

Dutch PM apologises for state's role in abuses in 1940s Indonesian war

Friday 15 April 2022, by [BOFFEY Daniel](#) (Date first published: 17 February 2022).

Study finds 'widespread' ill-treatment and extrajudicial executions during 1945-9 war of independence

Mark Rutte, the prime minister of the [Netherlands](#), has apologised after an inquiry revealed that the Dutch state condoned the systematic use of extrajudicial executions and torture during the 1945-9 Indonesian war of independence.

The "extreme violence" of the Netherlands' military and intelligence services was said in the report to have been sanctioned at the highest levels of government, with all considerations subordinated to the goal of maintaining the colony.

The government's position, held since an inquiry in 1969 concluded there had been only isolated "excesses" and that the armed forces "on the whole" had behaved correctly, was condemned in the report as "untenable".

After the publication of the inquiry's findings, Rutte said: "I make a deep apology to the people of [Indonesia](#) today for the systematic and widespread extreme violence by the Dutch side in those years and the consistent looking away by previous cabinets."

Rutte said the blame did not belong to individual soldiers but to the system at the time. "The prevailing culture was one of looking away, shirking and a misplaced colonial sense of superiority," he said. "That is a painful realisation, even after so many years."

Dr Rémy Limpach, one of the historians involved in the research, said part of the explanation for the conduct of the Dutch, which he said amounted at times to a "reign of terror", was its weakness in the face of guerrilla tactics.

"Often it follows from a feeling of powerlessness, frustration, feeling that you have got your back against the wall," Limpach said. "Not being able to handle the conflict with normal military means."

The government-funded research, undertaken over four and a half years, offers a challenging perspective on a period of history that remains raw to many in the Netherlands, where the country's colonial record is fiercely contested.

On 17 August 1945, two days after Japan's surrender brought an end to the second world war, the Indonesian revolutionaries Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta declared independence, breaking with 350 years of Dutch exploitation.

The government in The Hague rejected the move and between the independence declaration and the withdrawal of Dutch forces on 27 December 1949 an estimated 100,000 Indonesians were killed, compared with about 5,300 fighting on the Dutch side, including Indonesians in their service.

"The sources show that the use of extreme violence by the Dutch armed forces was not only widespread but often deliberate, too," the Dutch and Indonesian researchers wrote. "It was condoned at every level: political, military and legal. The reason for this was that the Netherlands wanted to defeat the Republic of Indonesia – which had declared independence on 17 August 1945 – at any cost, and was prepared to subordinate almost everything to this goal. In doing so, ethical boundaries, including those that applied at the time, were emphatically crossed."

The army was "frequently and structurally" guilty of "extrajudicial executions, ill-treatment and torture, detention under inhumane conditions, arson of houses and villages, and often arbitrary mass arrests and internments", the report's researchers said. Rape was not normally condoned but it was lightly punished, if at all.

A spokesperson for the Veterans Platform, an organisation representing former Dutch military personnel, claimed the research underplayed the violence unleashed by those fighting for independence.

He said: "The decolonisation period has been too emphatically examined from the perspective of contemporary norms, values and ethical considerations. Unfortunately, more than 200,000 veterans are implicitly portrayed as extreme perpetrators of violence and they and their relatives are insulted and stigmatised."

An organisation said to represent Indo-Dutch people, Platform 2.0, had appealed to the courts to block the report's publication.

The research, conducted by the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, the Netherlands Institute of Military History and the Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, will be published in 14 books, including a summary volume, *Beyond the Pale: Dutch Extreme Violence in the Indonesian War of Independence, 1945-1949*.

The Dutch king, Willem-Alexander, apologised in 2020 for the "excessive violence" inflicted on Indonesia during colonial rule, the first admission of regret since independence.

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