



II.

INTERMEZZO





The human dimension

The search for stories about the Indonesian War of Independence

EVELINE BUCHHEIM, FRIDUS STEIJLEN,
STEPHANIE WELVAART

Edi Kuncoro, born on 27 December 1930 in Boyolali, Surakarta/Solo, joined the *Barisan Pemberontakan Rakyat Indonesia* (BPRI) as a fifteen-year-old boy in December 1945.¹ This people's movement was founded by the famous resistance fighter and later politician Sutomo (better known as Bung Tomo), who played an important role in the Battle of Surabaya in November 1945. Pak (Mr) Edi related how the Dutch had repeatedly violated their trust at that time:

We fought the British, they came without permission and wanted to free the prisoners of war. They released the Dutch who had been held captive by the Japanese. Without our knowing it, the Dutch army joined them [the British]. That was NICA, the Netherlands Indies Civil Administration. They wanted to restore order and arm the prisoners

A relief located at the heroes' cemetery in Koto Nan Gadang, Payakumbuh, 2008.

Photo: Fridus Steijlen.

who were held captive in Ambarawa. I fought in the second line, in Banyubiru. The battle took place in Ambarawa and was led by Pak Dirman, General Sudirman.²

In 1947, Willem F. van Breen, born in Amsterdam on 13 March 1925, went to North Sumatra as a conscript with the 4-2 RI battalion. He described an experience that stayed with him for life:

We were on patrol. [...] We arrived at a *kampung* and came under fire. We were lying in a trench and had to fire the mortar. Next to me the sergeant says: 'Van Breen, mortar fire'. But we were lying in the trench and I had to go and stand on the road. Crouching on the road I fired the mortar, I fired 15-20 mortar bombs at the *kampung*. Later we entered the *kampung*, and then I saw the effect. Those are the things that keep me awake at night. They were civilians; as far as they were men, I could be at peace with that, certainly, because they were not in uniform, they were civilians, that was guerrilla warfare. As far as they were women and children, that of course was very difficult. A mortar bomb doesn't just make a little hole, they were all dead. Well, there was nothing we could do...³

What can personal stories, such as the stories of these two veterans, tell us about the Indonesian War of Independence? Their accounts do not necessarily represent 'the' Indonesian or 'the' Dutch perspective: they are the experiences of 'just' two soldiers who were on opposing sides between 1945 and 1949. Their experiences differ in many respects, but there are also similarities. Both men were young; the Indonesian veteran was even younger than the Dutchman. Both felt they had little choice but to fight for their country. The Dutch veteran was sent out as a conscript, the Indonesian veteran could not imagine not defending Indonesian freedom. Their stories show that neither had a complete overview of the conflict. One had heard that NICA was going to arm internees in Ambarawa, the other was fired at and had to respond. Each felt that they had to do what they did. Instinct told them they had no other option. Their stories bring nuance and personal justification to grand historical narratives, but they also create room for doubt.⁴ Hesitation is an excellent measure of the human dimension, the realm of personal experience and perception; and that is what we were seeking in the Witnesses & Contemporaries project.

By paying attention to the experiences and memories of individuals and small groups, and by focusing on their personal stories, we come closer to different people's individual perceptions. Searching for the human dimension can help us to understand events that took place in the past. Moreover, we gain greater insight into the way in which these events are remembered afterwards, by the witnesses themselves as well as the social communities to which they belong. When we create space for multiple perspectives, different or even conflicting views and ways of thinking are given a place in the historical narrative, and the layered nature of history becomes clearer as a result.⁵

More or less official stories about the war are in circulation in both the Netherlands and Indonesia, perpetuated by the government, politics, the army or other groups and institutions. In these narratives, meaning is ascribed to the past; they reflect the norms, values and beliefs of a country, organization or community. Yet behind these grand overarching narratives lie a multitude *and* an incredible variety of personal stories. Stories that may deviate from and add nuance to the official versions. Stories about fear, about hesitation, about choices that turned out not to be real choices at all. Stories that reflect the experiences of individuals and small groups, stories that in fact make up the human dimension of history, that show how the past was lived and how it was perceived and remembered.

Personal stories and overarching narratives are rarely in sync, and for that reason alone, personal stories all too easily become hidden in the public domain. After all, a tangle of divergent storylines seldom makes history any clearer. In order to get a grip on history nevertheless, we often resort to timelines and national canons, which can serve as frameworks for historical narrative. In doing so, we attempt to bring order to the past, but at the same time we make choices, consciously or not; emphasis is placed on a certain perspective, whether it is the national perspective or that of a particular social group.

