

The Predicament of Commissioned Research

Report >
Indonesia

Although commissioned research is not in itself unusual, it raises the question of how to safeguard the independence of inquiry, especially when moral, political or newsworthy issues are at stake. As the party placing the commission and other parties involved may have interests in the outcome of the inquiry, attempts to intervene in the inquiry are not inconceivable. While this is inadmissible in light of the independent nature of the inquiry, neither is it possible to cut off contact with the commissioning party: a good working relationship can be crucial to the research. In contrast to the humanities departments of most universities, the NIOD often faces these dilemmas in its research assignments.

By Hans Blom

From the outset, commissioned research has been at the heart of the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD), itself founded by Royal Decree in 1947. The Dutch government commissioned the 26-volume history on the Netherlands in the Second World War by NIOD's former director L. de Jong, the Weinreb inquiry and, more recently, the Srebrenica report. Today's NIOD research programme 'Indonesia across Orders' was also commissioned by the Dutch government, and the current historical research programme 'Japan and the Netherlands' can likewise be considered commissioned research. Drawn up after consultation with the Japanese embassy in The Hague, the latter project is funded by the Japanese government.

Due to the sensitivities of war history, in particular that of the Second World War, NIOD's research cannot be carried out in safe academic seclusion. Interest groups and even politics squat on NIOD's threshold, trying to read over the shoulders. This makes it necessary for NIOD and its researchers to reflect on their position vis-à-vis the outside world. The situation – commissioned research eagerly watched by the world of politics, interest groups and the larger public – may seem inimical to independent research; it requires the solid protection of research interests and a careful strategy of dealing with stakeholders.

The NIOD/Rijksmuseum exhibition 'Dutch, Japanese, Indonesians: The memory of the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies', exhibited in the Rijksmuseum in 1999 and subsequently shown in Japan, brought to the fore many of these challenges. With the sensitive nature of the topic in mind, the exhibition aimed to present various perspectives to the visitors – many of whom presumably entered the exhibit with one-sided pre-conceptions. The exhibition presented the stories and experiences of individuals, displaying highly personal artefacts and documents. These were presented in the simplified context of national categories: the experiences and memories of Indonesians, Dutch/Europeans, and Japanese.

During the research for the exhibition, contact was sought with the parties involved in various ways. Not surprisingly, the final result was influenced by the often emotional, sometimes cogent pleas of interest groups to have 'their' experience represented in the exhibition. These ranged from specific elements of collective wartime experience (specific internment situations and categories of victims), to the ordeals of ethnic groups (Chinese, Eurasians), and more political interpretations of this episode (especially among Japanese war veterans). The exhibition was adopted by the bilateral Organisation for the Commemoration of 400 Years of Dutch-Japanese Relations for the obvious reason that this was a crucial episode in the contacts between the two nations. But reactions from the various parties involved proved the recalcitrant nature of the material: from the perspective of



Photo album of the Peta Foundation, Jakarta.

Five Peta veterans at the opening of the Museum Yapeta in Bogor on 18 December 1995. The statue is of Sudirman, who later became commander-in-chief of the Republican army, but was a *daidanchō* in the Peta during the Japanese occupation.

the Netherlands and of the Indisch population in the Netherlands, the period of the Japanese occupation could not be passed over in silence; from a Japanese perspective reticence would be the most desirable option on this score.

With respect to the content, those responsible for the exhibition showed an awareness of the risks and acted circumspectly in accordance with their own insights. It became clear in their contacts with the parties involved that there would be a lot of resentment, as proved to be the case during the opening and afterwards. At the risk of generalizing – as there was of course a whole spectrum of reactions – the Indisch groups were often disappointed at what they felt to be insufficient attention paid to the suffering and injustices they had experienced. They expressed their irritation above all in individual interviews and, occasionally, in the media.

