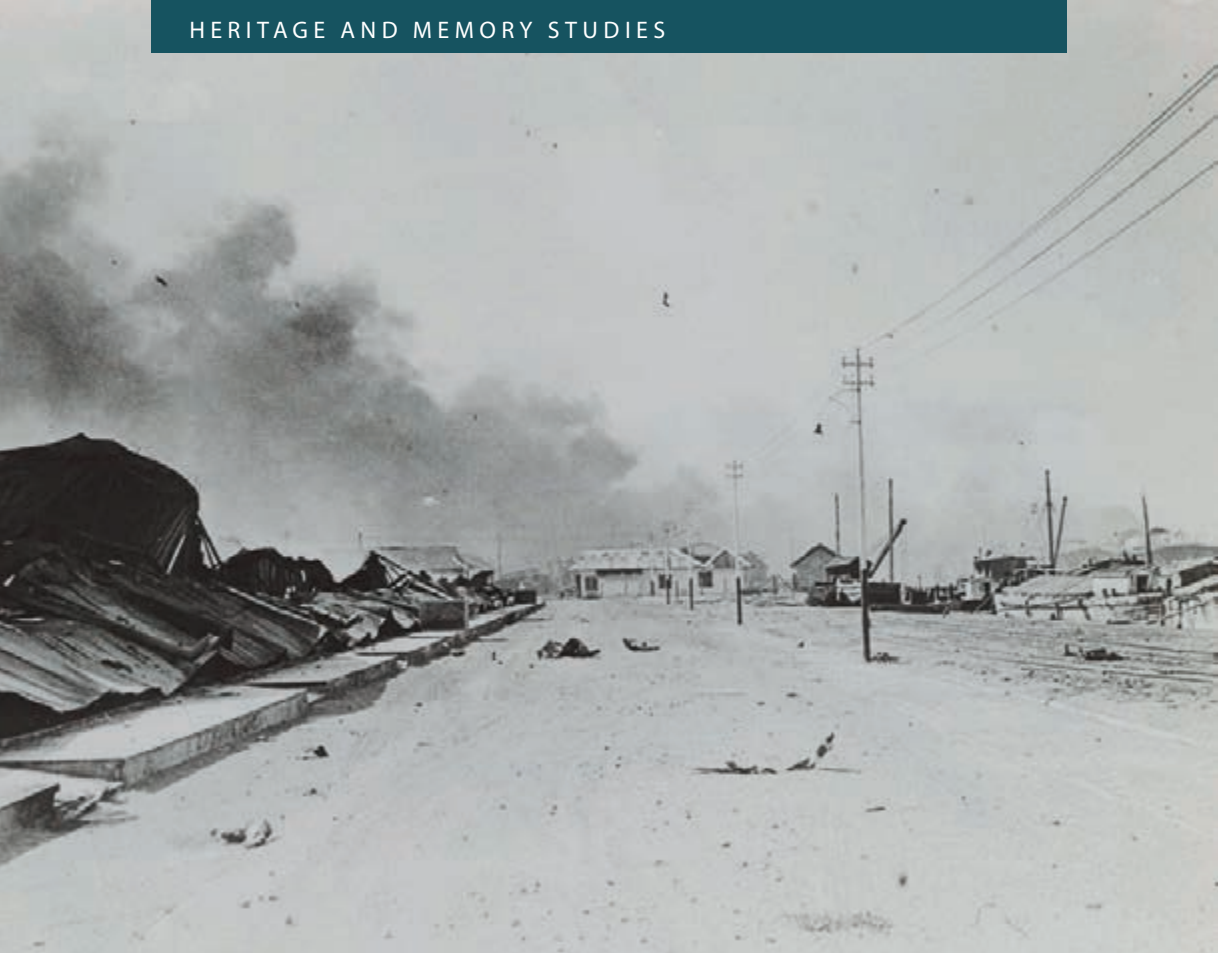


HERITAGE AND MEMORY STUDIES



Paul M.M. Doolan

Collective Memory and the Dutch East Indies

Unremembering Decolonization

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Collective Memory and the Dutch East Indies