IN SEARCH OF STORIES

The emphasis of the Witnesses & Contemporaries project was on collecting as many different stories as possible. Designed as a kind of 'window', or 'front office', that could be approached by people who were personally involved in this history, the project soon took an active course, inviting people in the Netherlands and Indonesia to share their personal stories and individual experiences.⁶ As the majority of the research was carried out in the Nether-

lands, where the Witnesses & Contemporaries project was based, this did not work equally well in the two countries. Despite this, we also managed to gather Indonesian stories.

In the Netherlands, the invitation to share personal stories prompted hundreds of emails and letters, telephone conversations, multiple interviews and group conversations, as well as original material from the war years themselves – such as diaries, photographs and letters. Some people shared only a short anecdote, others added more general political or sociological views or related what the period had meant to them personally. Yet others shared diary entries or correspondence written by their parents, and added their own reflections on this. Sometimes they searched for additional information among their parents' papers. All in all, the programme yielded a large quantity of material, in addition to what had already been collected in previous projects.⁷

This large collection of stories allows us to depict the past through a kaleidoscope, as it were, with a multitude of colours, perspectives, timelines, aspects and elements. The personal documents and stories offer an opportunity to get closer to the experiences of the people who helped to shape history, and who lived through and experienced it as eyewitnesses in different ways, and with different nuances and different accents, which have also changed in the course of time. Thanks to these personal impressions and stories, we not only acquire a clearer view of individual choices and circumstances, but we also gain a better understanding of history.

But that is not all: individual perspectives also help us to look critically at official sources, such as colonial archives, which are often formed by institutions and dominated by colonial ideas. Minority voices or divergent opinions are less common in such sources, or they are framed in a specific way, certainly when they concern controversial issues such as violence or rebellion against authority or intimacy, to name a few obvious examples.

In her book, *Along the Archival Grain*, Ann Stoler suggests 'reading along' with the colonial archive in order to gain a better understanding of the nature, the concerns and the fears of the colonial state.⁸ In addition, postcolonial and feminist researchers suggest that these archives should also be read 'against the grain', and personal testimonies and documents can help us to do this. It soon became clear that many people not only wanted to relate their experiences, but they also wanted to share their personal views on the overarching research programme, and on the social debate about the period between 1945 and 1949 in Indonesia. This was the response of one man, for

example, who, although he himself was not directly involved, grew up in a small Frisian village with 500 inhabitants, ten of whom went to Indonesia at that time. He wrote:

[they left] ... a hole in the village community and came back totally changed. In doing so, they encountered a lack of understanding from their family and a village community misinformed by government censorship.

He expressed his concern about the focus of the research 'on the violence, which emphasized the soldiers' guilt, while at the same time keeping those who decided to wage war out of range'.⁹

Suggestions were also made regarding the publications we should read and themes we should address. For example, a Dutchman who had been sixteen back then, and who had wondered at the time why soldiers were being sent to die again so soon after the end of the Second World War, wrote that the research should focus on the role of 'the people behind the scenes at that time, who set this whole disgraceful history in motion, the plantation owners and other private parties who wanted to see their interests safeguarded after the Second World War'.¹⁰ There was also criticism, for example from a former trade unionist who had himself published a book on the Indonesian Revolution, who wrote that there was every sign that the research would produce a 'second *Excessennota* [memorandum on excesses]', because the focus on excessive violence seemed to imply that 'there is also violence that is not excessive. So where to draw the line?'¹¹

From the outset, the aim was to give the floor to a wide range of witnesses and contemporaries. In the Netherlands, we put out calls to reach specific target groups or made appeals linked to certain themes, so that we could gather less well-known stories and testimonies. For example, those of conscientious objectors and soldiers who refused to follow certain orders, such as Mr Bruin, who was sent to Indonesia as a marine. He related how he was ready to fight for his 'native country'; he had no problem with the military culture of authority. But he nevertheless refused to follow one order. One day, he was sent to a kampong where a house was on fire. Dutch soldiers yelled that no one should be allowed to flee from the surrounding houses.

Then I suddenly saw a little boy walking through the *sawa* [rice field], a little boy aged ten, eight or ten. [...] Then the commander said to me,

‘Open fire!’ All at once he said, ‘In a warzone I give the command to “fire!”, you do it or else’ [...] But I didn’t open fire. I let that boy walk on. I thought, ‘I can’t shoot a child.’ So I didn’t. The child got away.¹²

Stories like these raise questions about where personal boundaries lie, from refusing to serve to refusing to follow an order. When do soldiers feel that violence is justified and when does it go too far? Mr Den Adel told us that at the time, he did not question the order to set houses on fire, even if he did not know whether anyone was inside:

When the fire had burned itself out, we went back. Yes, it didn’t really bother me, you know. The house burned down and it was over. We’d carried out another task. Yes, at that time I thought about it very differently from the way I do now. Now it’s just regret, regret and shame, but I didn’t feel that back then.¹³

Another way to find witnesses was to put out a call to people who could share common experiences, such as women who had served in the armed forces or people who could speak about specific historical events, such as the Republican camps or the *Bandung Lautan Api*, the ‘Bandung Sea of Fire’ on 24 March 1946, when a large part of the southern side of Bandung was torched by retreating Indonesian Republicans.

