

'Silence is the best solution'

This study surveys the Dutch (military) strategy versus the media, during the conflict with the Republic of Indonesia between 1945 and 1949.¹ The Dutch (military) information services in Batavia had been slow to establish itself, and only a limited number of Dutch reporters and photographers were located in the capital. There was talk of embedded journalism; the majority of Dutch reporters stayed mostly in their *comfort zone*, never left their hotels in the centre of Batavia, visited receptions and press conferences and received their information via the diplomatic circuit, from briefings and the communiqués issued by the military and government information services. They were frequently hindered in their newsgathering, fact checking and the reporting of both sides, and if they did travel into the relatively unsafe conflict areas on Java and Sumatra they were accompanied by press officers.

Louis Zweers



PRESS CENSORSHIP, which led to a regulatory self-control among journalists, made it almost impossible for them to file critical pieces with their editors. It was difficult to escape the coercion and interference of the employees of the information services. The journalistic output of the majority of reporters, whose gaze was rather clouded by propaganda, served to legitimate Dutch military action. At that time, many Dutch journalists were generally obedient, the media was pillarised, and many national newspapers were just mouthpieces for political parties. The pro-government media behaved compliantly and the tone was reassuring. It appeared as if a silent agreement had been made: we shall not reveal all.

Over time, more and more (international) journalists and photographers arrived in this conflict area. Unlike the *embedded* Dutch journalists, these experienced foreign correspondents were not easily intimidated by the (military) information services, and routinely reported on the Indonesian independence struggle. The information authorities, as a result, dismissed the foreign press corps in Batavia as a nuisance, hacks on the payroll of – in their eyes – anti-colonial British and American authorities and media.

Communications war

During the first military action (July/August 1947) those press people considered to be reliable were given permission to join the advancing Dutch troops on Java and Sumatra. The information organisations were hereby not only managing the news, but at this point were also increasingly controlling the photo coverage of the war. Journalists and photographers were becoming ever more dependent on the cooperation of the information services. The majority of published photos and news reports of selected events of the war were ideologically coloured and gave a scripted version of reality. The communications war was an unequal struggle between the various information services and the Dutch media; especially for the left-wing newspapers and magazines such as *Het Parool*, *Vrij Nederland*, *De Groene Amsterdammer* and the communist *De Waarheid*, which had only limited financial resources and opportunities.

The opposition to the colonial war remained limited to these media outlets, which, due to a lack of funds, did not have their own correspondents and photographers stationed in the archipelago. Moreover, many of the left-wing daily and

weekly newspapers, critical of the Dutch policy in Indonesia, were banned for readers in the military, and often not even distributed in Batavia. These papers certainly did leave their own mark on the (photo)reporting about the Indonesian question. They were critical and even fiercely pro-Indonesian, but only about a quarter of the population actually read these relatively negative reports. Thousands of former *Het Parool* and *Vrij Nederland* readers appeared unappreciative of such critical and negative reporting, and the papers saw their subscription numbers drop rapidly.

There was a lot of verbal aggression in the press. The critical press was dismissed as *fellow travellers* and even as 'friends of Sukarno' by *Elseviers Weekblad* and *Trouw*, which functioned as mouthpieces for the colonial-thinking Netherlands. This conservative media accused them of using their coverage to undermine morale on the home front. Subsequently, in the pro-government Christian, social democratic and liberal newspapers and journals, reporting was dominated by emotionally-distant photos and soothing articles supplied by the information services. This reporting was less and less about actual military activities and more about social-cultural issues and the humanitarian activities in the colony.

Retaining civilian support

During the second military action (December 1948) and the subsequent guerrilla war in the first half of 1949, the (international) press was no longer granted access to operational areas. This was an effective means of curbing (international) attention for the Indonesian struggle for independence. The army and navy information services now dominated the production, selection and distribution of photographs and articles to the press. There were no longer any current images published.

The military information services engaged their strategy to keep the grisly guerrilla war out of the media. Specifically, this meant keeping war operations out of the headlines and allowing absolutely no shocking photos of dead or badly injured Dutch soldiers or Indonesian fighters in the newspapers and magazines. These sorts of images were never shown in the Dutch media, and the Dutch population was carefully shielded from violent images. This is not surprising, as violent photos could stir up strong emotions against the war. So no (photo) reports and newspaper articles were published about setbacks on the battlefield (including the many casualties on both sides),

Fig 1: Malang, East Java, end July 1947. Operation Product. KNIL soldiers (Royal Dutch-Indies Army) standing by captured, wounded and deceased Indonesian soldiers. Unpublished photo. Army photographer unknown.

the sometimes violent experiences of the Dutch conscripts and volunteers, and the hardships suffered by the local population during the intensive guerrilla war. The chaotic warzones and the reality of the fighting remained largely invisible. By omitting relevant (visual) information they were trying hard to keep morale on the home front high, to please public opinion and to minimise any anti-war sentiment among the Dutch people. The media was used to retain the support of the civilian population in the implementation of the government policy and, effectively, to use propaganda against the enemy, usually referred to as 'roving gangs'.

