

*The Collapse of a Colonial Society: The Dutch in Indonesia during the Second World War.* By L. De Jong. *Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, vol. 206. Leiden: KILTV, 2002. xi, 570 pp.

The Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia is a highly sensitive and controversial subject as shown by the outbursts of anger by one country or another at the slightest indication of lack of remorse on the part of Japan about its conduct during the Second World War. Louis de Jong's book provides a detailed account of the experience of European (mostly Dutch and Eurasian) inhabitants of the Dutch East Indies, a subject which has received little attention in the literature focused on Indonesia's struggle for freedom during and after the Japanese occupation. This book is a small part of a larger work dealing with the German occupation of The Netherlands, an enterprise that kept the author busy for many years. De Jong was criticized by scholars and laymen alike for his anti-colonial bias when the first part of his study, which dealt with the Indies during the war, appeared twenty years ago. The second part of the study on the Indies, which appeared a year later, fared better because it was a sympathetic chronicle of the misfortune of Europeans in the hands of the Japanese during the war. This book, which deals with the experience of the Dutch and Eurasian population of the Indies during the war, is based on the original work in Dutch.

The conventional and revisionist historical discourse on Indonesian independence struggle in the 1930s and 1940s is usually focused on the way in which the Japanese occupation aided the struggle and paid very little attention to the fate of former colonial masters who were marginalized, isolated, interned, and reduced to poverty. De Jong's study takes this group of people — who were divided into several categories reflecting the hard divisions in colonial society but brought together in misfortune — to the centre stage of historical discourse. The book presents their experience at length as they recalled it during and after the war. De Jong has made no effort to write a balanced and dispassionate account of his subject on the basis of all relevant evidence at his disposal. Writing a chronicle of the Japanese occupation of the

Indies on the basis of a large amount of oral evidence of the Dutch and Eurasian people is a daunting task as attested by the length of De Jong's study. The author was understandably unwilling to contemplate a careful study of other sources at the end of a long and laborious research project.

It is perhaps reasonable to use only the evidence of victims to tell their experience, but we have to admit that all evidence should be treated with caution and carefully weighed, especially when dealing with a subject that is still somewhat difficult to consider in a dispassionate manner. The evidence reflecting harsh opinions about the allegedly callously indifferent attitude of Indonesians and uncivilized actions of the Japanese perhaps say more about the state of mind of witnesses than the actual situation everywhere in occupied country. One cannot deny such deplorable action by Indonesians and Japanese by all accounts, but we also need to consider the humane conduct of many Japanese and Indonesians in any balanced view of the situation. It is also striking indeed that most Dutch men and women who now criticized Indonesians for kowtowing to the Japanese and ignoring the plight of the Dutch hardly gave a thought to their own conduct towards Indonesians before the occupation. The evidence of European victims of Japanese occupation is partial towards the Dutch themselves and needs to be carefully weighed before drawing any conclusion. De Jong presents his evidence without any personal commitment, showing his awareness of the problematic nature of his evidence. He is sympathetic towards his subject, needless to say, but draws the reader's attention to a somewhat one-sided nature of his narrative. It is a measure of success that the reader finds himself in sympathy with the plight of Europeans during the Japanese occupation while recognizing the less congenial side of Dutch colonial rule.

De Jong begins his narrative with an account of the "elimination" of the Dutch power in the Indies, a graphic account of the way in which the Dutch rulers were caught by surprise and brought to heels in no time. Their sudden elimination was a great shock to the officials and the civilian population of Dutch origin. De Jong's account of their dismay and difficulties being pushed aside both in terms of power as well as socio-economic prestige presents a clear picture enlivened by extensive

verbatim descriptions of the victims. A slightly different approach that takes into account the views of Indonesians would have produced a more balanced narrative. It is difficult to believe that all Indonesians were simply unsympathetic towards their former colonial rulers who had fallen so low so quickly; indeed, some snippets of information in the book contradicts such a universal antipathy on the part of Indonesians towards the plight of individuals despite strong feelings towards the Dutch as colonial masters.

This book provides an insight into the abortive clandestine activities of the Europeans during the Japanese occupation of the Indies. The existing literature is silent on this subject and De Jong's detailed account of it is very useful, even if it only confirms the fact that all clandestine and subversive activity failed miserably. The clandestine activities such as monitoring radio news bulletins and circulating news nevertheless helped people to keep their hopes alive and feel useful to the community. The material conditions of the European population were severely affected not only by the generally depressed economic background but also from being interned in inhospitable and isolated areas and being deprived of a regular income. De Jong provides a detailed, and at times a harrowing, account of the hardship endured by Europeans in and out of internment. The account of emotional state of Europeans is moving and alerts us to the human dimension of a difficult political situation for both the former colonial masters and their subjects alike.

The narrative of war prisoners is by far the best on the subject, full of details on the ways in which the prisoner camps were organized and managed and the conditions of people who were imprisoned. The author achieves a greater degree of balance in presenting the experience of people in this part of the book in comparison with the earlier chapters. Being imprisoned in camps was perhaps the most harrowing experience for Europeans who lived through this difficult period. Their sense of being helpless and vulnerable under harsh circumstances that deprived their dignity as decent people comes across well in one statement after another. Some parts of the narrative such as the part that depicts women who were forced one way or another to work as prostitutes throw new light on a darker side of the Japanese occupation.

The author admits that his study is largely confined to eyewitness accounts of men and women who lived in the Indies through the occupation and official reports, which have certain limitations. These are indeed very important sources for all their limitations of being partisan, bitter, and even prejudiced. De Jong has made use of it with some care to present a picture of the plight of the Europeans during the Japanese occupation that has received scant attention in the literature. The author emphasizes the fragile nature of the Dutch colonial state with its inherent political and social contradictions, which were brought into sharp focus by the efforts of Dutch men and women trying to find traces of indigenous ancestry in order to escape from isolation and by rejection of any cooperation with the indigenous population against the occupation, in such stark reality seldom found elsewhere in the literature. The value of this book lies in the evidence it presents to readers who are unfamiliar with the Dutch language and do not have access to the sources concerned. The readers can interpret this body of evidence in conjunction with other evidence and from different points of view, but they are likely to find that De Jong's way of organizing his narrative and the value he places on various aspects of his narrative are valid and have a claim to be considered. The author emphasizes one important message with force: for most Dutch men and women who lived in the Indies, it was their home. This makes it easy understand why most Dutch men and women felt so bitter about their plight and made clear their bitterness of being forced to leave the Indies after the war, an intense feeling that still makes any discourse on the fall of Dutch colonial rule over Indonesia difficult for the survivors of those difficult times. De Jong's study is a valuable addition to the literature that will hopefully stimulate other scholars to explore his sources to go further in enlightening us about a dark period in the history of Southeast Asia.

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