By interviewing people who were in the same place at more or less the same time, we could enrich their experiences with images and stories from others who were relatively close by. Moreover, it allowed us to look ‘over the fence’ at what was happening on the ‘other side’. The witness seminar at which we spoke with three members of the Indo-Dutch community about their experiences in Bandung in 1945-1946 gave an impression of what had happened in the northern part of the city.¹⁴ The conversation took us through the streets of Bandung on the Dutch side of the demarcation line, the railway that ran through the middle of the city. The witnesses recounted the tense situations they had experienced, but also how they had been helped by Indonesians.¹⁵ Ami spoke of *pemuda*, as the Dutch called Republican youths, who wanted to force their way into his aunt’s house. His aunt knew that there was an Indonesian armed guard in the neighbouring house at night, and she called out to him loudly in Indonesian for help:

And then he came. And he fired in the air. And then the youths came, they were in the backyard. They stole away immediately... When people say the pemuda [young irregular fighters] were all murderers, then I have to say, now we were the exception. Our family is alive thanks to the pemuda.

An incident that occurred during a transport of people who had been taken for their own protection from their homes on Lembang Road was still fresh in Robert's mind. They were shot at by snipers and had to seek cover in the ditch by the road, and unfortunately there were many fatalities among them. But, he countered:

We're talking about these troubles... and all the misery we went through. But I know from my own experience, and from several friends, that they personally sometimes received great help from Indonesian boys, girls, women, who helped them at the time... we should think of that too, of course...

Connie described the dangers she faced when she went out to fetch milk, and how she had to lie still in the ditch when *peloppers* (fighters) turned up: 'That's logical, because they don't see you in the ditch. But what's more, if they do shoot, then you hope the bullets will pass over you. Then you're safer there, relatively speaking.'

After this group interview in the Netherlands, we searched for Indonesian accounts of these events. During a visit to a veterans' office in Bandung, we were able to interview veteran Pak Ididjuhana, who had lived through the *Lautan Api*. The conversation was special for two reasons. First, because he told his story at the office of the war veterans' legion, surrounded by other veterans. Second, because his story gave insight into what happened to the people on what is described in the Netherlands as the 'other side of the demarcation line'. He spoke of Indonesian colleagues who sometimes crossed the demarcation line:

We went there for surveillance activities. Some of us were taken prisoner when they were spying on the Dutch in the north. But they were unarmed; they were simply locating the Dutch troops. Some of my friends were captured and were never able to return. I don't know where they are. We were defending our territory. Between 1945 and 1946, there was a lot of fighting.

When the Republican troops withdrew from the city in March 1946, they used a scorched earth tactic: they set fire to buildings that could be used by the Dutch. Part of the city burned down as a result. Pak Ididjuhana described his experiences on 24 March 1946:

I was in the south. [...] I was stationed with the battalion in Gang Pab-aki. [...] My group was ordered to patrol Bandung train station. We were ordered to watch out for attacks from the north. The station was located near the governor's office. I was on patrol until midnight. We didn't receive any orders to set fire to Bandung. We were just on patrol. No orders. But when I looked up, the sky had turned crimson.

Pak Ididjuhana then described how, as he slowly fell back to the south, he witnessed hundreds of people fleeing their homes. He helped to evacuate the hospital, but he also set fire to buildings:

I burned things there. Why did we burn it all? Because we didn't want everything to be misused by the foreign troops.¹⁶

Another historical event that served as the starting point for gathering personal experiences was the violence that took place near Payakumbuh, on Sumatra. This was also investigated by the research programme as part of the project on the intelligence services.¹⁷ In Payakumbuh in 1949, young Indonesian men were shot dead by a bridge by Dutch soldiers. Today it is the site of a monument, which was previously visited by one of the researchers of the Witnesses & Contemporaries project, Fridus Steijlen, as part of an audio-visual project. For the book *Sporen vol betekenis* [Meaningful Traces], which is being published in the context of Witnesses & Contemporaries, he went back to the recordings in order to reflect on what he had seen back then and how he viewed it now. In April 2021, Ody Dwicahyo, another researcher of Witnesses & Contemporaries, also visited the area, full of *lieux de mémoire* – places of remembrance where history is told and retold and constantly acquires new meanings. Today, the actions of the Dutch army in January 1949 are commemorated on Sumatra with several monuments. In Indonesia, such places are easy to find, and they tend to convey a message of victory or make references to Dutch violence. The situation in the Netherlands is different; there, such monuments do not commemorate specific battlefields, but rather the loss and the victims. Discussions about monuments

in the Netherlands continue to this day, mostly about who is commemorated where and in what way.¹⁸

PERSONAL STORIES: REFLECTIONS

Personal stories, like monuments to commemorate the war, show how the same history can be viewed from different perspectives: who tells what from which point of view? What role do these narratives play in the commemoration of the history of this period? And why do some stories become dominant whilst others are overlooked?