Letters from the front

The information authorities and the compliant media emphasised reassuring images of the Indies archipelago. But the humanitarian mission, as it was portrayed in the propaganda, was not what the ordinary soldiers experienced, especially on Central and East Java, which were consistently under attack by Indonesian insurgents. And although the military information services were successful in keeping certain reports and images out of the media, they had no control over the letters from soldiers published in *Het Parool*, *De Waarheid*, *Vrij Nederland* and *De Groene Amsterdammer*, which revealed the drama that was taking place in the tropical archipelago. The letters and eye-witness accounts by soldiers reported extreme engagements with guerrilla fighters, but also the civilian population.

While these allegations of violent excesses led to widespread public outrage at the time, in the absence of any visual proof of bombed *kampongs* and dead civilians and combatants, these acts of war remained hidden. Moreover, such reports were often denied, belittled or ignored by the government and the army leadership in Batavia. In reality, the colony found itself in a precarious position in the Spring of 1949. The (photo) coverage of the Dutch dailies and illustrated journals was, for the most part, a version of events propagated by the military information services and provided little independent and/or new (visual) information. This fit neatly with the desired image of the military top brass (General Spoor, spy chief Colonel Somer, the press chief Lieutenant-Colonel Koenders) and political elite (Catholic government leaders and HVK Beel in Batavia) about the military actions in the former Netherlands East Indies. The fight for public opinion was just as important as the actual battle being waged in the archipelago.

The military versus the media in the Netherlands East Indies 1945-1949

Fig 2: Malang, East Java, end July 1947. Operation Product. Indonesian man, killed in battle. Unpublished photo. Army photographer unknown.

