

Colonial Armies in Southeast Asia

The Leviathan's Military Arm

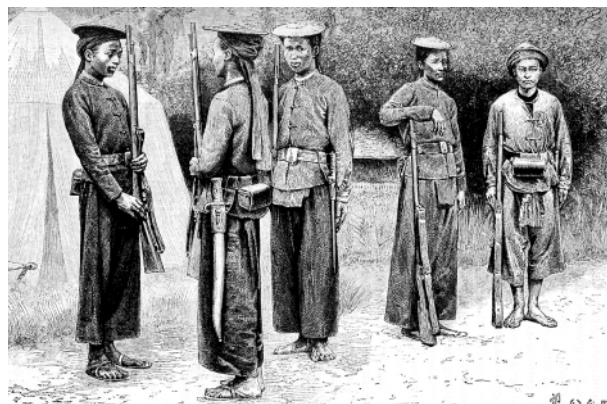
The EUROSEAS panel on "Colonial Armies in Southeast Asia" - organized by Tobias Rettig and chaired by Ian Brown, both SOAS - tapped into the recently expanding interest in colonial institutions and in particular the history of colonial armies. Ten scholars from five countries presented papers that raised interesting and stimulating questions concerning the similarities and differences of the region's variegated colonial armies.

Report >
Southeast Asia

By Tobias Rettig

Panel Report from
EUROSEAS

Robert H. Taylor opened the well-attended panel with a paper on the history of the British colonial army in Burma and the struggle of Burmese nationalists to be included in an army that was primarily made up of Indians and the



Tirailleurs Tonkinois.
Gravure after two
original photographs
from Hocquard,
1884 or 1885.

Dr. Hocquard, Une campagne au Tonkin, Paris: Hachette, 1892, Page 7.

colony's ethnic minorities. In his longitudinal study, Karl Hack examined locally raised forces as a prism for British imperialism and decolonization in the Malay region between 1874 and 2001. Both papers took the long-term view, demonstrating that the structure and nature of colonial armies - at least the British ones - underwent changes due to evolving local and metropolitan needs, geo-political developments, and the rise of nationalist movements. Hack, in particular, explicitly argued that the historiography of colonial armies would profit from a "systems approach".

The following two papers reinforced some of the insights of these long-term studies. Gerke Teitler dealt with policy discussions and decisions regarding the fighting power of ethnically mixed companies in the Dutch colonial army in the 1890-1920 period. Henri Eckert explained how French military-civilian rivalries about the uses and status of Indo-Chinese troops and militia forces prolonged the conquest and postponed the "pacification" of Tonkin and Annam until a compromise solution was found in the early 1890s. Both contributions brought to light the amount of experimentation,

that was involved in the creation of armies in which the twin aims of having both a safe and effective tool of defence and internal security often opposed rather than complemented each other.

The most dreaded of colonial fears was that the colonized people, and those in the armed forces in particular, would suddenly refuse to obey or even turn their weapons against their colonial masters. Both Richard Meixsel and Tobias Rettig looked at such worst-case scenarios by analysing colonial mutinies. Thus Meixsel's excellent paper analysed the context and causes of the Philippine Scout Mutiny of 1924 - little-known, perhaps because it was resolved without bloodshed - whilst Rettig explored the drastic and far-reaching changes of military policies in French Indo-China resulting from the far more violent Yen Bay Mutiny of 1930. The main difference was that the former constituted a "loyal" mutiny aiming towards improving service conditions, whereas the latter, like the Singapore Mutiny of 1915, clearly intended to overthrow the existing political order by violent action.