Both the dominant narratives and the personal stories are partly coloured by what Gloria Wekker, in her analysis of the multicultural Netherlands, *Witte onschuld: paradoxen van kolonialisme en ras* [White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race], calls the ‘cultural archive’.¹⁹ This ‘cultural archive’ also explains, for example, why Dutch soldiers were able to draw on existing paternalistic and racist ideas about the people of Indonesia despite never having been there. We find echoes of this ‘cultural archive’ in oral and visual sources, both from the time and in the present day.

Language and terminology, words and ideas in contemporary sources can and will be different from today’s norms and ideals. We can draw on these discrepancies between the language of the past and present to gain more insight into how, in different times and in different places, events and people are presented in different ways. There is growing awareness that words matter; the words that we choose to narrate a story can reveal underlying beliefs or prejudices. Nowadays, people in the Netherlands are more aware of the use of terms such as ‘coolie’, ‘slave’, ‘*baboe*’ (‘housemaid’) and ‘*djongos*’ (servant), and what these words may mean for readers or listeners. We are more attuned to how the language we use can have a connecting or exclusionary effect, consciously or unconsciously. Indeed, we need to ask ourselves what impact certain words can have. In order to make this extra step towards greater understanding, it is important to reflect on the words that are used in contemporary material – and sometimes still used, in recent interviews and written material – that are often perceived as hurtful.

Many written sources about the violence in the period between 1945 and 1949, such as battlefield reports by the Dutch army, were produced for a specific purpose. When we use them today, we should take account of that original context. Source criticism also means asking ourselves how credible or factual the story that is being told actually is. Oral history sources present similar problems. For example, it is difficult to make a precise distinction

between our own experiences and the way in which others' stories, or films or books, colour our memories. In any case, we know for sure that the memories that stem from our own minds are not necessarily accurate or reliable. That does not mean that the personal stories have less meaning or no meaning at all; the key is to judge them on their own value and in context.

Written, oral and visual sources offer insight into the personal experiences of people who directly or indirectly witnessed dramatic historical events in the period between 1945 and 1949. These stories go beyond experiences alone; they also offer insight into the sensitivities involved. Moreover, they show how emotions and loyalties shaped decisions and how those experiences are viewed in retrospect. The starting point of the Witnesses & Contemporaries project was to make our representation of the past more inclusive and varied by creating space for as many different perspectives as possible, without claiming to be comprehensive. After all, not everyone can or wishes to write, and not everyone is able or prepared to tell their story. Moreover, not everything that has ever been described has been preserved. The material that we have at our disposal today has already undergone a considerable process of pre-selection over time.

WRITTEN SOURCES

When it comes to personal sources written at the time of the conflict – such as letters, diaries and memoirs – or life stories that are written after the event, there are various questions to consider: who can or who wants to make his or her voice heard? For someone from the Netherlands who is far away from home and finds himself in a new environment, writing things down is an obvious way to inform his absent family while at the same time processing new impressions. But the extent to which someone is used to setting his thoughts on paper also plays a role. It is questionable whether it was common practice for the Indonesians involved or KNIL soldiers to put pen to paper in order to record their thoughts and experiences; and if this did happen, were their writings preserved and can we trace them? In the end, the written personal sources that we consulted were mostly Dutch sources, which in itself gave an unbalanced picture. Nevertheless, the Dutch sources turned out to represent a wide range of very diverse experiences and ideas.²⁰

Letters and diaries written by civilians or soldiers can provide insight into how the war was seen by contemporaries who were sometimes in the very midst of the action. Many of these writings were cherished for years by the writers or the recipients, often as a personal reminder of a significant period

in their lives. Other personal documents were forgotten but then rediscovered again after many years. Much of the material we have at our disposal is from people who had a connection with the Netherlands at the time. For them, writing was a way to keep in touch with the home front, but also a way to document or process new experiences in an unfamiliar world. The letters also describe the emotions and loyalties that influenced decisions at the time. In retrospect, these letters often turn out to have had many more functions than the writer anticipated. Although the degree of reflection and explanation varies greatly from writer to writer, individually – and certainly in large quantities – they add nuance to the many official reports and thereby further our understanding of the human dimension.

