

BOOKS

The Particular Cruelty of Colonial Wars



A new history of Indonesia's fight for independence reveals the brutal means by which the Dutch tried to retain power.

By Adam Hochschild



Illustration by Joanne Imperio / The Atlantic. Source: Widener Library / Harvard University

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EVEN THE MOST WELL-READ World War II enthusiast is likely unaware of one major military operation that happened in 1945. It involved Royal Air

Force bombers, 24 Sherman tanks, and 36,000 troops—some of them British, the rest Indian and Nepalese Gurkhas under British command. More than 600 of these soldiers died, including a British brigadier general.

Despite the year, the fighting happened after the war ended. It took place in Indonesia. One of the dirty secrets of 1945 is that just as the Allies were speaking loftily of having saved the world from German and Japanese tyranny, they began new battles to regain colonies they had lost in the war: France retook Algeria and Indochina, and the Dutch wanted Indonesia back. With the Netherlands half a world away and devastated by war, the British stepped in to help.

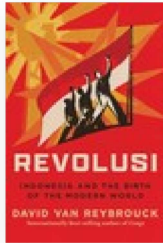
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Few Anglophones know either Dutch or Indonesian, and that's likely one reason we know far less about that archipelago's long and painful history than, say, about India's ordeals under the Raj. Yet Indonesia is the world's fourth-most-populous country, and the one with the largest number of Muslim inhabitants. A single island, Java, has more people than France and Britain combined. David Van Reybrouck's immensely readable new history of the nation, *Revolusi: Indonesia and the Birth of the Modern World*, fills an important gap.

Van Reybrouck is a Dutch-speaking Belgian best known for his *Congo: The Epic History of a People*, published in 2014. Although his writing is dazzling, some of us who follow events in that country felt he was a mite too gentle in dealing with Belgian colonial rule, especially the forced-labor system that so enriched the colony's founder, King Leopold II. But he shows no such reticence when it comes to the Dutch in Indonesia.



Revolusi - Indonesia And The Birth Of The Modern World

By David Van Reybrouck

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How, he asks, did the once-tiny settlement that today is the immense city of Jakarta “ever become a thriving hub of world trade? The answer was simple: by enslaving people.” Between 1600 and 1900, an estimated 600,000 people were traded by the Dutch in Asia. Some 150,000 slaves came from Bali alone. All of this began under the Dutch East India Company, which, like its British counterpart (they were founded a mere two years apart), had its own army. The company ran the colony for two centuries and was the first corporation anywhere to have tradable stock.

The colonial regime brought vast riches to the mother country and much bloodshed to the islands; a single war from 1825 to 1830 cost roughly 200,000 Indonesian lives. Several decades later, slave labor in the archipelago was in some years generating more than half of the total Dutch tax revenue. (Surprisingly, Van Reybrouck does not mention someone who noticed this, Leopold of Belgium. Enviously eyeing these huge profits set the king on a similar path in his new African colony. Forced labor, he declared, was “the only way to civilize and uplift these indolent and corrupt peoples.”) As with many colonial conquests, the resources that first loomed large for the Dutch—spices—were soon eclipsed by others that proved even more lucrative: coffee, tea, tobacco, and sugar. Ultimately, major profits came from feeding an industrializing world’s hunger for coal and, above all, oil.

ALTHOUGH MANY SCATTERED revolts took place throughout the centuries of Dutch rule, a profusion of local languages and the expanse of the islands (stretching a distance as far as from Ireland to Kazakhstan, Van Reybrouck points out) meant that national consciousness was slow in coming. An official independence movement did not begin until 1912—by coincidence the same year that saw the African National Congress born in South Africa. The charismatic orator

Sukarno, the man who became the movement's often-imprisoned leader, had the ability to knit together its nationalist, Communist, and Islamic strands. When the Japanese occupied the islands during World War II, they imprisoned Dutch officials and professed anti-colonial solidarity with the Indonesians, but before long began seizing natural riches and imposing their own forced-labor system. A mere two days after Japan announced its surrender to the Allies but before the Dutch could again take over, Sukarno saw his chance and issued a declaration of independence, the postwar era's first.