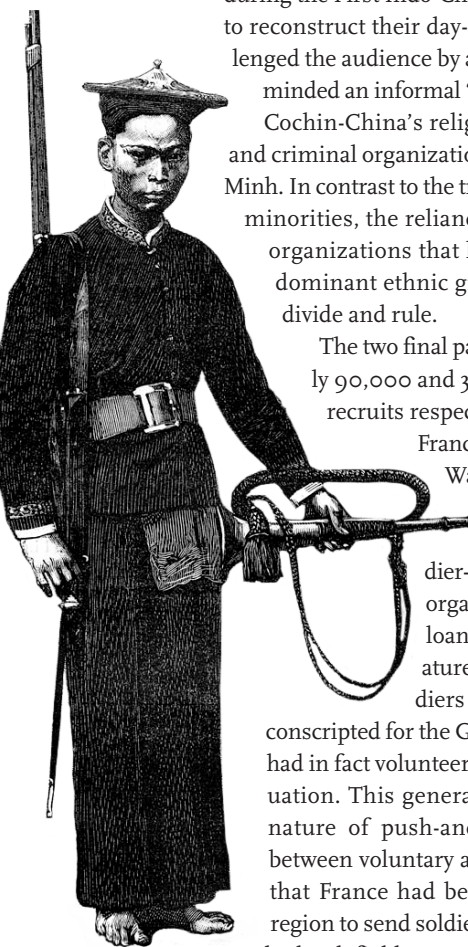
To prevent such mutinies, colonial regimes devised structures and mechanisms of divide and rule aimed towards maintaining soldiers' obedience and including purposeful under-representation of majority populations in the army. Michel Bodin traced the history of the use of Indo-Chinese ethnic minority soldiers in the French Expeditionary Corps during the First Indo-China War, but also painstakingly tried to reconstruct their day-to-day lives. Vladimir Kolotov challenged the audience by arguing that the French had masterminded an informal "collective security system" that used Cochinchina's religious sects (Cao Dai and Hoa Hao) and criminal organizations (Binh Xuyen) to combat the Viet Minh. In contrast to the traditional resort to ethnic or Catholic minorities, the reliance on religio-political and criminal organizations that had emerged from within the predominant ethnic group constituted a novel variant of divide and rule.

The two final papers dealt with the dispatch of nearly 90,000 and 35,000 Indo-Chinese soldier-worker recruits respectively to serve "their" *mère-patrie* in France during the First and Second World War. Marie-Eve Blanc compared how

French social control over these predominantly Vietnamese soldier-workers and the latter's anti-colonial organization differed in both wars. Kimloan Hill challenged the secondary literature for exaggerating the number of soldiers that had against their own will been conscripted for the Great War, by emphasising that many had in fact volunteered to escape their dire economic situation. This generated a passionate debate about the nature of push-and-pull factors and the difference between voluntary and forced service, but also revealed that France had been the only colonial power in the region to send soldiers to Europe to sustain its war effort on the battlefield, as well as in industrial and agricultural production.

One of the great spin-offs of the panel was that it served as a catalyst for several publication projects. Thus five of the ten papers will be part of a July 2002 special issue of *Southeast Asia Research*, a SOAS-based journal. Furthermore, two book projects are now under way. Marie-Eve Blanc and Gilles de Gantès from the Marseille-based IRSEA are editing a book for their institute to appear in the Presses Universitaires de Provence. It explores indigenous and colonial armies in Southeast Asia from the pre-colonial period to the present day, with particular emphasis on indigenous soldiers and sociological questions; paper proposals are welcome until 10 May 2002 (E-mail: Marie-eve.Blanc@newsup.univ-mrs.fr). A second book project on colonial armies in Southeast Asia, directed by Karl Hack and Tobias Rettig, is also on the way. <

Tobias Rettig, MSc, MA is a PhD student at the School of Oriental and African Studies. After extensive archival research in France, he will finish his PhD thesis on "Indo-Chinese soldiers in French service, 1928-1945" this summer.
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Tirailleur Annamite
(Annamite rifleman)
from Cochinchina,
1884. Gravure after
original photographs
from Hocquard.

Indonesia across Orders

Research >
Southeast Asia

Preparations for the start of the research programme "Van Indië tot Indonesië. De herschikking van de Indonesische samenleving" - on the decolonization and restructuring of Indonesian society during the 1930s to 1960s are in full swing.

