

The bersiap discussion as revived by W. Frederick

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Twee interviews met prof. dr. William H. Frederick deden de discussie rond de excessen van de Indonesische revolutie weer opleven. Maar nieuw is dat er nu ook landelijk meer aandacht is voor het nationalistisch geweld tegen Nederlanders, Chinezen, Molukkers en andere groepen. De heer Frederick reageerde op deze site en zijn reactie verdient een apart topic.

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I am afraid things have gotten rather out of hand, with people interpreting my original article in their own way (perhaps without having read it), and misquoting me. For example, I don't think I said anywhere, and certainly never intended to say, that 250,00 – 300,000 Indonesians were MURDERED. I have suggested that the victims of the bersiap may number 20,00-30,000, a number which I consider reasonable. Those were indeed largely murders. As for the total number of Indonesians who lost their lives during the Revolution as a whole, 250,000 would not be an unreasonable guess, though perhaps on the high side. But that would be deaths from ALL ethnic groups and causes, military as well as civilian, and therefore certainly not murder or genocide.. Here again, however, we will never know. Further, H. Bussemaker did NOT use the word 'genocide' in his book, and did not discuss the possibility. That is one reason why I thought it useful to do so. Also Cribb's use was too tentative, in my view. The whole issue of the definition of 'genocide' is too huge to discuss here, but I think common sense usage is defensible, at length.

I NEVER suggested to the Dutch government (or asked Minister Timmermans) that further research on the Revolution/decolonization period was needed and should be supported, but I privately did agree with the proposal submitted by the KITLV and NIOD, which was turned down. Also, I don't think I even described his response as a "false reason," as reported somewhere, though I did think it both unconvincing and unfortunate. I could mention other points, such as that I do not live in Columbus, Ohio, as reported!) but will leave it at that. I am disappointed that the matter has turned into a media circus rather than an opportunity to suggest further research. And of course I wish commentators had read the original article, which appeared in the Journal for Genocide Research. There my arguments are filled out and supported with many primary and secondary sources.

Here is an e-mail interview I prepared for OmroepWest (their questions, not mine), little of which was used. Please note my plea for attempting to find both Truth and Balance.

Why do you think it is important for the Dutch people to know about this horrible part of Indonesian history?

The Dutch people have heard a great deal about Dutch soldiers' "war crimes", "excesses", and so forth during the immediate postwar period in Indonesia. But they have heard little about the Indonesian violence against Dutch citizens (Dutch and Eurasians), or Chinese, or indeed other Indonesians. It is important that they know about such matters in order to have a more realistic understanding of that period, of the Indonesian Revolution, of the decolonization process, and of the Eurasian population that has been so important – but also so publically neglected – in the Netherlands from that time to the present. It must be said also that Indonesians, perhaps even more than the Dutch, need to know about this part of their history so that they can see their Revolution and their revolutionary heroes in a more realistic – if also rather uncomfortable – light. Truth and balance in our perspective on the past: it seems to me those are worthwhile goals, valuable for the people of both nations.

Why has this information being held back, out of shame , or because of political consequences for the Netherlands?

First, it is doubtful that we should use to phrase "held back", as if there is a conspiracy; that is unlikely. But we can ask why the information is not better known, and has not attracted more interest over the years? Those are very difficult and complex questions, and certainly no single response is adequate. Survivors, and the families of those who did not survive, have been very quiet about this dark past, and the reasons are not entirely clear. For some, it was too horrible to re-tell; for others, feelings of guilt that somehow they had been complicit with the evils of colonial oppression have kept them silent. Some perhaps were also silenced by the racial prejudices of the Dutch society around them after arriving in the Netherlands, and feared as well that stories of their experiences would not be believed. And many probably simply wanted to leave the *bersiap* behind them entirely, and refused to burden their children and grand children with what they knew about that history, which they believed was no longer relevant. Politically, of course, the issue was difficult then, and continues to be now. Which government wants to be seen as having been "on the wrong side of history"? Ironically, since the Dutch has already announced it was on the wrong side of history in opposing the Indonesian Revolution, it would now be forced to say that perhaps those conservatives who argued for many years that Indonesian anti-colonialism and nationalism were not pure, and those others who argued that the plight of Indos and other victims should have been viewed more sympathetically and with greater understanding, were correct....in other words, to suggest it had been only partially on the wrong side. Jakarta finds it difficult at best to say that its national history books have told only the most glorious versions of the Revolution's history, and that there was a very ugly side as well. There has also been fear in both Jakarta and The Hague that too much truth about the *bersiap* might lead to lawsuits and political retribution of various kinds, and to nasty outbursts of extreme nationalism. In Jakarta, the specters of Indonesians killing fellow Indonesians, of some Indonesians not supporting the idea of immediate independence, or of Indonesian freedom-fighters also being violent racists, are virtually unmentionable, even in private.

Can this information be found in Dutch history books? or is this being ignored?

It is not true, as some have argued recently, that a blanket of silence covers the horrors of the *bersiap* tijd; mention of them can be found in numerous publications on the period, but it is brief and highly generalized. There is also a surprisingly large literature about the *bersiap* period in general, almost entirely from Indo authors, but these writings have not for the most part reached a general Dutch audience, and tend to be relegated to a fairly segregated "Indisch" category. That includes not only the works of a great many Indisch authors of fiction, but some very detailed historical studies in recent years, for example the substantial studies by H Bussemaker and W. Meelhuizen. I think the general attitude of the Dutch public has been embarrassment (because these views are at odds with the politically correct view that the Dutch were the ones in the wrong) and boredom (that was then and this is now).

How can that be solved? more info, media attention ?

For all of the reasons already mentioned, it will be difficult, perhaps impossible, for the issue to be made genuinely interesting, meaningful, and important to today's readers. We should, however, for the sake of posterity, make a renewed effort to bring as many details and realities to light as possible. This will require new research projects along the lines suggested last June, which the Dutch government refused to fund for the, in my opinion, rather spurious reason that the research and resulting knowledge might disturb diplomatic relations. But in the end perhaps the best we can hope for is a modest correction of the historical record as it appears in history books and texts used in schools and universities in both the Netherlands and Indonesia. Again, truth and balance are worthwhile goals.

How many people have died during this period ?

This is perhaps the most troublesome basic question about the *bersiap*. Too many authors seem to believe that it was "only a few hundred", or repeat the number used even by L. De Jong, which is 3,500. These are certainly far too low. My own guess is that an accurate figure lies somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000, and may be somewhat higher. In all likelihood we will never know even the approximately correct figure, but that should not prevent us from acknowledging that it was a much larger number than has been thought.

Will survivors ever be compensated in some form ?

Questions of this type are precisely what makes both Jakarta and The Hague fear any discussion of the subject at all. I do not see how "compensation" is a relevant matter, except that victims of the *bersiap* were victims of war and revolution. The direct fault lies with the killers, who cannot be specifically identified and are in any case now deceased. Should it be suggested that the Dutch government is to blame for not protecting these people? That would hardly be realistic. Should Jakarta be held responsible? That is equally untenable. Besides, as most survivors and their families have repeatedly – repeatedly – said, compensation is not their goal. They want acknowledgment of reality and an accurate place in the historical record. Surely that is a fairly modest proposal.