Then, in response, came the British invasion, the first round of a four-year colonial war as vicious as any in the 20th century. Heavily armed by the United States, the Dutch battled, in vain, to reestablish control over the sprawling territory. Possibly as many as 200,000 Indonesians died in the conflict, as well as more than 4,600 Dutch soldiers.

As in most counter-guerrilla wars, captured fighters were routinely tortured to force them to reveal the whereabouts of their comrades. The Dutch soldier Joop Hueting left a chilling memoir, which Van Reybrouck summarizes: "The platitudes in the letters home.

'Everything still fine here,' 'how lovely that Nell has had her baby,' because why worry them with stories that they, with their crocheted doilies and floral wallpaper and milk bottles on the doorstep, wouldn't understand ... stories about bamboo huts burning so fiercely that the roar of the flames drowns out the screams of the people who lived there, stories about naked fifteen-year-olds writhing on the concrete with electric wires attached to their bodies."

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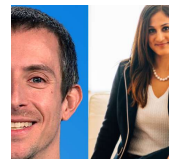


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Hueting went public for the first time in a television interview he gave in 1969, two decades after his return from Indonesia, provoking death threats so severe that he and his family sought police protection. For the rest of his life, he collected testimonies from fellow Dutch veterans, but, Van Reybrouck writes, “it is bewildering that shortly before his death, the NIOD, the Dutch Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, showed no interest ... As a result, the legacy of the post-war Netherlands’ most important whistle-blower is languishing in the attic of a private house in Amsterdam.” No country, including our own, reckons easily with such parts of its past; few Americans learn much about the similarly brutal colonial war we waged in the Philippines from 1899 to 1902.

To their credit, some Dutch people were uneasy about the war. Although 120,000 draftees were sent to Indonesia, a remarkable 6,000 refused to board the ships, many of them sentenced to prison as a result. An unknown number of others, foreshadowing our own war resisters during the Vietnam years, concocted medical or psychiatric ailments or quietly slipped out of the country. Among those who did go to Indonesia, at least two—echoing a handful of Black American troops in the Philippines a half century earlier—switched sides.

The best-known of them, Poncke Princen, had been jailed in Holland and Germany by the Nazis, then joined the Dutch army after liberation. Sent to Indonesia, he deserted and took up arms with the rebels. He remained after independence,

becoming a member of the Indonesian Parliament and an outspoken human-rights advocate. Those activities won him lengthy prison terms under both Sukarno and his successor, Suharto; sadly, postindependence Indonesia saw long periods of repression.

MANY VOICES WE HEAR in *Revolusi* are of people whom Van Reybrouck himself talked with. Another Dutch deserter who went over to the rebels was 90 years old when the author tracked him down, in the Dutch city of Assen. With astounding energy, Van Reybrouck found dozens of other elderly eyewitnesses in huts, apartments, and nursing homes all over the world—in Holland, Indonesia, Japan (veterans of the World War II occupation force), and Nepal (Ghurkas from the British army). And even when all the participants involved in a particular event are now dead, he often manages to find a daughter or grandson with a story to tell. Van Reybrouck has visited just about every place that figures in Indonesia's history, and evokes them with a narrative zest all too rare among historians. When approached from the air, for example, a pair of islands look “like two emerald-green cufflinks on the sleeve of the Pacific.”

That 1945–49 war saw scenes of appalling savagery. One notorious Dutch commander, Raymond Westerling, would have “his men surround a suspicious kampong in the early morning ... Anyone who tried to escape ... was gunned down ... After searching the houses, Westerling addressed the silent crowd and went through his list of suspects ... One after the other, the suspects were forced to squat.”

If he thought someone had information he wasn't yielding, Westerling would begin firing bullets.

"The first one shot was Regge, a cousin of mine," a woman told Van Reybrouck.

"They shot him six times. In his right foot, his left foot, his right knee, his left knee ...

It was Westerling himself who shot him. He didn't say anything. He drank a soft drink, threw the bottle in the air and shot it." Westerling claimed to have personally killed 563 people. After the war, he ran a secondhand bookstore in Amsterdam, took opera lessons, and ended up as a swimming-pool lifeguard.

Many things make colonial wars particularly brutal: the colonizers' lust for wealth; their fear that their enemies might be anywhere, instead of behind a clearly defined front line; their belief that the colonized people belong to an inferior race. But in the case of the Dutch in Indonesia—as of the French in Algeria, who also practiced torture and murder on a huge scale—was there an additional factor as well?

