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Review

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Willem Remmelink, ed. and tran. *The Invasion of the Dutch East Indies*. Compiled by the War History Office of the National Defense College of Japan. Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2015. 640 pp.

David Jenkins

The island of Java, a penny-pinching Dutch Minister of Colonies, Jean Chretien Baud, reminded Governor-General Pieter Merkus in 1842, was “the cork on which the Netherlands floats.”¹ And so it remained for many years. Between 1851–66, remittances from Java were responsible for about one-third of Dutch state revenues.² Late in the nineteenth century, the Dutch began to expand their beachheads in the Outer Islands. That paved the way for still greater revenues—from oil, tin, rubber and other plantation crops. By any measure, the Netherlands East Indies was a prize of inestimable value. Before long, however, the Dutch had grounds for concern. There were threats from both within and without. Japan, which had astonished the world when it defeated the Far Eastern forces of Imperial Russia in 1905, and which had succeeded in gaining control of Korea and Taiwan, was casting a covetous eye on the East Indies. The Dutch, a senior British diplomat noted in 1921, had been “in terror of Japan” during World War I, fearing that Tokyo would ignore the Netherlands’s neutrality and make a lunge for its lucrative and lightly defended tropical possession.³ Although such an attack never occurred, Dutch fear of Japan remained. Nor were those fears unfounded. The Japanese, the British official added, were

... obsessed by the idea that their country is one day destined to be the mistress of the Pacific and of its islands. They regard Holland as a very weak power, and her colonial empire as doomed to disruption. Japan must have a say in the disposal of this rich empire. So she is steadily increasing her knowledge of the country, her vested interests therein, and the numbers of her merchants and colonists.⁴

Despite their fears, the Dutch were guilty of extraordinary complacency. For many years they clung to the principle of strict neutrality while privately believing, or at least hoping, that the British and Americans would never allow the rich East Indies to fall under enemy—by which they meant Japanese—control. A large-scale attack was nearly impossible, they believed, because any hostile Japanese force would have to pass French, American, and British possessions. Britain ruled the waves; Singapore

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¹ Cornelis Fasseur, *The Politics of Colonial Exploitation: Java, the Dutch, and the Cultivation System*, trans. R. E. Elson and Ary Kraal, ed. R. E. Elson (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1992), 57.

² M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia Since c. 1200*, 4th edition (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 149.

³ Minute by Frank Ashton-Gwatkin, March 7, 1921. The National Archives: Public Record Office [hereafter TNA: PRO], FO 371/6696 [F902/902/23], cited in Nicholas Tarling, *Britain, Southeast Asia and the Onset of the Pacific War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Indonesia 102 (October 2016)

was invincible.⁵ The most likely threat, they felt, was a *coup de main*, a swift but essentially limited surprise attack aimed at seizing critical points (*kwetsbare punten*) in the Outer Islands: the oilfields at Tarakan or Balikpapan, perhaps, or the air and naval base at Ambon.⁶ This, the Dutch planners persuaded themselves, just a little too conveniently, would involve a force of no more than four thousand men, put ashore from a fast cruiser squadron with no accompanying troop carriers.⁷ In the mid-1930s, with the worst of the Great Depression behind them, the Dutch began to bolster their defenses in the East Indies. It was a case of too little, too late.

On Sunday, January 11, 1942, five weeks to the day after its attack on Pearl Harbor, Japan struck. Before dawn, a naval landing force went ashore at Menado and Kema in North Sulawesi (Celebes). On the same day, other Japanese units landed at the East Kalimantan (Borneo) oil port of Tarakan; the defending Royal Netherlands Indies Army (Koninklijk Nederlands-Indisch Leger, KNIL) garrison capitulated twenty-four hours later. One Japanese force went on to seize all of eastern Kalimantan. A second swept down through Sulawesi, while subsidiary units captured Ambon and Kupang. A third was standing by to take the most productive oilfields in the Netherlands East Indies, at Palembang in south Sumatra. (In the arresting words of the War History, “it is no exaggeration to say that the Greater East Asian War was launched for the oil in Palembang,” page 269). In the face of these attacks, outlying KNIL detachments wilted.

The great British naval base at Singapore fell on February 15, attacked from the rear by Japanese troops who, having trained for this on long bicycle exercises in Japan, moved swiftly down the Malay Peninsula, backed by light tanks and overwhelming air superiority, against which retreating British and Australian forces had no adequate defense. Throughout this time Dutch fighter pilots from the KNIL air wing made a valiant effort to stem the Japanese advance. But they were swept aside by swarms of Japanese Zero fighters, flown by pilots who had gained invaluable combat experience in China. By late February, the noose had tightened. Java was isolated. Steaming south in two great convoys was the main force of the 97,800-strong Japanese Sixteenth Army; 55,000 of those troops were to land on Java in the first ten days of March. Once ashore, they were to sweep aside 65,000 poorly led and mostly indigenous KNIL troops, of whom only 25,000 were in regular units, leaving about 16,000 British, Australian, and American troops in an impossible position.

