

The Invasion of the Dutch East Indies

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The Second World War left deep scars in all our societies, the Dutch, the Indonesian and the Japanese. The reactions, however, have been rather different. In the Netherlands, the attention is almost exclusively focused on the victims: the internees in Japanese camps, the forced labor of POWs at the Burma or Pekan Baru railroads, and of course the comfort women. In Indonesia the focus is not on the period of the Japanese occupation, no matter how harsh it was and no matter the enormous number of laborers who succumbed in the Japanese defense projects, or because of the ill-advised economic policies of the military administration. In Indonesia the focus is still completely proklamasi-sentris, focused on the proclamation of independence. The Japanese occupation is usually summarily dealt with. It raises too many uncomfortable questions, such as the role of the independence hero Sukarno during the Japanese occupation; and since Indonesians on the whole tend to avoid controversy, the fall of the Dutch East Indies and the Japanese occupation become little more than a necessary prelude to independence. In Japan, the reaction is even more complicated. For many Japanese, the Tokyo Tribunal and the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the latter seen as a more heinous crime than anything the Japanese Army ever committed, is the end of discussion. Others do press for a more serious discussion of the role of Japan during the war and the politics of the 1930s. Unfortunately, this discussion has become completely politicized and the participants cannot even agree on what to call the war, the Pacific War, the Greater East Asia War, the Fifteen Years War, or the Asia-Pacific War, just to mention a few examples. Unlike the Royal Netherlands Indies Army veterans who were rather shabbily treated by the post-war Dutch governments, the Imperial Army and Navy veterans or their bereaved families were comparatively well taken care of after the war. Their associations also played an important role in the election of successive conservative governments, which naturally muted the discussion on the role of Japan and its armed forces before and during the war. This is not to say that the Japanese do not wrestle with the legacy of the war. The personal loss and traumas have been amply documented. But beyond the immense personal suffering caused by the war, many Japanese feel that whatever mistaken policies had sent their soldiers and sailors overseas, these soldiers

and sailors should be honored for their loyalty and sacrifice. That atrocities and even war crimes had been committed was for a long time difficult to accept, just as in the Netherlands the general public couldn't believe that their boys sent to Indonesia after the war had often not behaved, as they should have. Since Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and countless other conflicts, we know, thanks to instant media coverage, that war is a far dirtier business than old-fashioned heroic war histories want us to believe. We also know that once the political, religious, economic, or whatever other reasons that led to the conflict have petered out, the world moves on; what remains is the personal suffering of the victims who have little chance for redress and probably even less chance for an official apology.



When two years ago I was asked to do this translation, I wondered why I should spend two years of my life to translate a book on a forgotten campaign that, moreover, represented a total Dutch defeat. In a general way, I knew the story. My father and two elder sisters had been in Japanese internment camps, as had several other members of my family. My father had never struck me as a victim. He seemed to consider himself more like a person who had been at the wrong place at the wrong time with all the attendant bad luck. With one of my sisters it was a different story, but I am happy that she is with us here today. The founder of the Corts Foundation was severely traumatized by the war, but I never fully understood his obsession with wanting to know what had happened and how it had happened, lest posterity forgot. What finally made me decide to undertake this project was a letter to the editor in the

Dutch newspaper NRC-Handelsblad of 18 May 2012. The letter was a protest against the planned reorganization and relocation of the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation. But it also told the personal story of the writer. That he had been imprisoned at the end of war, and that on the day he was set free (6 May) he had vowed to learn everything about the causes and the course of the war that was there to be known, and that this had determined the rest of his life.

I then realized that there was still much to learn about this forgotten campaign -- at that time the largest transoceanic landing operation in the military history of the world. The general view is that an all-powerful Japanese army and navy had swooped down upon an ill-prepared Dutch East Indies side and that the fall of the Dutch East Indies was somehow "in the nature of things," as Lt. Col. Mantel, a staff officer of the Dutch East Indies Army, remarked after the surrender talks at Kalijati. This is in marked contrast to the talk before the war when Japan was described as a tenth-rate nation with warships that were little more than sardine cans, airplanes that were supposed to be made of paper, and soldiers and sailors who couldn't fight at night, because they didn't eat carrots and therefore couldn't see well. In fact, at the outset of the war the Japanese warships and airplanes were far better than almost anything the Allies possessed, and the night attack was the favored tactic of the Japanese army and navy. The swing from boastful confidence to utter resignation bewildered the Dutch civilian population. Well-known is the remark of a Dutch lady in Batavia (Jakarta), when she witnessed the Japanese troops enter town, that she couldn't understand how such a scruffy-looking lot of diminutive soldiers wearing funny sneakers could have defeated her tall and handsome Dutch heroes. The shock was enormous, but a mood of resignation that this was somehow inevitably the nature of things prevents a clear appreciation of the military campaign that the Japanese conducted. It was, after all, a daring campaign of which no one in the Dutch East Indies had thought the Japanese capable. In China they seemed incapable of decisively defeating a supposedly rag-tag Chinese Army; in a border incident in Manchuria they had basically been defeated by the Soviets; and if they opted for going south, they had to pass the Americans in the Philippines and the British in Malaya and Singapore. The war in Europe, of course, had changed everything. But even then, the conquest of Southeast Asia, including the Dutch East Indies, seemed to many too tall an order for the Japanese. Nevertheless they took the risk.