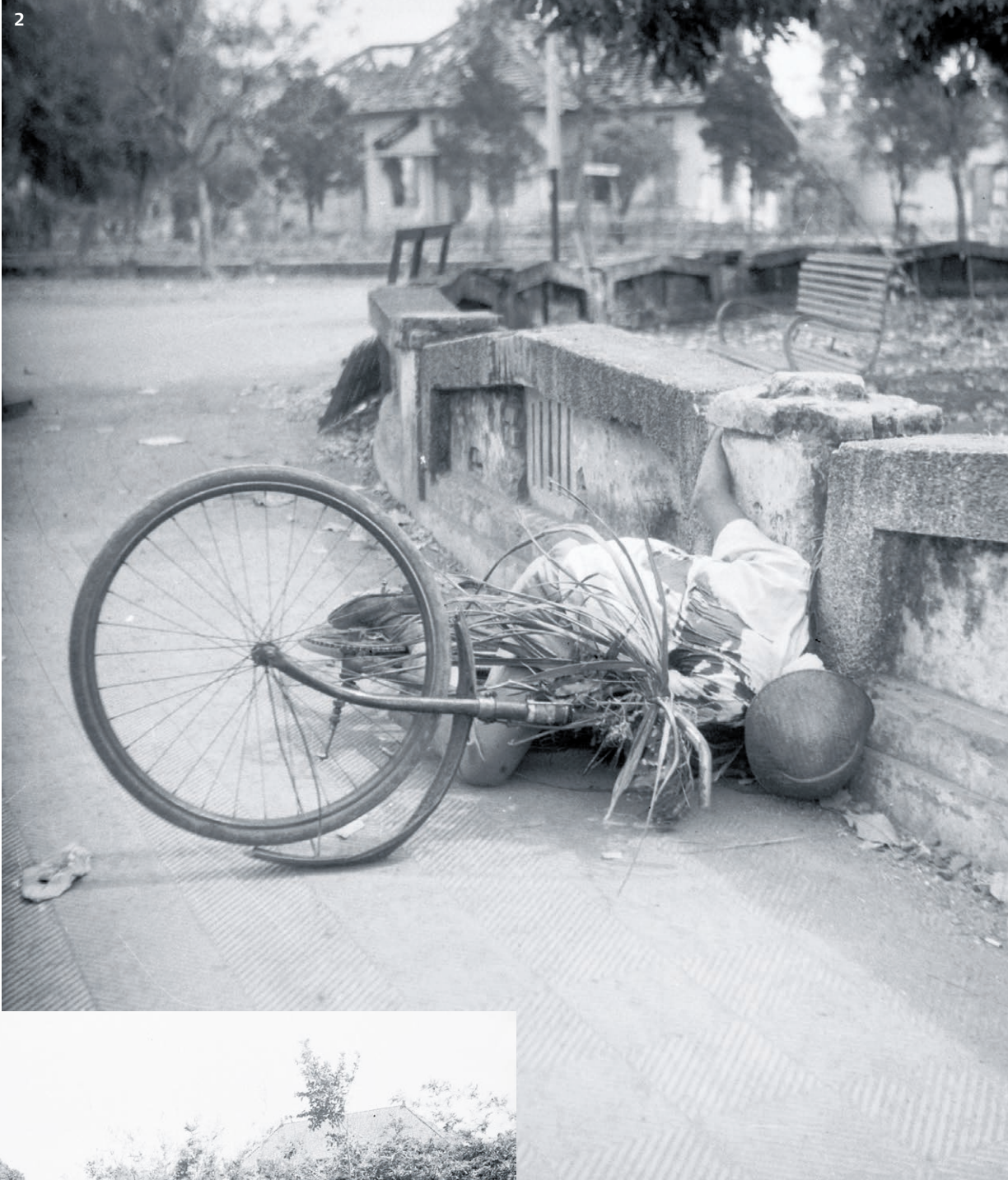


Fig 3: Batavia, West Java, 10 March 1948. DLC information officer at work. Army photographer, ensign H.J. van Krieken

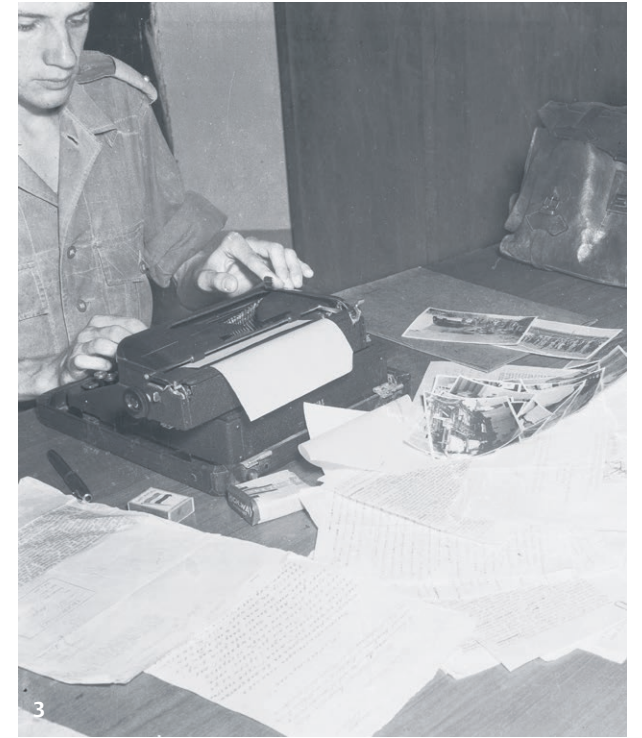
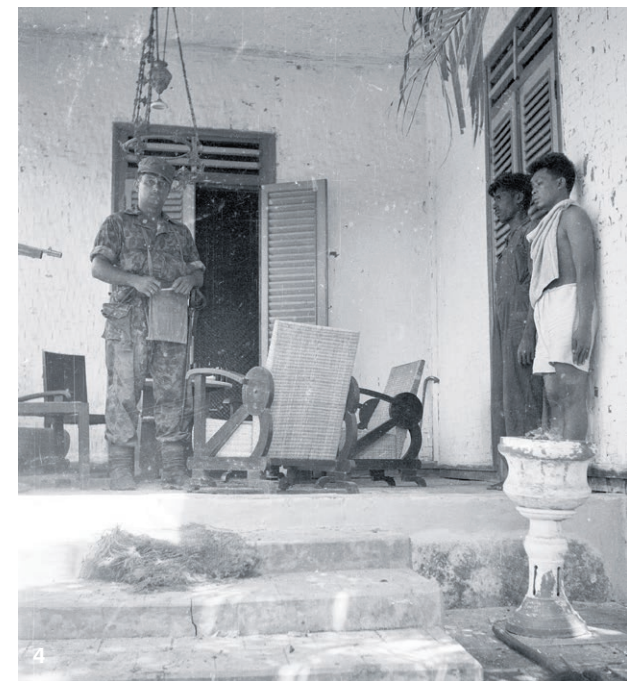


Fig 4: West Java, July 1947. Operation Product. Young Indonesian men held at gunpoint. Unpublished photo. Army photographer/camera man, lieutenant Wim Heldoorn



Foreign PR

The DLC and MARVO (the army and navy information services) were virtually absolute rulers in the area of military information and propaganda. They censored all photo and film material in the name of operational security, public opinion and the need to uphold the morale of the population. No poignant or revealing war images were released. This strategy determined the image of the struggle in the former Netherlands East Indies. The censored material was archived and was only available to the military authorities.

