

'Merdeka': images of hostile territory

The autonomous press photo agency, *Indonesian Press Photo Service* (IPPHOS), established in 1946 by Frans and Alex Mendur and the brothers Umbas, was the first and formerly the largest photo agency in Indonesia. The IPPHOS images were mostly taken during Indonesia's struggle for independence in the period 1945-1949, and today are the only existing agency images from this time. Collections of the state-owned ANTARA photo agency and BERITA Film Indonesia were destroyed after the failed communist coup of 1965. Art and photo-historian Louis Zweers gained privileged access to this partly damaged collection which has survived the turbulent period and is now in the National Archive of Indonesia (*Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia*) in Jakarta.

Louis Zweers

AT THE START OF 1946, President Sukarno fled Jakarta for reasons of safety and established himself with his family in the former palace of the Governor in Yogyakarta, the capital of the new Republic. At the same time, many Indonesian officials as well as members of the temporary parliament moved from Jakarta to Yogyakarta in Central Java. Even the headquarters of the Indonesian army, the *Tentara Nasional Indonesia* (TNI) were established in the city in the former *Grand Hotel*, renamed *Hotel Merdeka*. This overcrowded, wartime city – the battlefield of Java – was also home to a number of unknown Indonesian photographers from the *Indonesian Press Photo Service* (IPPHOS).

The IPPHOS collection reveals that the agency's photographers frequently depicted the daily life of ordinary Indonesian citizens, but also their enthusiasm for Indonesia's leaders. President Sukarno is visible as a small figure at mass meetings, cheering crowds surrounding him. The pictures of demonstrations and speeches in that revolutionary period show the population's support for the nationalistic leaders and the struggle for independence. The people of Indonesia were in pursuit of freedom and this is reflected in the many photographs of young, armed Indonesian guerrillas with captions like: 'Indonesian militia are prepared for the fight against the Dutch enemy', or: 'Indonesian fighters are ready to resist the attacks of the Dutch military.'

The Indonesians armed themselves with old Dutch equipment, weapons seized from the Japanese army and second rate armaments from the provisional army factories of the Republic of Indonesia. Poorly armed and without payment the Indonesian fighters faced a superior Dutch army with tanks and aeroplanes. The guerillas were forced to developed rapidly a variety techniques that avoided open conflict. For example,

when retreating, they applied 'scorched earth' tactics and blew up bridges and destroyed European government buildings, factories and houses. The Indonesian fighters, with the support of the people, became mobilised for the fight against the colonial opponent and images from the IPPHOS collection show young Indonesian women and men bearing simple, even primitive, arms. Female militia march with sharp bamboo sticks (*bambu runcing*) along the steps of the presidential residence in Yogyakarta. Vice-President Mohammed Hatta and a young General Sudirman, the famed founding father of the Indonesian army, salute the troops.

The pugnacity and involvement of Indonesian women and young men in the revolution are frequently represented and the original photo captions shout out that they are ready for the fight against the Dutchmen. Interestingly, the photographs show the preparatory activities of the young Javanese guerrillas but almost none depict the actions themselves. There are virtually no images of hard fighting. Similarly, there are only a limited number of photographs recording the Indonesian victims of Dutch military violence. This is remarkable given the high number of Indonesians victims at that time. In one of the few images available, Indonesians are seen sneering at Dutch soldiers of the 'Andjing Nica' of the KNIL (Royal Netherlands Indies Army) infantry battalion - with a reputation for supporting the hard treatment of guerrillas. The caption uses the pejorative term 'Dutch Dogs' (*Andjing = dogs; NICA = Netherlands Indies Civil Administration*). Equally significant is that the thousands of Indo-Europeans and Chinese who fell victim to Indonesian violence are also not shown. In fact, the IPPHOS photo collection is predominantly propagandistic, with the images emphasising the young Indonesian generation and their persistent fight for independence.

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It was extremely difficult for Dutch photographers and journalists to gain access to the areas controlled by the Indonesians at that time. Reports from those areas which occasionally appeared in weekly magazines or daily newspapers generally originated from foreign press bureaus. Some exclusive picture stories from Yogyakarta, the capital of Sukarno's Republic, did make it into the Dutch illustrated magazines, the *Katholieke Illustratie* and *Panorama*. According to the captions, the photographs came from an American photo agency and both illustrated magazines had acquired the exclusive rights to these unique reports. However, these photographs had in fact been taken by the Dutch war photographer Hugo Wilmar. Wilmar had managed to get himself a presscard from an American press photo agency and presented himself as an American press photographer. He succeeded in getting himself on a flight from Batavia (Jakarta) to Yogyakarta with an international group appointed by the UN Security Council, the Committee of Good Services. Apparently, the Indonesian officials had no suspicions that Wilmar was a Dutch citizen. Consequently, he was able to work unimpeded in Yogyakarta. Not only was he able to photograph the activities of the Indonesian side, including the army on exercise and Sukarno making a speech to his troops but Wilmar even managed to get access to the Indonesian nationalistic president at home. The two Dutch illustrated magazines who published these extraordinary images made no mention that they had come from their own photographer, because the Editor-in-chief was frightened that it would put Wilmar in danger. These picture stories with tens of photos made an enormous impact in the Netherlands. The photographs showed just how poorly-armed and badly-dressed the Indonesians were. They carried bamboo sticks, wooden exercise-guns and weapons they had managed to capture from the Japanese and Dutch. They wore a ragbag of clothing pulled together from all kinds of uniforms, mainly Japanese. Some of the soldiers had very long hair, having sworn to themselves that they would only cut their hair when the Dutch disappeared definitively from Indonesia. The captions of the images in these Dutch reports emphasise the bad equipment and organisation of the enemy's army and along with the text composed by the editors they give a propagandistic slant to Wilmar's photographs. In fact, the Dutch daily newspapers and illustrated magazines who published on the situation in Indonesia, did so according to information provided by the army information service (renamed in the spring of 1947 as the '*Dienst voor Legercontacten*'). The images reflect a docile and uncritical Dutch press whose reports left the Dutch reader in no doubts about the 'troublesome' Indonesian antagonist.

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Art and photohistorian Louis Zweers' latest book (in Dutch) is *Koloniale Oorlog (Colonial War) 1945-1949, Van Indie naar Indonesie*. Carrera Publishers, Amsterdam. December 2009.

Right:
Yogyakarta, Java,
Indonesia, 5 October
1946. Parade of the
Indonesian Army
at the central square
during the first anniversary of the military
forces. The display
of power is striking.
In photographs the
army seems very
professional, but
the Dutch military
information service
estimated at that time
that only one in four
Indonesian soldiers
possessed a firearm.
Collection IPPHOS,
ANRI.



Right:
Malang, East Java,
Indonesia, 1946.
An Indonesian gives
weapons training
to young pupils of
a secondary school.
Collection IPPHOS,
ANRI.



Above:
Yogyakarta, Java,
Indonesia, 5 October
1946. The headquar-
ters of the Indonesian
Army, the *Tentara
Nasional Indonesia*
(TNI) was established
in the former Grand
Hotel. Sukarno
on horseback, like
the 19th century
freedom fighter
Raden Dipanegara,
inspects the Indo-
nesian Army. In the
background, a young
General Sudirman,
Commander-In-Chief
of the Indonesian
Army, is visible in his
white uniform on
horseback. This meet-
ing took place during
the first anniversary
of the military forces
in the Central Square
of the capital of the
Indonesian Republic.
Collection IPPHOS,
ANRI.

Below:
Yogyakarta, Java,
Indonesia, 1946.
An Indonesian soldier
holds a machine gun.
Collection IPPHOS,
ANRI.