In the letter that the Dutchwoman Eida Tan-Schepers wrote to her parents in The Hague, two weeks after her Chinese husband Dr Tan Sin Hok had been killed by Indonesians, she described his murder at length. This description of a murder during *bersiap* is in itself remarkable, but the letter also offers insight into the couple's considerations at the time:

Neither of us wanted to enter the camp anymore, and because Hok belonged to a race that was well regarded by both parties, we believed ourselves to be safe in an ordinary street – but it was precisely that street that was chosen for destruction – When the houses opposite ours were in flames, I still thought that they would pass us by – I was not afraid for a moment, and the last thing I said to Hok was: 'Rest assured, nothing will happen to us!' By that time they had already started smashing our windows and Hok left us for the last time – When I went to look, maybe fifteen minutes later – he was lying on the ground, unconscious I thought, not for one moment did it occur to me that he might be dead – It was around 7 o'clock in the evening and already dark, I couldn't see his injuries – I waited another hour or so for help, not imagining that in an area protected by the English no help would come in such a situation. I then ran to the Hospital, where hundreds of healthy Dutchmen wearing red crosses were hanging around – They promised me they would come and get Hok, I could assure them the hordes had left – but the heroes did not dare to – I waited the whole night at Borromeus [hospital] for news of Hok's arrival – Although I could not imagine that Hok was not alive, I started to realize that he might also die – so I was completely calm when I received the news the following morning.

In letters such as this, we are taken into a very personal, dramatic time. We should not forget, though, that (self-)censorship, certainly in the case of letters written by soldiers, could influence what was shared. This is clear from a collection of letters that we received, written by a Dutch conscript soldier to his family and several friends in the Netherlands between 1948 and 1950.²¹ The collection includes a letter from 2009, in which the writer reflects on an old letter that he wrote to a friend on 24 May 1949, and that he had re-read:

Thank you very much for sending my letter from Watoetoelis that you found. It evokes a lot of memories. [...] The story of the 'baboe from Surabaya' was actually a little different. And it shocked me very much, and I didn't dare write that to you.

This is followed by an explicit description of the sexual abuse of an Indonesian woman, and to this memory he adds another of how he witnessed the shooting of an elderly man during a 'sweep' of a kampong.

The kampong was surrounded and then a group of marines went from house to house through the kampong to track down peloppers. I had to hide behind a bush with another marine, someone I didn't know, watching to make sure no one escaped from the kampong. In the first light of day we saw an old man emerge from the back of his house, stand still in his garden and stretch. 'Beng', my colleague shot him. While I don't think that there was any question of his trying to flee. Then the endless waiting, until we got the signal to go on. Upon which my colleague walked up to the shot man, took a quick look, and shot him dead. He came back: 'I just gave him a mercy shot, my previous bullet had hit him in the neck.' As though he'd been a sick dog. Harmless. A sleepy old man.

Only years later would he dare to write about it. If we only had access to the letters from the years 1945-1949, we would not have read about such incidents, or only in euphemistic form. Then we mostly would have read about incidents such as his day of leave in May 1949, when he made a sailing trip from Surabaya to Madura with some friends and the boat's owner, a former marine, and three of his nieces, after which they drove a military car along the beach on Madura: 'The girls kept finding shells

and stones, they ran up and down at breakneck speed and chattered. Another funny incident,’ and ‘we ate lots of chicken and a huge amount of ice cream’. Individual experiences shed light on personal circumstances and perceptions. In addition, they show how some memories are accessible while others are not; how, consciously or unconsciously, certain memories are hidden away or given space. The war veteran ends his letter by reflecting on the murder of the elderly man: ‘I had no idea what to do about it, it remains a horrible memory. That also explains why I’d “erased” other memories too, such as the one of that sailing trip. Enough of the past.’

Although the focus of the overarching research programme is on the period between 1945 and 1950, we never imposed this periodization on the Witnesses & Contemporaries project. Divisions into historical periods are constructed with hindsight and often are out of step with witnesses’ experiences. For many Indo-Dutch, the Japanese occupation flowed almost seamlessly into the threats and the violence of *bersiap*. Indonesians may have experienced the invasion of the Japanese army as a change of colonial power. And then again: during the conflict, people were sometimes confronted with several changes of power without their lives being transformed substantially in the meantime. We were given a good example of this during an interview with Tarsu’ah, a 93-year-old grandmother from Salem on the border between West and Central Java. She related how one time fighters of the Republican Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI) had come to the village, another time the militia of the Islamic Darul Islam, and yet another time the Dutch army. As she remembered it, they had all done the same thing: steal her chickens. Only the way in which they did it differed.