Initially, the DLC and MARVO maintained the impression that the colonial conflict was manageable and even winnable. This was a misrepresentation. Later, as the conflict progressed, Indonesian resistance increased, the violence escalated, and the lists of the dead became longer, the Dutch lost all chance for victory. By the end of 1948, during the second military action, the decisive DLC and smaller MARVO no longer even made any sophisticated use of the media. They blocked access for the (international) press to operational areas on Java and Sumatra; they postponed the forwarding of reports and images, by their own (photo) correspondents about the military actions, to the press. The cause of this suspension can be explained by interference from the United Nations, the US and Great Britain in the escalating military conflict. Foreign observers, correspondents and intelligence services meticulously followed the coverage in the Dutch (Indies) daily and weekly papers.

Until that point, the Netherlands had been particularly inward looking with regards to information and (international) press awareness. Only after this military action did the information services see the light, after it became clear that the

Fig 5: Pesing, near Batavia, West Java, 15 April 1946. Indonesian prisoners of war, some in military uniform, work under Dutch military supervision. Context unknown – they could perhaps be digging their own graves, or the graves of their fallen comrades. Unpublished photo. Army photographer unknown.

All images from the DLC Collection (Dienst Legercontacten), housed in the National Archives in The Hague.

Dutch government was receiving no support and international criticism was growing. The US even threatened to withdraw the promised Marshall aid for the reconstruction of the war-damaged Netherlands. Confronted with international isolation, The Hague and Batavia decided on a new media approach as well as spin-doctoring the effects of the conflict. The information services made common cause with an unexpected ally: the American media. In particular, Herman Friedericy of the NIB was active in the promoting of the Dutch standpoint in the USA. He advised the Dutch government to hire the American PR-bureau Swanson & Co to fight the negative image.

The turning point was the goodwill press trip to the archipelago for a group of prominent American journalists in the Summer of 1949. During the fact-finding mission, these journalists became increasingly convinced that Sukarno was not the right leader to stop the rise of Communism in Southeast Asia. This was despite the fact that the nationalist Sukarno had executed a group of high-profile Communist leaders. Dutch spokesmen labelled the actual elimination of these top PKI figures as counter-propaganda designed to achieve favourable media attention in the US. The coverage of the travelling American press was greatly swayed by the growing Cold War atmosphere in Asia. They had no trust in the Republic of Indonesia and saw the continuing Dutch influence as a safeguard against the encroaching Communism. In short, they chose for a pro-Dutch position. However, the Dutch PR coup was destroyed in one fell swoop when the KLM airplane Franeker, carrying the group of prominent American journalists, crashed on the journey home. Another American PR consultant, John Boettiger, was hired to start a new media offensive and press campaign in the US. But it was too little, too late.

Speaking out

In summary, the professional information services more or less set the agenda and the news in the Netherlands with respect to the struggle in the Netherlands East Indies. In particular, they zoomed in on the information that supported their views; the rest was ignored. 'White noise' and 'correct' details predominated. They had a tendency to neutralise and justify the colonial conflict, and were very good at disguising the war as a humanitarian action. They engaged in muddled language and transparent propaganda. Today this is called *perception management* or strategic communication. In fact, they were

juggling information about war operations; independent (photo) journalism was limited by a cordon of (army) press officers. The Dutch-Indies government in Batavia stayed in close contact with the expensive American PR bureau Swanson & Co, but also with the overzealous information officers under the leadership of Herman Friedericy, of the *Netherlands Information Bureau* (NIB) in New York, in order to portray the Dutch presence in the colony in a favourable international light via the press, newspapers, radio and films. And, when necessary, the secret services, such as NEFIS/CMI, were employed. Power always has the tendency to interfere with journalism.

At that time, the military press officers and spokesmen never spoke out against their superiors, and the often uncritical Dutch correspondents never went against their editors. Exceptions included the left-wing journalists Frans Goedhart and Jacques de Kadet from *Het Parool* and the astute NRC journalist Chris Scheffer, who was summarily dismissed because he dared to stick his neck out. Because journalistic reports and photos were censored and the majority of reporters censored themselves, the full reality of the war never penetrated the wider Dutch public. It is also striking that the Dutch media – with the exception of *Het Parool*, *De Waarheid*, *Vrij Nederland* and *De Groene Amsterdammer* – published harmonious copy (the tone was primarily reassuring) and neutral, meaningless photos taken by military information services. Dutch citizens were not well informed. Indeed, there was little provision for transparent information and only biased images about the struggle in the Netherlands East Indies.

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Reference

- 1 This article is a translation of (an edited version of) the summary from Louis Zweers' 2013 PhD dissertation: "Doodzwingen leek de beste oplossing. Militairen versus media, Nederlands-Indië, 1945-1949" ['Silence is the best solution'. The military versus the media in the Netherlands East Indies 1945-1949]