth, it was never a truly shared experience in the general population of the Netherlands. Colonialism may have suffered from 'cultural asphasia', being subjected to simplistic good/bad analyses, and likewise demonization and glorification.

(iii) *How can teachers share colonialism?*

There should be an emphasis on the violence of the system: there has been no book focused on the structural colonial violence, and yet it was distinctly abnormal, and needed addressing in the classroom. Multiple perspectives needed to be presented (for example, the story of Japanese prisoners-of-war who were made to provide forced labour for the Dutch in the late-1940s). The use of a selection of personal stories, showing complex narratives and crossing the lines of national and ethnic intersections, was to be recommended.

(iv) *What role should colonialism play in public debate?*

It was the job of teachers to turn their pupils into 'good citizens'. Colonialism and the legacy of decolonisation should inform public debate about all matters pertaining to racism in the Netherlands, including current controversies about public statues and other commemorations.

Raven concluded his remarks by emphasising that colonialism was highly relevant to contemporary society and education, that it was necessary to show the violence inherent in the system, and that it was crucial to discuss various perspectives and distrust simplification.

4. Q & A with [Dr Rémy Limpach](#) on violence during the war of decolonisation

Limpach spoke about the reception of the book he had written on the basis of his doctoral research, and his professional role at the Dutch Institute of Military History. The main conclusion of his book had been that there was widespread structural violence during the decolonisation, although most veterans had 'clean hands'. Limpach advocated for the use of historically accurate terminology, most specifically by using the term 'war' to describe the conflict of 1945-9 in Indonesia.

5. Indonesia's current approach to colonialism and decolonisation – [Professor Dr Henk Schulte Nordholt](#)

Schulte Nordholt noted that the Indonesian revolution was a very complex historical event, and yet paradoxically the Indonesian government's current position on the event was very simplistic. Current Indonesian historiography started with the brief proclamation of independence, with very little context, and then moved on to consider the 'police actions', which were referred to as Agresi 1 and Agresi 2. There was no regional variation in the portrayal of events, and the Bersiap period was not discussed. Indonesia's celebration of its victory failed to commemorate the victims of violence. All these matters were very sensitive, much of the historiography was distrusted in Indonesia, and Indonesians themselves had to be very careful when engaging with this history.

6. The Bersiap period – Dr Esther Captain

In her research Captain was trying to settle on a clear victim count for the Bersiap period. She was considering the inclusivity of definitions, and seeking to broaden definitions. She wanted to incorporate Indonesian perspectives on the period, and was finding ways to do so. Captain believed that there were clear implications for teaching in her work, and that it was particularly important to include consideration of the Bersiap period because for many people now living in the Netherlands this period was more traumatic than the period of the Japanese occupation during the Second World War.

7. The exhibition – Dr Yvonne van Genugten & Dr Pauljac Verhoeven

Verhoeven and van Genugten welcomed us to visit the exhibition, which attempted to provide a multi-perspective portrayal of events, as well as providing its audiences with a basic knowledge of the Dutch colonial past.

Work-session 1. Approaches to teaching about empire and the end of an empire: a view and some ideas from England – Professor Terry Haydn

Haydn outlined how schools in England and Wales had approached the teaching of the British empire, following the development of a national curriculum from the late-1980s. Noting that History was a compulsory subject only until the age of 14 in UK secondary schools, Haydn drew attention to the variability in coverage, and to the limited amount of time available for teaching what was a geographically and chronologically very wide ranging topic. Haydn's research showed that coverage was often focused on nineteenth-century developments, with twentieth-century events and especially decolonisation receiving more patchy coverage. Recently, politicians had been attempting to use school History as a tool of wider social cohesion, and History teachers were required to engage with recent requirements to teach 'British values' (though there was no agreement as to whether teachers should embody and transmit these values, or merely examine them in the abstract). There were helpful moves towards incorporating historiographical perspectives, and most schools taught in the context of enquiry questions and debates enabling students to focus on positive and negative aspects of empire.

In general, Haydn explained that pedagogical approaches in the UK in past 15 years had tended towards structuring teaching around planning for enquiry, and around setting good enquiry questions. He also laid down a useful corrective marker that multi-perspectivity wasn't just a matter of listening to multiple voices and treating them all equally: there *were* wrong answers in History.

Work-session 2. Teaching about decolonisation in France – Dr Delphine Boissarie

Boissarie outlined the current structure of the French national requirements for the teaching of decolonisation: the ministry of education had selected Algeria as the example to be used in history classes in secondary schools. Algeria was a problematic example for

several reasons. Firstly, it was only one of many French colonial possessions, which means that other French colonial examples tended to be neglected. Secondly, it was the least typical of the colonial possessions because of its technical status as part of the 'metropole'. The current textbook provision has some problematic asymmetries, for example in the division of exemplary statistics between 'Europeans' and 'Muslims'. Finally, the war was only officially recognised as such as recently as 1999, and the events still had contemporary political resonance.

Decolonisation was taught at three points:

- (i) in Year 9, when students did four hours on the decolonisation of India or Algeria (and it was noted that perhaps the teaching of what another colonial power, Britain, did was less problematical);
- (ii) in Year 12, when students did three or four hours on the decolonisation of Algeria, with specific links to the Cold War; and
- (iii) in Year 13, when as part of the *terminale* students looked at 'historians and the memories of *either* the Second World War *or* the Algerian War.

The historian Henry Rousso had proposed that historical memory worked in four distinct phases:

*liquidation of the crisis > amnesia > progressive return of memories > hypermnnesia**

*when discussion of the crisis was found everywhere in the public discourse

However, Boissarie argued that Rousso's cycle didn't work well for French memories of the Algerian War, and that the cycle had been disrupted because these topics challenged the unity of the nation. Debates still raged about even the terminology to be used to describe the events: then-candidate Macron had, in February 2017, described French actions in the Algerian War as a 'crime against humanity'. In the classroom, pupils' own words often still revealed underlying conflicts, and sometimes there would be outright indifference – not helped by the two-dimensional nature of the textbooks on offer.