Immediately before its war against Indonesian independence fighters, the Netherlands itself emerged from five years of ruthless German occupation. The country had been plundered. The massive bombing of Rotterdam had leveled the city's medieval core and left nearly 80,000 people homeless. The occupiers had banned all political parties except a pro-Nazi one. Those suspected of being in the resistance had been jailed and tortured; many of them had been killed. In the winter of 1944–45, the Germans had cut off heating fuel and food for much of the country, and some 20,000 people had starved to death. More than 200,000 Dutch men, women and children had died of causes related to the war, just over half of them Jews who'd perished in the Holocaust. As a percentage of the population, this was the highest death rate of any country in Western Europe. And more than half a million Dutch citizens had been impressed as forced laborers for the Nazis, usually working in war factories that were the targets of Allied bombers.

When victims become perpetrators, are they unconsciously taking revenge? Many conflicts, including those raging today—think of Gaza, for instance—have this underlying subtext. The whistleblower soldier Joop Hueting reported a haunting piece of graffiti he saw as Dutch troops advanced in Java, which answered the question definitively: “Don’t do to us what the Germans did to you!”

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Adam Hochschild is the author, most recently, of *American Midnight: The Great War, a Violent Peace, and Democracy’s Forgotten Crisis*.



Cover-up

An atrocity committed by US troops in the Philippines

ADAM HOCHSCHILD

MASSACRE IN THE CLOUDS

An American atrocity and the erasure of history

KIM A. WAGNER

400pp. PublicAffairs. £28.

WE USUALLY THINK of colonialism as driven by a lust for wealth. In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad wrote about the white men drawn to the Congo: “The word ‘ivory’ rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it”. Diamonds and gold motivated the Europeans who flocked to the interior of what today is South Africa. And the long Dutch rule over Indonesia began as a quest for spices, until other products - such as coal and oil - turned out to be more valuable. Curiously, however, no such dream of riches drove the half century of American control of the Philippines, the largest of the colonies the United States seized from Spain in 1898. For much of that period, in fact, American sugar producers and other farmers lobbied vigorously for tariffs that would bar Philippine products.

What did motivate the Americans? Kim A. Wagner’s chilling account of a mass killing by US troops in 1906 reminds us that colonialism had emotions as well as economics behind it. The US had come late to the race for territory in the global south - indeed, Rudyard Kipling’s plea to “take up the white man’s burden” was specifically urging a US takeover of the Philippines - and warfare against the Filipinos offered Americans a chance to show that they were just as adept at conquering “savages” as Europeans. With the end of the Indian Wars in the 1890s, furthermore, one arena in which military-minded young Americans had traditionally proved themselves was now closed.

From 1899 to 1902, the US fought a brutal war against advocates of Philippine independence, which left several hundred thousand Filipinos dead. But resistance simmered on in the southern, predominantly Muslim islands of the archipelago, where the governor, who commanded all US troops in the Philippines, was the crusty, ambitious Major

General Leonard Wood, a close friend of President Theodore Roosevelt.

One of these was the small, volcanic island of Jolo. There were no great riches to be had there, but some of its inhabitants, Muslims from the Moro people, bristled at the idea of becoming American subjects. They had managed to stay free from all but nominal Spanish control and had no interest in submitting to a new set of infidel foreign overlords. When the Americans insisted that every adult male pay a *cedula*, a sort of head tax, a thousand or more of the island’s inhabitants refused and took refuge in the crater of an extinct volcano, Bud Dajo. Their only weapons were knives, rifles and boulders that could be rolled down the steep mountainside. *Massacre in the Clouds* is the story of how, over several days of slaughter, virtually all of these Moros were killed. Most died from high explosive and shrapnel shells; the remainder from the machine guns that American troops carried up to the crater’s rim.

Although Wagner gets too far into the weeds at times (do we really need to know that Captain McGlachlin of the artillery “set his gun at a 14-degree angle?”), he has done an important service by meticulously recording the full scope of an event that Americans have almost totally forgotten. Its death toll, he points out, was far larger than those of the better-known killings at Wounded Knee (1890) and My Lai (1968). And it is well-remembered by the Moros, some of whom continue to resist outside rule to this day. When Wagner, to his great credit, went to the island and climbed up to the crater, he had to be accompanied by a twenty-five-strong army patrol.