The broad outlines of the Japanese assault on the Netherlands East Indies are, of course, well known. That eight-week campaign has been described in official or semiofficial Dutch, British, Australian, American, and Japanese war histories. It has been examined in nonofficial histories, especially in Holland. One such book is the

⁵ Written communication, Colonel J. J. Nortier, March 5, 1996.

⁶ In 1940 the *kwetsbare punten* were Tarakan, Balikpapan, Palembang, and Ambon.

⁷ For details of the 1927 *Defensiegrondslagen* [Defense Foundation] policy paper, see: J. J. Nortier, P. Kuijt, P. M. H. Groen, *De Japanse aanval op Java, Maart 1942* [The Japanese Attack on Java, March 1942] (Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 1994), 19–22; and Herman Theodore Bussemaker, “Paradise in Peril: Western Colonial Power and Japanese Expansion in South-East Asia, 1905–1941” (PhD dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2001), 351–52, 381–82. Bussemaker sets out in almost excessive detail the attempts the Dutch made to build up their defenses ahead of the Japanese assault.

late Colonel J. J. Nortier's *De Japanse aanval op Nederlands-Indie*.⁸ A more specialized study is *De Japanse aanval op Java, Maart 1942*, published by the Military History Department of the Royal Netherlands Army.⁹

These books have their virtues. Some also have their shortcomings. One problem with mainstream Allied war histories is that, written as so many of them were in the first decade or so after the Pacific War, they rely too greatly on Western source material; Japanese perspectives are often missing. Another problem is that many excellent specialized works are in Dutch or in Japanese and not widely accessible to readers unfamiliar with those languages. The present book, a translation sponsored by the nonprofit Corts Foundation in the Netherlands, is a welcome addition to the literature.¹⁰ Handsomely produced, it is a 640-page doorstopper of a volume, complete with excellent maps and some good photographs. It provides an utterly absorbing Japanese account of the assault on the NEI, infinitely more detailed than anything hitherto available in English or Dutch, and enlivened with the odd telling anecdote.¹¹ Inevitably, though, it too has a number of shortcomings.

In a frank introductory note, editor and translator Willem Rummelink, a specialist in Japanese and Indonesian history, who was executive director of the Japan-Netherlands Institute in Tokyo for more than twenty-five years, draws attention to some of the volume's deficiencies. One is that the history of Japan's involvement in the Second World War is still a matter of great controversy, not least in Japan itself. Amid the clamor of discordant voices, amid "the vigorous, if not acrimonious, debate," there is not even agreement in Japan about what to call the war. This controversy, he notes, affected the War History series. A related problem is that while official war histories in the West tend to be commissioned by, and in many cases endorsed by, national governments, the Japanese series was neither commissioned nor endorsed by the government, but nevertheless compiled by a government agency. This, as Rummelink notes, raises the question of whose view it represents, although the resulting text "does to a large extent represent a view shared by Imperial Army

⁸ J. J. Nortier, *De Japanse aanval op Nederlands-Indie* [The Japanese Attack on the Netherlands Indies] (Rotterdam: Ad. Donker, 1988).

⁹ Nortier et al., *De Japanse aanval op Java*. This book has a cover illustration depicting a giant octopus, squatting in the Japanese home islands, with six of its tentacles reaching down to ensnare the hapless islands of the Dutch East Indies. This was a recurrent image in Holland some seventy years ago. It does not seem to have occurred to anyone in Holland at the time that it would have been not unreasonable for an Indonesian to have drawn, very much earlier, a different octopus, this one based in the North Sea, with vast tentacles reaching halfway around the globe to ensnare those same tropical islands. Equally, of course, it would have been possible between 1975–99 to draw a smaller octopus on Java, with tentacles reaching east to ensnare former Portuguese East Timor. Also useful is P. C. Boer, *The Loss of Java: The Final Battles for the Possession of Java Fought by Allied Air, Naval and Land Forces in the Period of 18 February–7 March 1942* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011).

¹⁰ It is a translation of *Ran-In Kōryaku Sakusen* [The invasion strategy for the Dutch East Indies], the third volume in the 102-volume Japanese War History [Senshi Soshō] Series (Tokyo: Asagumo Shimbunsha, 1967). The 102 volumes were produced by the War History Office of the National Defense College of Japan, now the Center for Military History of the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), between 1966 and 1980.

