

Van Dijk, Kees. 2007. *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War, 1914-1918*. Leiden: KITLV Press. xiii + 674 pp., illus.

Dutch resilience: *maintaining a distant colony during world war*

NICHOLAS TARLING

This is a book on a grand scale, the product of vast industry and learning on the part of an author already well known as an authority on the Darul Islam movement and on post-Suharto Indonesia, made available to us by the admirable Leiden Institute. It is a work of traditional historiography, informed by an awareness that, as the late Stephen Gould put it, 'complex events occur but once in detailed glory'.

There is no explicit theorising. But it would after all be difficult to make generalisations about so exceptional a history as that of the Netherlands Indies in the 19th and early 20th centuries. That history is full of apparent paradoxes, many of which may, however, be resolved by recurring to a

Within that economic framework the Dutch found their second answer. They gradually built up the entity of Netherlands India, adopting and adapting existing political structures, co-opting traditional rulers, securing compliance with a minimum of coercion. The overthrow of their Spanish neighbours in the Philippines in the 1890s suggested that this answer might not be enough. That was one argument for the Ethical Policy of the early 20th century: it would win over both elite and masses by means that the Spaniards had notably failed to adopt. Together with the economic changes induced by world trade, the policies inaugurated, even before the first world war, a series of social and political changes that were welcomed by Ethici but alarmed others. Where was the Indies heading?

Van Dijk's earlier chapters, which give a

independent Indonesia. In the first world war the Netherlands was not invaded by Germany, nor was its colony invaded by the Japanese. But it was a world war, and so prolonged and catastrophic event could not have 'virtually passed the colony by', to use van Dijk's phrase (page vii).

Walking the line: Dutch aspirations to neutrality

The wish to preserve neutrality was a challenge to Dutch officialdom. Governor-General Idenburg appealed to the citizens of the warring parties whom trade had brought to the Indies to respect it. Throughout the war, however, the Germans demonstrated their national feelings, bearing witness to their 'common emotion and their devotion to king and fatherland' (page 176). The French and the Britons were not very different. More serious was the growing British belief that the Dutch were in fact doing too little to ensure that the Indies were not used as a route for smuggling arms and propaganda by the German-Indian conspiracy to overthrow the empire in India. The Dutch, indeed, felt a certain solidarity with other colonial powers, and were, as van Dijk suggests, concerned lest unrest spread to the Indies (page 327), one outcome being the creation of the PID, the Political Intelligence Service, in 1916. But, in the eyes of Walter Beckett, the British Consul-General in Batavia, they did not do enough. At one point he suggested to the Foreign Office in London that the British should divide the Indies with their allies the Japanese.

That proposal is one of the few points that van Dijk might have considered including in his richly detailed account. He does, of course, point to the concern the Dutch felt about the Japanese and the interest in them on the part of some of their subjects, and to their apprehension lest the Anglo-Japanese alliance undermine their own fundamental understanding with the British. In a sense Beckett's suggestion, and the Foreign Office reaction to it, completes the story. 'If the Netherlands Indies are not too friendly they are harmless. It would be quite another matter if the islands were in the hands of the Japanese' (Minute by Langley, n.d. FO 371/2691 [23543131446], National Archives, London). Given that view, the Netherlands Indies was unlikely to be lost in the war, unless Britain lost.

Maintaining participation in world trade, the other support for the existence of Netherlands India, was more of a challenge. Initially, as van Dijk makes clear, the colony performed better than expected. After the first two years of war, however, its position deteriorated, as Britain maintained and tightened its control on neutral trade, shipping became scarce, the Germans resorted to unrestricted submarine warfare and America entered the war. Exports piled up, imports – even of rice – were restricted and the risk of popular unrest increased.

The continuance of the war also had its political effects, in part indeed connected

with the deterioration of the economy, in part also as a result of changes the war induced elsewhere, particularly in Russia. Initially, the 'native movement' had displayed its loyalty. Then anxiety about the defence of the colony had raised the question of creating a militia, and that in turn raised all sorts of questions. Could the rulers risk arming their subjects? Should their subjects join without securing some participation in ruling the realm they would be called on to defend?