In retrospect, it is easy to say that the Japanese leaders at that time staked the future of their nation on a war that by human reckoning they could not possibly win. In fact, the decision had not come about rationally. In mid-October 1941, the third Konoe cabinet resigned

after a clash between Prime Minister Konoe and War Minister Tojo. Despite his grandiose ideas about a New Order in Asia and a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere, Konoe backed away from a war with the United States and even considered pulling out of China. For Tojo and the Army this was unacceptable. Tojo told Konoe that for a man it was sometimes necessary to leap from the balcony of the Kiyomizu temple. Tojo's remark refers to an 18th-century Buddhist miracle tale in which a boy praying for the health of his bed-ridden mother leapt from the high balcony of the Kiyomizu temple in Kyoto. In the tale, the boy was miraculously unharmed and his mother suddenly could walk again. Under the leadership of General Tojo, the next prime minister, Japan in effect leapt in blind faith and without a feasible plan B from the balcony of the Kiyomizu temple.

At first the gamble seemed to pay off. In a few months and far ahead of their own schedule, the Japanese armies overran Southeast Asia, but when they had outrun their momentum and the Allied nations refused to acknowledge the results, the war turned into a war of attrition for which Japan was ill prepared.

From Dutch and other Allied sources we know how the Dutch East Indies forces were defeated, but they do not tell us how the Japanese actually won; how they planned, prepared and executed their campaign. *The Invasion of the Dutch East Indies* is a textbook case of Japanese military thinking and practice. The emphasis on speed and offensive spirit, the classic deployment of a division in two columns with a weaker left wing to hold the enemy in place and a strong right wing to deliver the decisive blow, the requirement that the advance guard commander aggressively take on the enemy even at the risk that the main force cannot catch up in time, all these elements worked to perfection on Java against a Dutch East Indies Army that was quickly thrown into disarray. However, the very success of the campaign also blinded the Japanese military against the weaknesses of their doctrine. The relentless emphasis on bold and decisive action instilled in many frontline commanders a tendency for recklessness because they were afraid to be branded cowards. In the Java campaign this did not matter, but later on in Burma it led to the squandering of thousands of well-trained and loyal troops. Tojo's leap into war à la Kiyomizu was as much an expression of his military training as of his character.

When I started the translation and went through the war games, the plans and the logistics, I thought it was all pretty well thought out. However, when I asked the late General Ad Herweijer, a former deputy commander of the Dutch Army, for his comments, he shook his head and said: "What a risky and rickety operation (in Dutch: houtje-touwtje operatie). We would never have dared to plan it that way." However, the central tactical tenet of the Japanese

Army was surprised and not doing what the enemy thought you might be going to do, whatever the risks involved. In that way, they caught the Dutch East Indies army flat on its feet. The fact that the ship carrying the headquarters of the Sixteenth Army was torpedoed by friendly fire in Bantam Bay and sunk with most of the communications equipment on board may have been a blessing in disguise. Except for the 2d Division in western Java, the army headquarters had during the whole campaign on Java no communication with the units under its command. In case of the 2d Division, they more hindered than helped its operations. Here the tenet of frontline commanders taking the initiative and acting on their own judgment clearly worked to the advantage of the Japanese. I am no military expert, but one almost wishes that the Dutch headquarters in Bandung had been out of touch with its troops, for the frequent changes in disposition and sudden marches and countermarches tired and demoralized the troops while leaving them often in the wrong place unable to put up a credible defense. If the present book dispels one notion, it is that the Japanese were far superior in numbers. During the first week of March 1942, the Japanese put about 55,000 men on shore. They faced a 60,000 men Dutch East Indies army and if we include Australian, British, and American forces, an army of about 80,000 men in total, though admittedly the majority of these troops were poorly trained and under-equipped. The Japanese were better trained, for the most part battle-hardened, and better led. It is sobering to read how the Dutch East Indies Army met its Thermopylae at the Ciater pass when just one battalion of the Shōji Detachment, supported by planes of the Japanese 3d Air Division, broke through and outflanked, apparently guided by a Dutch POW, the Dutch positions. Again, it started as a desperate gamble by a frontline commander acting on his own judgment, but it paid off with the unexpectedly quick surrender of the whole Dutch East Indies Army.

This translation would not have been possible without the help of many people ...