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Abbreviations

AVRO	<i>Algemene Vereniging Radio Omroep</i> (General Association of Radio Broadcasting)
DLC	<i>Dienst voor Legercontacten</i> (Army Contact Service)
KITLV	Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde/ Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies
KNIL	<i>Koninklijk Nederlands-Indisch Leger</i> (Royal Netherlands East Indies Army)
KRO	<i>Katholieke Radio Omroep</i> (Catholic Radio Broadcaster)
KVP	<i>Katholieke Volkspartij</i> (Catholic People's Party)
NCRV	<i>Nederlandse Christelijke Radio Vereniging</i> (Dutch Christian Radio Association)
NICA	<i>Nederlandsch-Indische Civiele Administratie</i> (Nether- lands Indies Civil Administration)
NOS	<i>Nederlandse Omroep Stichting</i> (Dutch Broadcast Foundation)
RMS	<i>Republik Maluku Seletan</i> (Republic of South Moluccas)
RVD	<i>Rijksvoorlichtingsdienst</i> (Government Information Service)
TNI	<i>Tentara Nasional Indonesia</i> (Indonesian National Military)
VARA	VARA Broadcasting Association; originally acronym for <i>Vereeniging van Arbeiders Radio Amateurs</i> (Association of Worker Radio Amateurs)
VPRO	<i>Vrijzinnig Protestantse Radio Omroep</i> (Liberal Protes- tant Radio Broadcaster)





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Paul M.M. Doolan



Introduction

Abstract

In this introduction, I explain how, during five years of studying history in the Netherlands in the mid-1980s, it puzzled me that we never studied the decolonization of the Dutch East Indies. The subject was reported in the news, but indifference seemed to dominate within the university. This has led me to the question, How has the decolonization of the former Dutch East Indies during the period from 1945 to 1949 been represented in Dutch culture? My aim is to map out the process by which a collective memory of the war of decolonization was constructed among the Dutch during the 50 years after the declaration of independence in Indonesia (1945-1995). Using a variety of theoretical frames, I apply new readings to memories of decolonization that have been mediated in literature, memoirs, historical works, journalism, radio and television documentaries and film. This will reveal the means by which decolonization came to be (un)remembered.

Keywords: decolonization, Dutch East Indies, collective memory, unremembering

If truth be told, I was born twice. The first time, when my mother gave birth to me on a February night in late 1950s Ireland. The second, when I disembarked from a ship in mainland Europe, aged eighteen. Crooked roads eventually led me to the Netherlands in the late 1970s. It seemed to me then that all Dutch people were welcoming and warm and I delighted in their open and liberal culture. I felt more at home in the Netherlands than I had ever felt before.

In the early 1980s, I started my university studies. From the inspiring lectures of Professor M.A. Wes on Greek and Roman antiquity, to intriguing seminars on the philosophy of history from Frank Ankersmit, I received an outstanding education during five years at the University of Groningen, for which I will always be grateful. I made friendships then that have lasted a lifetime.

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Most, if not all of my friends, were progressive thinkers and activists. We protested against government tyranny; we occupied the Ministry of Education as well as the university headquarters; we went from house to house collecting signatures against the placing of American cruise missiles on Dutch soil. Conversations often revolved around the liberation movements in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Sometimes, but rarely, the conversation touched upon Dutch colonial history. "Ah, Indonesia, we did terrible things there." Yes, but what things exactly? No one seemed to know the details. Even more surprising, no one seemed to care or wished to find out. Likewise, Dutch overseas history was touched upon during my studies, but without much depth.

This was even more surprising, given that Dutch colonial history was seldom out of the news. Indonesia, the former Dutch East Indies, had gained independence from the Dutch, but only after a war of liberation – or, as it was euphemistically known among the Dutch, "police actions" – that had lasted from 1945 to 1949. During my study in the mid-1980s, controversies regarding the war of decolonization regularly appeared in the newspapers. Yet my friends, most of them budding historians, seemed uninterested. I was baffled by the stories in the newspapers. When I asked my friends, all I heard was the refrain: "We did terrible things," followed by something like, "Those bloody veterans." I got the distinct impression that the military veterans or "Old Warriors" as they are called in Dutch, were a most unpleasant group of people, varying from disgruntled archconservatives to narrow-minded right-wing thugs. No doubt, the sort of people who opposed the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and supported the importation of cruise missiles into Europe. Years later, I realized some veterans had risked their lives fighting fascism during the German occupation of the Netherlands (1940-1945). Most had been between 19 and 21 years old and had been drafted into a new army and shipped to Indonesia to fight a counterinsurgency war that the Dutch public supported. Some were my friends' dads or granddads.