GROUP INTERVIEWS

In the interviews and witness seminars that we held for the Witnesses & Contemporaries project, the period 1945-1949 could not be viewed in isolation from the colonial history that preceded it. In the seminar with eyewitnesses with Chinese or Indo-Chinese backgrounds, it became clear how far their parents’ social position had determined whether they came into contact with other communities in the former Dutch East Indies, a society that was segregated along ethnic lines. Patricia, who had two Chinese parents, knew Indonesians mainly as servants. She spent most of her childhood in a Chinese neighbourhood. ‘Only afterwards’, she said, ‘when looking back,

do I see how all of those communities lived in their own bubble ... to use the modern term'. At Lisa's home, with her Chinese father Tan Sin Hok and Dutch mother Eida Tan-Schepers, Indonesians were also servants. Her parents were oriented towards European culture, and their circle of friends mainly consisted of Europeans and Chinese. The home of Abraham, the third witness to take part in the seminar, was visited by well-to-do Europeans and Chinese, as well as Indonesians from the same class, such as Indonesian doctors.

Their experiences during the period 1945-1949 were very different. We asked them which events in those years had made the greatest impression on them. Much passed Patricia by, as she was still very young in 1945. That was due to her age, but also where she lived. During the Japanese occupation, her family had moved from Cirebon to the relatively closed and safe Chinese neighbourhood in Semarang. After the Japanese surrender, during *bersiap*, her parents went back to Cirebon to see whether they could get their businesses back. She remembered her parents being worried, mostly about the businesses, but they never talked about their experiences during the revolution. Lisa spoke about the killing of her father, which we read about in the aforementioned letter from her mother. During the witness seminar she gave her own version of the story, but she also spoke about the rising tensions in the preceding period:

I was walking along with my father, briefly on the street, while there was all that shouting going on, when it was so threatening. It was a dreadful sound, of course. We walked past a cornfield. I wanted to pick a corncob, and a man with a gun was sitting there. He turned the barrel on me. So I stood eye to eye with death for a moment, but then I went back to my father.

Abraham's experience was also different. He was fifteen years old at the time and lived in Kediri. When the fighting broke out in Surabaya in November 1945, the refugee flows started, including towards Kediri. Abraham was a member of the Chinese boy scouts, who were sent to the station each morning to receive and help the refugees, for example by transporting their luggage on bicycles. There were also *pemuda* at the station, who sometimes hassled the girls. The Chinese boys could do little about it; the *pemuda* were armed, the Chinese scouts were not. This was deliberate, said Abraham, in order to prevent escalation; otherwise they would be suspected of being

against the pemuda and on the side of the Dutch. They knew that things had got out of hand elsewhere on Java. 'We lived separately from each other, as it were', Abraham explained. 'The pemuda walked with *bambu runcings* [sharpened bamboo spears] and we had our bikes.'

We sometimes gained new perspectives when we asked witnesses to reflect collectively on their experiences during group interviews. Moreover, this setting provided an insight into the often winding road that the stories could take from the actual event to the eventual memory. It showed how memories can assume different forms at different times, and how personal memories are partly influenced by collective memories.²²

This was clearly evident from a group interview in 2018 with civilian internees who had ended up in the Republican camp Sumobito (on East Java) after the Japanese surrender. The participants added to each other's stories and shared their memories, which sometimes varied widely. Some had experienced the camp as a hostage camp, others as a place that offered protection. Class, age, prior history and the time of arrival seem to have shaped their experiences. They also reflected on how memories could suddenly surface at times. One of the participants related how, at the time of the Bosnian war, he had been overwhelmed by memories of his time in Indonesia; another actively went in search of additional memories and stories by organizing a camp reunion.²³ The dynamic in the group interviews was not only inspiring for the participants, but it was also an enriching experience that yielded new information for the project.

As interesting and informative as interviews with eyewitnesses conducted 70 years later can be, we should not forget that these people were extremely young when the events took place. The older eyewitnesses whom we describe here were recalling memories of their lives as teenagers or young adults. During the group interview with people who had been teenagers in the divided city of Bandung in the spring of 1946, Ami explained that it took many years for him to understand what had happened there in those days. He said: 'At that time, we had no idea what was going on in the southern part of the city, which was in Indonesian hands. Only years later [...] did I read in a book about what had played out mere kilometres from my own home.'²⁴

The stories that emerge in families as a result of personal documents and conversations can have a major impact on younger generations. Exchange with others can thus lead to new insights. In 2021, we organized an online group discussion with the children and grandchildren of war veterans from

Indonesia and the Netherlands.²⁵ The participants had similar questions about the role played by their parents and grandparents, and there was also space to share different experiences. During the conversation, family stories could be placed in a broader context. The participants John and Frans related how the years 1945-1949 had changed their fathers' lives. Cousins Santi and Ratmurti, also known as Songsong, said that their grandfather actually spoke more about later times, namely the thirteen years during which he was village chief; for them, the period that we focused on during the witness seminar was too limited. Ratmurti: 'In 1965, my grandfather was village chief; those were hard times, because the regime rounded up every member of the communist party.'