Japanese grievances mainly concerned the way the emperor had been portrayed as well as a perceived trivialization of three hundred years of Dutch colonial oppression, by comparison to which the three years of Japanese occupation pale to near insignificance. In spite of many explanatory discussions during the initial stage of the project, the result were negative media coverage in Japan and the Japanese government's refusal to allow the ambassador to be presented with a copy of the conference and exhibition publication at the opening conference.

Furthermore, the commitment made to assist in making the exhibition accessible to the public in prestigious locations in Japan went unrespected. As a result, a vastly reduced version of the exhibit was shown on panels in a few small, relatively remote locations in Japan.

Interestingly enough, the fewest problems came from Indonesia, which had many other pressing problems on its mind at the time. As a result the exhibition was not present-

Indonesia across Orders

'Indonesia across Orders: The reorganization of Indonesian society' has been developed at the request of the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport. The research is aimed at providing new insights into the consequences of war, revolution, and decolonization for the different population groups in the Indonesian archipelago from the 1930s to the 1960s. The programme covers four research areas that embrace a wide range of social developments: the Indonesianisasi of the economy and of the world of industry and commerce; the financial settlement and the question of war damage, rehabilitation and repayment; the mechanisms of and views on order and security; and the changes in urban society.

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ed in Indonesia at all. Nevertheless, the Indonesian ambassador came to accept a copy of the book and made use of the opportunity to make critical remarks about the Netherlands, Dutch colonial policy, and Dutch historiography.¹

This example shows, above all, the need for independent researchers to be aware of the problems which can arise through close contact with commissioning and interested parties. The inclination to accommodate the funding party or – what is even more tempting – the contact persons, especially if they can be regarded as victims in the bargain, is understandable, but it can easily place a researcher on a slippery slope.

My personal and institutional experience has convinced me that it is of utmost importance that the independence of research is explicitly specified as a basic condition, and that this is formalized in agreements. Regarding (government) commissioned research in particular, agreements ought to include a ban on intervention in the research by the commissioning party, guaranteed unhindered access to sources, guaranteed and sufficient budget, and publication guarantees, even if the result is not what the party placing the commission wants. In extreme cases exemption from claims is also worth considering. In addition, an academic supervisory committee can support researchers in the event of conflicts with the commissioning party, while giving that party the feeling of not being unduly dependent on the arbitrariness of a single researcher or research institute.

Friction, irritation, and a permanent difference of insight or opinion are never entirely to be avoided, no matter what one does. After all, in many cases they derive from the same source that generated the research: the emotions connected with the issues to be investigated. It is important to take contacts with the parties involved seriously. Consultation with those 'involved' in the past (and in the production of its history) can be a useful and necessary addition to historians' more 'traditional' sources. Their stories and memories can provide essential information that is seldom put on paper, adding personal and emotional flavour to our understanding of the period. Furthermore, the public can be mobilized to provide information and personal documents. Finally, lobbying can attract researchers' attention to less known and publicized events. In the 'Indonesia across Orders' programme, this is the case with the Indonesian Chinese, whose fascinating array of experiences have remained outside most histories of decolonization.

This means that consultation should include a wider community of people and not remain restricted to representatives of interest groups. The 'Indonesia across Orders' programme does this by organizing frequent seminars for non-academic audiences, with special interest in 'new' source materials such as photographs and films, and for specific sub-groups, such as the Indonesian Chinese. In the recent past, this has resulted in the unearthing of unique personal sources and invaluable communication with 'hands on' experts.

The integrity of individual researchers and institutional determination can provide clarity and firm footing (and have a preventive effect) against two common reflexes: 'who pays the piper calls the tune', and 'those who have been through it themselves are the best judges'. These reflexes are incompatible with the demands of academic rigour. In NIOD's commissioned research projects on Asia, terms were specified at the outset to enable researchers to produce genuine, balanced research. May that integrity be maintained in practice. ◀

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1 For the reactions to this exhibition, see Somer, E., S. Rijppma, *Nederlanders, Japanners, Indonesiërs. Een opmerkelijke tentoonstelling*, Zwolle and Amsterdam: Waanders (2002).