Clearly, this was an episode in recent Dutch history that most people seemed to want to ignore, even future historians. What explained the indifference of my friends? What explained why this war, involving the largest mobilization of military manpower in all of Dutch history, could be ignored during my lessons at university? What explained the discrepancy between its frenzied appearance, disappearance and reappearance in public media, and it being rarely mentioned in academia? These questions remained with me.

Eventually I moved away from my adopted homeland. Despite the passing of time, and from a distance, I noted that the Indonesian War of Independence remained a wound in Dutch public life that wouldn't go away. With



some frequency, at certain points in time, the experience of 1945-1949 would be re-remembered, only to be unremembered again, like the sediment that arises when a bottle of liquid gets shaken and floats near the surface briefly, until gravity forces it silently to the bottom of the stilled liquid. There the sediment remains, almost out of sight, until memory stirs it again.

The question that I attempt to answer in this book is, How has the decolonization of the former Dutch East Indies during the period from 1945 to 1949 been represented in Dutch culture? The focus is on the 50 years between the Indonesian declaration of independence in August 1945 and the anniversary of that declaration in 1995. The emphasis is on the public discourse regarding decolonization, conducted partly by means of academic historiography, but also in popular culture by means of, for instance, literature and film. It is in these mediated representations that we see collective memory being shaped and contested. My aim is to map out the process by which a collective memory of the war of decolonization was constructed among the Dutch and uncover the various representations that led to this collective memory being contested. Perhaps, in doing so, I will reveal the reasons for the indifference of my friends that puzzled me all those years ago.

A word on methodology. An attempt to map out 50 years of constructing representations of decolonization inevitably involves making a selection of sources. Some sources that I have selected for analysis will surprise no one familiar with the topic. Haasse's novella *Oeroeg* and Hylkema's film of the same name, Hueting's interview televised on the programme *Achter het Nieuws* and the subsequent parliamentary inquiry report, the historical works of De Kadt and Loe de Jong – these are obvious choices. However, others may seem less obvious. I decided to include works from some of the giants within the canon of *Indische* literature, works that had, at first sight, little or anything to say about the process of decolonization. However, these authors, such as Dermoût, Robinson and Nieuwenhuys, had a huge influence, especially within the *Indische* community, in shaping collective memory. Hence, I set myself the task of applying a rereading of their works in order to discover if this would uncover some aspect of the process of (un)remembering decolonization. I selected a number of non-fictional and fictional works by Dutch military veterans. Until very recently, these have been all but ignored by scholars. For instance, no scholar before me has ever written a word about the writings of Ben Laurens. Yet in the 1980s, his work was popular among his fellow veterans, reinforcing the collective memory of a group that felt much maligned. I included a selection of works from former colonial officials or government authorities in order to gain

another perspective. My selection of radio and television shows from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s is not exhaustive, but I hope that it is representative of what was broadcast during these decades. When considering the vertical transmission of memory from one generation to the next, I selected for analysis the postmemory novelists of the first hour, who all published their first works in 1983. In order to gain a flavour of how representations of decolonization were received, I researched press coverage of the topic and included a range of national and local newspapers and magazines.

One could say, in a general sense, that I apply a postcolonial reading to my sources. I hope that I have approached every text with a certain humility and openness, allowing the text to speak. (I use “text” in the loosest sense, to refer to written works of fiction and non-fiction as well as photographs, film, and radio and television documentaries.) Nevertheless, I believe that in a post-Saidian world, any innocent reading of colonial literature demonstrates bad faith. However, I have not felt strictly bound to any one reading method. As already mentioned, this is an interdisciplinary work and I have freely borrowed concepts and approaches from leading scholars in literary studies, film theory, philosophy, and sociology. These have helped me frame my analysis of texts. As a cultural historian, I feel like cultural anthropologists are my first cousins. Hence the ideas of Auge, Connerton, Van Gennep and Turner have been helpful in framing some of my readings. I am indebted to the late Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s gem of a book, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. This eclectic approach of mine may seem jarring to some scholars, but I am glad that Derrida would approve: “The laws of reading are determined by the particular text that is being read. [...] [O]ne cannot prescribe one general method of reading.”¹

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1 Derrida, “Deconstruction,” 173-174.