The conversation again highlighted the importance of personal documents for relatives, and how egodocuments are sometimes deliberately withheld or only later shared more widely in the family. Frans explained that at the age of sixteen, for example, he protested against the American war in Vietnam and thereby brought international politics into the family, but his father never wanted to talk about it. When Poncke Princen (a soldier who defected from the Dutch to the Indonesian side) appeared on TV in the mid-1980s, his father also remained silent: 'I was with my parents and wanted to talk about him. I know there was a diary. They refused to give it to me; it was lost, burned, etc. My father became furious when I asked him to talk about it.' During the group interview, Ratmurti, in turn, shared documents that he had recently found, which showed that his grandfather had been part of the student army in 1945-1948, and had joined the Siliwangi division in 1949. This came as a surprise to his cousin Santi:

I have never seen these documents, except for that last one. [...] This discussion opens up opportunities, so that we can create a new perspective. [...] Yesterday I asked my father. He answered that he knew nothing about it. I think that these documents were in the possession of Songsong's mother because she cared for my grandfather before he died. Yes, it is so heart-warming to see all these documents, what he did, that I really... My whole life, his whole life, there was a part of his personal identity we never really knew. So it is wonderful to see. [...] It is strange. That is a fact. Even among the family, we don't really have an opportunity to talk about it.

The conversation highlighted the considerations that are made when deciding to share documents within families and with archival institutions. In addition to the question of which people are able or willing to write down their stories, there is the question of which documents are subsequently shared and which remain hidden from wider view. Public archives can give a distorted picture. For example, Frans talked about his considerations when donating his father's diary to NIOD:

If the content had been more controversial, that might have been a problem. [...] For example, descriptions of war crimes, or his own participation, that would be controversial, also from the family's point of view, I think. And that is not the case with my father.

VISUAL SOURCES

Visual sources are well suited to bringing out the human dimension of history. How can you for example use photographs to highlight the role played by female fighters on the Indonesian side? The most telling way would be to use photos of women bearing arms. Our search of the online collections yielded a photo of marching women carrying bambu runcing in the archive of the Indonesian Press Photo Service (IPPHOS). The photography collection of the National Archives of the Netherlands in The Hague also gave a number of hits for female TNI fighters. One of the photos shows three figures strolling through Yogyakarta, then the capital of the Republic of Indonesia. According to the description, the photo shows three female fighters: the one in the middle in a dress, flanked by 'female fighters' in trousers, carrying weapons. The photo was also shown in the 'Revolusi' exhibition in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (2022), but this time the caption referred to young male fighters from Sulawesi, out for a stroll with a female friend; and they are indeed young men with long hair. Taking a closer look at two more photos of 'female fighters' in the National Archives of the Netherlands reveals that they, too, are young men with long hair.

In our book *Sporen vol betekenis*, we used photos and quotes to tell the story of Ibu (Mrs) Djoewariyah, whom we got to know via students at Universitas Gadjah Mada in Yogyakarta. Ibu Djoewariyah had a photo that was taken when she was working for the Red Cross when she was fifteen. She said of this: 'Coincidentally, someone had a Kodak camera with him. He was from the *Tentara Pelajar*, the student army. He took a photo. In fact, it was taken after we had buried a fallen comrade.' Ibu Djoewariyah



Ibu Djoewariyah (standing girl, fourth from the left) as a fifteen-year-old in 1948, with her fellow fighters. On the back of the photo is written: 'Kenangan massa perjuangan Ibu Djoewariyah. Tahun 1948, Clas II Belanda menduduk kota Yogyakarta' / 'Memory of the period of conflict Ibu Djoewariyah, 1948, Confrontation II, the Netherlands occupies Yogyakarta.' Source: Private collection of Ibu Djoewariyah.

became involved with the Red Cross when she saw refugees passing by her home. She gradually became active as a courier, too, carrying information from the city to the guerrilla fighters in the mountains outside Yogyakarta. She regularly visited a warung (restaurant) in the city centre, which functioned as a meeting point for the guerrillas. Nowadays there is a relief in front of the restaurant, showing the guerrilla activities. Photos of the relief and the warung allowed us to visualize Ibu Djoewariyah's story. A photo of Ibu Djoewariyah with the students who were at our interview added a further layer to these images. It shows how she passed on her story to the following generations, an important theme in the Witnesses & Contemporaries project. Sadly, we learned that Ibu Djoewariyah died on 1 October 2021.