The fruit of Dutch resilience

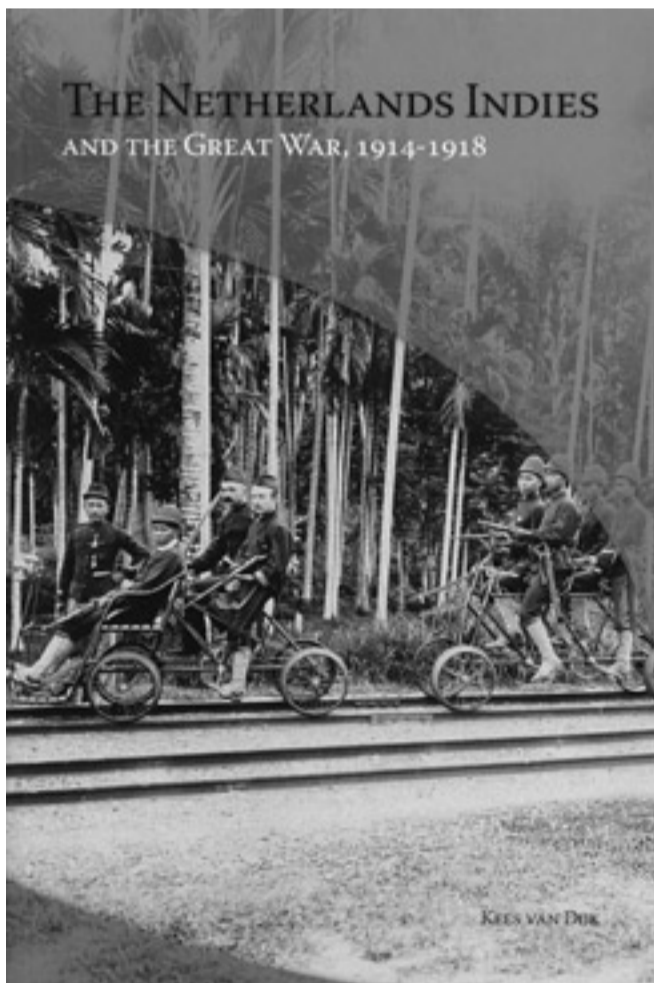
The overthrow of Tsardom contributed to the radicalisation of the nationalist movement and to the division within Sarekat Islam between the left and the right that was to culminate in the creation of the Communist Party in 1920. The government, perhaps still influenced by the Ethical ideology, perhaps also wanting to avoid provocation, was slow to react. News – and lack of news – from the Netherlands at the end of the war seems to have prompted Governor-General van Limburg Stirum to offer additional concessions to the newly-founded Volksraad, though ultimately little or nothing came of them, and no militia was ever created. That does not perhaps mean that the war was without effect. The

radicalisation it had advanced and the Governor-General's response prompted the reaction of the 1920s against what remained of the Ethical Policy.

It is, of course, as van Dijk concludes (page 630), the Indonesians in this story whom Indonesians now remember, and he has brought those rather sympathetic figures alive. He has also restored to the historiography some of the Dutchmen who both ruled and argued over the Indies and had a role in creating and preserving the realm that the Indonesians inherited.

War created economic challenges, but also offered economic opportunities. New trade routes and new markets were found, and some import-substitution industries were established. Some Dutchmen spoke of 'resilience', a word the Suharto regime was later to deploy. A prominent Dutch businessman, C. J. K. van Aalst, took the initiative in establishing a technical college in the colony. Among its first students when it opened in 1920 was a young man no one will ever forget, the first President, Sukarno.

Nicholas Tarling is a Fellow at the University of Auckland's New Zealand Asia Institute. n.tarling@auckland.ac.nz



central fact: a small European state dominated a vast, resource-rich and populous archipelago at the other end of the world. How was that possible?

Here's how: trade from the outside, 'Ethical Policy' from the inside

The first answer the Dutch found was to open the islands to world trade, securing a substantial share for themselves, but allowing others a share, too. That policy, initially imposed on them by Great Britain, was extended to other powers from the 1870s. They would accept the political dominance of the Dutch if allowed commercial opportunity.

graphic account of the Indies before the war, detail some of the differing reactions. How was the urge to modernity to be reconciled with the continued concern for peace and order? How were nascent political movements to be handled? Even more extraordinary, we read, for example, of the unionisation of the navy and the emergence of what some called a 'red fleet' (page 96).

What was the war's impact on this extraordinary state and the extraordinary state of flux it was in? In the second world war, the Netherlands, of course, lost its neutrality and then lost its empire, and the results, all admit, were decisive for the future of an