¹¹ The military horses of the 2nd Division, mainly bred in Hokkaido, sailed south of the equator without being allowed to "disembark for bathing," unlike the troops. There were fears the animals would not survive as the invasion convoy entered the tropics. However, the handlers were devoted to their charges and "[even] the officers" volunteered to live in the horse stalls "at the bottom of the ships." Out of more than one thousand horses, "only three succumbed" on the voyage south (250).

veterans.” Still another problem is that the authors of the Japanese war history volumes, not being trained historians, “may not be expected to handle their material with all the conventions of the historian’s craft.” As in older Western military histories, “a certain bias and one-sidedness is inherent” and one finds “a general tendency to skirt controversy and jump as quickly as possible into the nitty-gritty details of the planning and execution of the operation.” That is true. One doesn’t find much in the way of historical context. One is not told of Japanese atrocities.

There is, Rummelink acknowledges, another “limitation.” Despite its title, the book deals mainly with the operations of the Sixteenth Army, which moved on Java, by way of Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and the South China Sea, in the period of mid-January to early March 1942. This means that events in central and northern Sumatra are not dealt with at all, “for they mainly took place after that date and, moreover, fell under the responsibility of the Japanese Twenty-fifth Army,” while operations in the Navy area to the east, including, for example, those in Sulawesi, “are dealt with only very summarily.” The first part of that observation is undeniable: Japanese operations across a vast area of Sumatra are simply not discussed. This is regrettable. It is also frustrating for any reader who might be hoping to learn more about the Japanese Army officers who first encountered Sukarno, who had spent more than four years under town arrest in Bengkulu in southwestern Sumatra, which comes within the purview of this book, but who had, at the last minute, been spirited away by the Dutch to Padang and thus into the pages of quite another volume.

The second suggestion, that operations in eastern Indonesia are given once-over-lightly treatment, overstates the case. The book devotes twelve pages to the capture of Tarakan and Menado and the following 231 pages to what it calls “The Capture of Java’s Dehors.” (This French word, *Dehors*, which appears at the top of every one of those 231 pages, looks distinctly out of place in a book translated from Japanese into English; “Outer Islands” would have been more appropriate.) Even if one deducts from the “Dehors” chapter the sixty-six pages devoted to general preparations and the ninety-three pages on the Southern Sumatra Invasion Operation, one is left with the best part of seventy pages on operations in the east, at Balikpapan and Kendari, at Ambon and Banjarmasin, at Makassar and Bali, and at Kupang and Dili. Included in that is a six-page account of the cabinet-level debate concerning the wisdom of occupying Portuguese Timor, the somnolent colonial backwater of a neutral state Tokyo was anxious not to offend; and another thirteen pages on the subsequent simultaneous attack on Kupang in Dutch West Timor and Dili in Portuguese East Timor.¹² These seventy pages about developments in the east make the absence of anything about operations in central and northern Sumatra all the more glaring.

This “limitation,” it has to be said, stems not from any deficiency in the Japanese War History series itself; the occupation of strategic areas in central and northern Sumatra, which was to follow the capture of Singapore, is dealt with in a 25-page chapter in Volume 5 (*The Invasion of Burma*); other volumes provide additional material

¹² Although the Japanese claimed that their objective was the emancipation of the Far East, they were, of course, self-interestedly selective about which Western colonies they were prepared to liberate. There was to be no freedom for the people of East Timor, lest that drive neutral Portugal into the arms of the Allies. There was to be no freedom for the people of Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos, who came under Vichy France, which, in early 1942, was collaborating closely with Nazi Germany, Japan’s Axis ally. In any event, the “independence” Japan granted Burma and the Philippines in 1943 was a puppet independence.

about operations in the eastern reaches of the archipelago. Rather, it stems from a decision to translate, at this stage, only Volume 3 in the series. One cannot help wonder whether consideration was given to the idea of seeking permission from the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), the copyright holder, to translate the relevant northern Sumatra part of the Burma volume for inclusion in *The Invasion of the Dutch East Indies*. Remmelink makes the point that, respecting the wishes of NIDS, the current volume is translated full and unabridged. That would seem to imply that NIDS might not have countenanced any “gutting” of the Sumatra section of the Burma volume. Against that it should be noted that in 2007 the Australian War Memorial published, in a compact English-language volume, extracts from two other War History volumes.¹³ That would seem to suggest that NIDS was amenable to the publication of abbreviated translations—unless, of course, it decided after that exercise that this was not the best way to proceed.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, this volume is a remarkable exercise in historical retrieval, as indeed are all the volumes in the series. By the end of the war the Japanese had lost—or deliberately destroyed—a vast number of official records; others had been seized by the Allies. Undaunted, the War History Office set about the painstaking work of telling, in elaborate detail, the history of Imperial army and navy operations that had been conducted across a vast sweep of the globe, from Manchuria in the north to the waters off Tasmania in the south, from Madagascar in the west to the California coast in the east. This work was undertaken by teams of veterans. They located every relevant official document, diary, and memoir they could and conducted a great many interviews with those who had taken part in these actions.