The photographs and photo albums that were sent to Witnesses & Contemporaries belonged almost exclusively to soldiers from the Royal Neth-

erlands Army (Koninklijke Landmacht). Most albums bear a remarkable number of similarities, not only in relation to the subjects in the photos, but also literally: the same photos pop up in multiple albums. The reason for this is that only a limited number of soldiers had a camera, and some of those who did shared or sold prints of their photos among their comrades. Often the films were developed on Java and the negatives were sent to the Netherlands to be printed, after which the ordered photos were sent back to Indonesia and distributed there. Moreover, servicemen bought copies of army photos.

What photo albums look like and what is made visible or invisible is partly determined by the intended audience. Were the albums compiled for relatives, as personal commemorative albums, or to share with other soldiers? For example, the albums that we know of from Indonesia tend to be official commemorative books. Although there was always a larger audience for these photos, for example within veterans' circles, and the line between private and public was sometimes blurred as a result, it is important to be aware that the compiler made certain choices and that the donor – who could be the compiler, but also a family member – chose to share the photo album with an archive in the first place. Although photo albums were also compiled by Dutch and Indo-Dutch civilians, for example, these were not offered to the project as frequently.

A collection of photo albums on the same period or theme can reveal how photographic material is presented and how countless choices are thereby made at different levels. Who is visible and who is missing from the photos? Which photos are ultimately included, and which are repeat-ordered and circulated widely? One such example is that of photos of the graves and funerals of Dutch soldiers, which seldom show their human remains, as compared to the (rarer) photos of the dead bodies of Indonesian soldiers/fighters, frequently still lying in the place where they were shot. The depiction of death could not be more different.²⁶

The captions provide an additional layer of meaning. What is explained and what needs no explanation? In some albums, for example, there are no captions for photos showing soldiers posing in front of a car, by a panorama or in front of a house, but photos of prisoners and dead bodies are sometimes explained in more detail. In the photo collection belonging to a Dutch marine, for instance, a photo of two dead bodies is accompanied by the following caption: 'Three prisoners escaped in the mine explosion, two of whom were shot on the spot.'²⁷ The former photos would not look out of

place in an album of holiday snaps, and would thus have been more self-explanatory for the intended audience; a caption was therefore considered unnecessary. The compiler of a photo album is telling a story, consciously and sometimes unconsciously. Sometimes the narrative is presented very literally, as in the example of a photo album with the following caption on the last page: *Djokjakarta, hotel Merdeka en het paleis van Soekarno, 't sprookje is uit...*' [Yogyakarta, hotel Merdeka and the palace of Sukarno, the fairy tale is over...].²⁸

Objects, like personal documents, can also tell a story; this was something that Ody Dwicahyo noticed after the death of his grandpa. The latter had fought against the Dutch and had the right to a veteran's funeral. The officer who was arranging the funeral asked the family for documents that could prove his involvement in the fight against the Dutch. It turned out that Ody's grandpa had created an entire archive, including certificates for his medals, a membership card for the veterans' legion, and a report cut out

Medals belonging to Ody's grandfather: twelve in total, three of which were for the War of Independence, the others for domestic military operations. Source: Satrio (Ody) Dwicahyo, collection of the author.



of the newspaper *Berita Bhuana*, in which his name was mentioned as the bearer of the red-and-white flag of the student army, which returned to Yogyakarta after fighters from the Indonesian Republic had taken the city for a short time. He had enlarged this newspaper clipping several times and made a number of photocopies.

This personal archive revealed the story of a young man who had kept moving to different places; Ody's grandfather had fought on several fronts. Unexpectedly, it also revealed the personal story of a Dutch soldier. The archive contained a collection of typed sheets belonging to one of grandpa's comrades; they concerned shared experiences, including an attack on a Dutch patrol at Ngasem market in Yogyakarta. It was later found that the three Dutch soldiers had not survived the incident. During the attack, one of the Dutchmen had lost his helmet, weapon and wallet, and his name was known as a result. In this way, the personal story of a fallen Dutchman intersected with that of Ody's grandpa.

THE HUMAN DIMENSION

The results of the search undertaken by the Witnesses & Contemporaries project show that there are many different stories to be told about the Indonesian struggle for independence. When gathering these stories, we wanted to emphasize their human dimension in particular. In doing so, we wanted not only to reveal the differences and nuances that are often missing from the 'larger historical story', but also to show that exchanging these different experiences and perceptions can help former opponents and different generations to gain a better understanding of diverse positions. Highlighting the human dimension also shows that history and the writing of history are lived and re-lived in dialogue and debate. The stories that were collected are available in the archives, and a detailed anthology of the stories can be found in our book, *Sporen vol betekenis*.

