

To:
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Subject: Questions about the Dutch research project 'Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia, 1945-1950'

Mr. President Rutte, Madam Bijleveld and Mr. Zijlstra,

November 27th, 2017

Hereby we ask your attention for questions that have arisen concerning the Dutch research project 'Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia, 1945-1950'. The following critique is based on information on the project website (<https://www.ind45-50.org/en>) and the presentation at the kickoff event on September 14th, 2017, at which the three institutions charged with the project—the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), the Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (NIOD), the Netherlands Institute for Military History (NIMH)—launched the research program.

We believe that more research on this period is needed, yet questions arise regarding political influences and decision-making and the way the project is to be constructed and directed. As proposed, we fear that this research project is not independent and believe it leaves out crucial issues.

What led to government approval?

The first questions concern the actual reason behind the unexpected change of heart on the part of the Dutch government to agree with this large-scale investigation at the end of 2016. After first having rejected the proposal in 2012, the government now approved the funding of new research citing Remy Limpach's recently published PhD thesis *The Burning Kampongs of General Spoor* as most decisive. Yet we question the degree to which Limpach's work actually revealed facts unknown to the government before its publication, and wonder whether this publication alone would have generated such a change in the government stance towards such a research project if not for successful lawsuits earlier initiated against the Dutch state by the Komite Utang Kehormatan Belanda (K.U.K.B., in English the Dutch Debt of Honor Committee), which compelled the Netherlands to express apologies and pay compensation to Indonesian victims of Dutch wartime atrocities. Particularly given the conflicting role of NIMH as the government institution where Limpach works, these are critical questions. The role of K.U.K.B. is generally known, as it has

successfully sued the Dutch State since 2008. Several lawsuits are still in process. In addition, the three Dutch institutions also admit that these lawsuits were a wake-up-call for them, and therefore that their request for large-scale investigation was not spontaneous. Why then did the government give green light to fund new research only after the publication of Limpach's book?¹ There is a discrepancy between the way Limpach's study is embraced on the one hand and the K.U.K.B. is ignored and excluded on the other. This discrepancy precisely highlights the ambiguity of the government-funded research, and calls for clarification.

Conflicting interests

Limpach is a researcher working for the National Institute for Military History, which falls under the Ministry of Defense. Particularly questionable in the NIMH's participation in the new investigation is the fact that Limpach and his team are responsible for the historical verification of Indonesian claims.² Noteworthy in this regard is the fact that he placed an embargo on his dissertation (originally written in German) until the Dutch translation was finished. Liesbeth Zegveld, the Dutch lawyer who represents the Indonesian claimants, protested against this decision in October 2015 because she found it unjust that the State had access to this knowledge while she could not read it and was not assisted by an experienced historian. In other words: the government used the expertise of Limpach to support its defense against Indonesian claims, while Zegveld as lawyer had to await the Dutch publication in September 2016. The double role of the NIMH and Limpach strongly indicates that there are conflicting interests. The government took this into account when ordering an investigation into the role of the Dutch Army in Srebrenica, from which the NIMH was consciously excluded.

The distance that the project researchers have maintained vis à vis the K.U.K.B. is illustrative. The foundation was not invited to be part of the 'Social Resonance Group', which consists of various remembrance organizations whose representatives function as advisors for the research team. Secondly, chairman Jeffry Pondaag was also not invited to participate in the project kickoff event on September 14th. As someone raising awareness on this issue for decades it is remarkable that he was not asked to speak or to explain what motivated him.

It should be noted however that a Swiss university funded Limpach's PhD research and that the NIMH only embraced it after the above lawsuits, apologies and compensations became a political reality.

Government conditions

Apart from the lawsuits and the role of NIMH, it is equally worrying that politicians negotiated that certain topics figure prominently on the research agenda. In particular, the conservative VVD party demanded that the Indonesian share in the violence (during the so-called Bersiap-period) receive

¹ <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-26049-82.html>

² The court in The Hague declared about the exact role of NIMH (in relation to the court cases against the Dutch state) on January 27, 2016: *"In addition, NIMH ... uses historical sources and archives to investigate the historical backgrounds and the likelihood of the claims of the claimants. ... The NIMH advises the ministries that are involved about the historical verifiability. According to the explanatory statement made by the State, this opinion is not written, the findings are discussed orally with all parties involved."* See the court ruling in relation to the South Sulawesi case: <http://deeplink.rechtspraak.nl/uitspraak?id=ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2016:700>

particular attention. VVD spokesmen describe the Indonesian Independence war in terms of ‘when two parties fight, there are two parties to blame.’³

In his letter on the project addressed to the Lower House of Parliament (dated February 9th, 2017) NIOD-Director Frank van Vree explained that the three institutions were in full agreement with the conditions set by the government. Indeed, the research program exactly conforms to the wishes and vision of government officials, who for their part seem to have been inspired by several topics identified by Limpach in the closing chapter of his book. Such as: mass violence on the part of (and among) Indonesians, the collaboration between juridical, civil and police authorities as well as an international comparison.⁴ Apparently, the government has not only provided funds for this research, but is also dictating its approach from the start. At the very least, there appears an uncomfortably close cooperation between the government as funder and the researchers as executors. This raises serious concerns about the scholarly independence of the project.

Colonialism no point of analysis

Although former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ben Bot publicly admitted in 2005 that the Netherlands stood on “the wrong side of history” when it comes to the colonial war, the proposed project does not show that his statement led to a fundamental change in orientation. The starting point of the investigation is the analysis of violence on both sides, while the colonial aspect of the war is taken for granted. The research aims to explain Dutch violence by studying the broad context of the decolonization war at (international) political, administrative, judicial and military levels. But we argue that the starting point should be that the Dutch East Indies colony was not a legitimate government to begin with. This means that the sending of Dutch soldiers—including those who did not commit war crimes—was unlawful. KITLV researcher Henk Schulte Nordholt once summarized the Dutch difficulty in dealing with the colonial past as follows: *“The colonial presence itself is not a point of analysis. When it comes to violence, we like to talk in terms of excesses, an incident, a transitional phenomenon, while it was much more fundamental. ...something Dutch historians do not want to see.”*⁵ Schulte Nordholt made this observation seventeen years ago but we do not observe a change in the formulation of this project. The colonial mindset of then (and its continuity until now) remains unproblematized.

In the search for answers to the question of the nature of the Dutch presence in Indonesia and its violence, we believe that research program should be changed on the following points:

- 1) The research program should take the colonial context, as well as the influence of Dutch colonialism on today's relationships and thinking, as starting points.
- 2) Indonesian researchers involved in the project deserve an autonomous and more prominent role.
- 3) The government cannot set conditions on the nature or contents of the project, and related

³ <http://historibersama.com/translations/2016-2/new-research-rtl-nieuws/>

⁴ Rémy Limpach, *De Brandende Kampongs van Generaal Spoor* (Amsterdam 2016) pp. 780.
Website project: <<https://www.ind45-50.org/en>>, Letter Frank van Vree to the Parliament's Second Chamber (9 February, 2017): <<https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/blg-801057>>

⁵ https://www.vpro.nl/speel~POMS_VPRO_210176~ovt~.html

agencies or military personnel should not interfere with research upon this politically sensitive subject. Instead of the NIMH, relevant external institutions and organizations should be involved.

4) The summary synthesis cannot be written by one person, above all not by KITLV director Gert Oostindie, who is not an Indonesia expert.

The 138 undersigned:

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[The letter is originally written in Dutch, and included an attachment of 13 points. There is no English translation of the attachment yet. Contact us if you wish to work on a translation]