As America took over the Philippines, officials tried to learn as much as they could from Europeans’ experience in subduing unruly subjects. When Wood was first dispatched to the islands, Roosevelt ordered him to study British and Dutch colonies en route. On a later trip, Wood was happy to find himself on the same ship as the British General Sir Archibald Hunter, a veteran of the Battle of Omdurman (1898), probably the deadliest single day’s slaughter in the history of colonial warfare. On board, Wood noted in his diary, he “enjoyed many long pleasant talks with General Hunter”.

Some of those talks must have been about hostile Muslims. One theme that runs through Wagner’s

The aftermath of the Bud Dajo massacre, Jolo, 1906

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Adam Hochschild’s most recent book is American Midnight: The Great War, a violent peace, and democracy’s forgotten crisis, 2022

book is how contemptuous the Americans were of the Moros’ faith. A newspaper headline spoke of “Mad Moros Killed”; Wood himself called them “pirates and highwaymen”. An American machine-gunner at the crater wrote home about “the delusion that the Filipinos and Moros are actually human beings”. They were seen as “fanatics” who were, in a phrase picked up from British descriptions of Malays, “running amok”. “Civilization has to be shot into them”, wrote an American captain. A colonel declared that he had “decided that perhaps the best way to impress the lesson of lawfulness upon the natives was ... by burying their bodies with a hog”. More than a century later, Donald Trump exultantly put forth a wildly twisted version of the story on the campaign trail. He claimed that General John J. Pershing, “a rough guy ... caught fifty terrorists who did tremendous damage ... and he took the fifty terrorists and he took fifty men and he dipped fifty bullets in pig’s blood ... and he lined up the fifty people, and they shot forty-nine of those people, and the fiftieth person he said you go back to your people and you tell them what happened. And for twenty-five years there wasn’t a problem”.

For some of the killers, the massacre was a source of manly pleasure. “Wagons and ambulances were being loaded, mule trains assembled, and packs selected”, wrote one English volunteer with the force, “everywhere was that bustle and suppressed excitement, that rattling and snapping of weapons, that hot smell of sweaty men, horses, and leather accoutrements, that accompanies a campaign.” Others shared in the pleasure vicariously. “How Wood must have enjoyed the work!”, the ambassador of Germany, which had just carried out a genocide of its own in what today is Namibia, wrote to Roosevelt.

News of the killings was carefully managed. Wood knew that many of those slaughtered in the crater were women and children - something that, even in the heyday of colonial enthusiasm, would not have landed well with the American public. Through control of the telegraph wires, his friendship with Roosevelt, and allies in Congress and the press - all carefully traced by Wagner - negative reports were suppressed and critics’ voices drowned out. American newspapers were soon printing headlines like “Troops Saved Women” and “Battle Humane”. Wood also tried unsuccessfully to stop the distribution of a photograph showing a mass of dead bodies by dropping its glass plate negative, supposedly by accident. But like the photograph, his reputation survived: in 1920, he became the leading, and by far the best-financed, candidate for the Republican nomination for president. Only after Wood led in four rounds of balloting but fell short of a majority did the convention nominate Warren Harding as a compromise candidate.

Wagner’s investigation prompts us to ask why the Bud Dajo massacre and the Philippine War more generally are so ignored in the US. As Wagner points out, Americans like to think of themselves as the “good guys”. But so does everyone. The story of slavery in the British Empire has been told far more fully in recent years because of pressure from Britain’s large and growing Black population. And the US has begun to acknowledge the role of slavery in its history in part because some 40 million Black Americans, and their allies, have lobbied hard for it. Filipino-Americans, however, are far fewer and less politically powerful. And as a country the Philippines itself has remained closely bound to its former colonizer.

The result is an enormous gap in the American collective memory. Wagner points out that no one has campaigned to rescind the three Congressional Medals of Honor awarded to participants in the Bud Dajo massacre. A green volcano remains part of the regimental crest of the fourth US Cavalry, which took part in the assault. And while the names of many Confederate generals have been stripped from US Army bases, a vast base in Missouri is still called Ford Leonard Wood. Changing such things might only be cosmetic, but it would at least signal the beginning of a reckoning. ■