By Eveline Buchheim, Peter Post &
Remco Raben

In the spring of 2001, the Dutch Ministry of Public Health, Welfare and Sports (VWS) commissioned the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD) to develop a historical research programme on the history of the Netherlands East Indies and Indonesia between the 1930s and 1960s, with specific reference to the social and economic effects of the Japanese occupation and the subsequent episodes of revolution, decolonization, state formation, and nation building for the various groups and strata of the Indies' and Indonesian population.

To be carried out by NIOD, in close cooperation with Dutch and Indonesian counterparts, the research programme is part of a set of policies by the Dutch government concerning the Indies' community that came to the Netherlands in the aftermath of the Pacific War and Indonesian independence. Part of the research will be devoted to specific problems related to the Indies' Dutch community: the material losses suffered during war and revolution, the attitude of the respective authorities towards damages, the arrears of salary payment, and claims for compensation. Other parts of the programme will concentrate on the effects of war, revolution, and decolonization in the fields of economy, urbanism, crime, and security.

The aim of the programme is to create new insights in the vicissitudes of the various communities in the Netherlands East Indies and in Indonesia during the turbulent decades between the 1930s and 1960s. The changes wrought by the chain of events of crisis, war, revolution, and the creation of national

structures can be grouped under the term "decolonization". Usually, decolonization is seen primarily in terms of "the end of empire", the withdrawal of (formal) colonial rule, a departure that was often accompanied by war, rebellion, and drawn-out negotiations. In this programme it denotes the entire range of developments related to the withering dominance of the colonial sectors and the increasing self-assertion of the Indonesian peoples.

The programme will offer an analysis of war and decolonization across the traditional boundaries of history and nation. Contemporary research often concentrates on a specific period, be it the colonial period, the years of Japanese occupation, the revolution, or the post-independence era. By doing so, many dynamics of history are neglected, and the more long-term developments are often obscured. In contrast to the traditional approaches, the entire period between the 1930s and 1960s: the war period, the revolution, nation building and the ensuing social and political disruption, can be seen as a protracted period of transition, in which the internal relationships of power and wealth in the Indonesian archipelago were thoroughly reconsidered and redistributed. This not only involved the expropriation of possessions of Europeans and Eurasians - most of whom left Indonesia in the period 1945-1962 - but also the advent of new entrepreneurial groups and new political elites. While giving rise to new styles of business, new authority structures, it deeply changed the patterns of life and the everyday environment.

The colonizer's departure on the one hand and the adjustment to new political, social and economic realities by the inhabitants on the other made society subject to radical change, influencing

the lives of most inhabitants of the Indonesian archipelago in a variety of ways. This process was highly unevenly distributed among the different regions, communities, and classes in the archipelago. A sensible way to investigate the different patterns of changing relationships in the archipelago is to concentrate on local and regional developments: on the ups and downs of specific enterprises, on changes in specific urban neighbourhoods, on the evolution of crime and order in a selected number of regions.

The research will be carried out by an international group of historians and social scientists, and will be institutionally chaperoned by LIPI (the Indonesian Institute of Sciences), several Indonesian universities, the IIAS, and KITLV in Leiden, the University of Utrecht, and NIOD. As most research themes will zoom in on events at the regional level, cooperation is sought with local research groups at universities in Indonesia. Local academic knowledge, archives, newspapers, and oral sources, will constitute the bone and marrow of the researches.

The research programme will start in the second half of 2002 and will run for four years. Its output will consist of at least four monographs, a research report, and several edited volumes. Apart from catering to the academic community, the programme provides a range of activities that appeal to a wider audience. Regular symposia, film programmes, a website, and participation in educational television broadcasts, will highlight specific themes from the researches and bring the results to a larger audience. We hope to be able to inform you on the programme's progress in future articles in this newsletter. <

Eveline Buchheim, MA, Dr Peter Post & Dr Remco Raben are researchers at the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation in Amsterdam. For information on the research programme, please contact:
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Editors' note >

This is a more extensive version of a panel report previously published in ASEUSUK News, vol. 30, Autumn 2001.