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Resonance of Violence: Bersiap and the Dynamics of Violence in the First Phase of the Indonesian Revolution, 1945–1946. By Esther Captain and Onno Sinke. Amsterdam University Press, 2025. 303 pp.

“Pikemen and Pikewomen,” wrote Thomas Carlyle about the *pemoeda* and *pemoedi* of the French Revolution, “the twenty-five million ... rose with pikes in their hands” (Carlyle 1837). Carlyle in his 1837 history considered the young men and women of France the soul of the revolution. They were singing *The Marseillaise*, which Carlyle described as a song of the “exasperated” marching masses, representing both patriotic fervour and the terrifying, uncontrollable spirit of the people, a desperate, blind eruption following “long dumb-groaning generations” (Carlyle 1837). It does not take an exceptionally vivid imagination to see the pikes as *bamboe roentjing*, the sharpened bamboo spears of the Indonesian Revolution and of the *bersiap* period, which were the first months of the revolution.

I hope that one day I may find Proust quoted without the poor “madeleine”. “Resonance” of the title of the book and of the prologue is slightly better. A little touristy, true, it is what one hears in memories of casual or first-time visitors to Jakarta, the cries of peddlers, the little bells on the hawkers’ carts, the messages the vendors sent, the community they built by the resonance. Within the symphony, or rather cacophony, Esther Captain and Onno Sinke picked up one cry, that of *bersiap*, which the gangs—the Indonesians of Jakarta and other cities and villages—were calling out on their way to kill in the months after Japan capitulated and before the Dutch returned to reimpose their rule. “My” old men and women whom I interviewed over the past fifty years, the emeriti of the Indonesian Revolution—*pemoeda* of the time—were telling me that, as often as not, *bersiap*, the word and the cry, reminded them rather of their happy days as young scouts at the end of the Dutch period—*bersiaaap*, “be prepared”. As for my first nights in Jakarta, in my friend Toenggoel Siagian’s house in Kwini, I was kept awake by the heat, of course, but also by the dull sound of

two pieces of wood beaten against each other, which, as Toenggoel explained in the morning, was part of a *ronda*, a community patrol, going around, checking, he said with tongue in cheek, whether there were any communists still alive in the neighbourhood.

Whatever my problems with the book, Captain and Sinke chose a wonderful topic, a penetrating and daring perspective to study the Indonesian Revolution and, indeed, modern Indonesian history—with all its fury, or “sound and fury”, to say with William Faulkner who, in a different genre and for a different history, did the same thing. After the tons of bloodless studies of the Indonesian Revolution, Captain and Sinke put together—with an astonishing diligence and going through all kinds of sources, from scholarly works to graffiti and eco-histories by participants—a compendium of horrors, page after page, of killing, of body slicing, and blood drinking, piercing with *bamboe roentjings*, the pikes of the Indonesian Revolution, and *klewangs* (machetes), blunt ones best of all.

The authors present the history of the violence in Indonesia through Dutch colonial rule (its violence and the fear it invoked), the Japanese occupation (pure violence), and the “lost six weeks” in late 1945 and early 1946, when all authority was close to complete crumbling and *bersiap* sounded, when the Allies and the Dutch were still away, and the Indonesian republic was not yet able to assert itself. One special chapter deals with the psychological causes and effects of *bersiap*, the rage, and the burst of freedom; well, they do not use that word, *freedom*, often in their *bersiap* vocabulary.

Their book is new—in the sense of being of the moment and to the moment. The final impulse to write it, it seems, was the *Merdeka* (“Freedom”) exhibition in the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum in 2022, and the flare-up in Dutch society as the Indonesian curator decided to scrap *bersiap* from the presentation. The book reacts to the war of words (reflecting a still divided society facing the passing of colonialism) in a poised and balanced way. It shows the *bersiap*, the rage, the violence of the other side as well as the brutality of the Dutch, the KNIL colonial army, the Dutch prisoners released from the Japanese camps, and even of the British Allied forces, often

equally savage, only more “remote” (an IT term is deliberately used here) from a shooting-range distance, “trigger happy”.

What I miss is the authors going as far as to tell me—from the perspective of sound and fury—what the Revolution, and the revolution, is. How much the rage of the *pemoeda-pemoedi*, the *Marseillaise* marchers of the Indonesian Revolution, had been a rage of freedom. How much, consequently, the settling down of *bersiap*, its suppression, was a victory of *rust en orde*, peace and order, *keamanan* (security), the compromise on which Indonesian independence was and still is based, and in the final effect, the victory of the military on both sides, Indonesian and Dutch. To what extent was *bersiap*—the patriotic fervour and the terrifying, uncontrollable spirit of the people, a desperate and blind eruption following the “long dumb-groaning generations”—a spark of freedom, without which history does not move, and where no human experiences true existence except through defeats.

There are standard review endings like “every student of modern Indonesian history must read this book”, which is true about Captain’s and Sinke’s book, certainly. In this case, however, a potential reader “should be warned” (as in a good advertisement, though I do not mean this): Not proper for everyone. Too much blood and juices like that (penises are cut). Too much insistence and daring to reach closer to the truth.

Rudolf Mrázek

University of Michigan, USA; email: rdlf@umich.edu.

REFERENCE

Carlyle, Thomas. 1873. *The French Revolution: A History*. James Fraser.