Only occasionally, in this volume at least, does the narrative seem a little threadbare and one or two of the assertions questionable. For example, on page 551, the reader is told that as the 48th Division embarked for the Philippines and Java it turned out that a member of the family of the Sultan of Yogyakarta was teaching at Gaoxiong Commercial School in Taiwan, “and the main force of the division took him along to the Philippines.” This (unnamed) aristocrat is said to have landed later at Kragan in East Java with the Japanese, which helped the division familiarize itself with the situation in “eastern Java.” The source for this claim is a memoir by Colonel Kawagoe Moriji, the then chief-of-staff of the 48th Division. This looks like a garbled reference to Raden Mas Sukandar Tjokronegoro, a member of the Sunanate of Surakarta (Solo). Expelled from the elite Hogere Burger School (Higher Civil School) in Malang in the pre-war period, he made his way to Tokyo, where he studied economics. When the war broke out, he joined an army officer’s school in Japan and graduated as a first lieutenant. He landed at Kragan with the Japanese. It seems unlikely that there were two young Javanese aristocrats, one from the dominant court in Yogyakarta, the other from the dominant court in Solo, in the Japanese invasion convoy.

What then of the successful Japanese operations on Java, which did so much to puncture the myth of Dutch invincibility and to which the book devotes almost 170 pages? The Japanese had organized two powerful forces for the capture of Java. A

¹³ *Japanese Army Operations in the South Pacific Area: New Britain and Papua Campaigns, 1942–43*, trans. Steven Bullard (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 2007).

Western Force, which had formed up in Cam Ranh Bay in Indochina, which was governed by the Vichy French, included fifty-six transport vessels escorted by a light aircraft carrier, six cruisers, and nineteen destroyers. It was to put the Japanese 2nd Division ashore at Banten Bay and Merak, at the northwestern corner of Java. The division would drive east to capture Batavia (Jakarta), Buitenzorg (Bogor), and Bandung, where the Dutch planned to make a final stand. Subsidiary units would go ashore at Eretan Wetan, seventeen miles west of Indramayu in West Java, and strike south in a bid to secure the vital Kalijati airfield, twenty-six miles north of Bandung. An Eastern Force would land at Kragan and strike eastward toward the port city of Surabaya and westward into Central Java. The landings in Java took place on March 1, delayed only briefly by the Battle of the Java Sea, in which ships of the Imperial Japanese Navy all but eliminated an Allied naval presence in the NEI, sinking six Allied ships and losing none themselves.

The War History brings these events vividly to life, focusing in detail on the swift Japanese advance and providing rich and colorful detail. In the anchorage at Banten Bay, the ships of the Japanese convoy were briefly menaced in the early hours of March 1, 1942, by the American heavy cruiser USS *Houston* and the Australian light cruiser HMAS *Perth*, both of which were sunk within half an hour. During the confusion, four Japanese transports, including one carrying the commander-in-chief of the Sixteenth Army, Lieutenant General Imamura Hitoshi, were hit by wayward Japanese torpedoes. Heavily damaged and with a punctured fuel tank, Imamura's ship ran aground. Imamura, who was fifty-five, swam around in the oil-covered waters in his life jacket until rescued at around 4:30 AM. His watch had stopped at 2:00 AM. Many of the invasion force's precious radio sets, codebooks, and a "war chest of six million yen" were lost (471). Dutch army engineers had done a good job felling trees and destroying bridges ahead of the landings; this slowed the Japanese advance. The colonial army did not do such a good job when it came to fighting. Some units fought well enough but many put up little, if any, resistance.

The Japanese landing at Kragan was under the command of Lieutenant General Tsuchihashi Yuitsu, commander of the crack 12,900-strong 48th Division, which had attacked and occupied Manila and then pursued General Douglas MacArthur's forces as they withdrew to the Bataan Peninsula.¹⁴ The division, already motorized, had commandeered additional vehicles in Manila and brought them to Java. At Kragan, Tsuchihashi sent his main force racing eastward toward Surabaya, which he reached on March 8. At 10:00 AM that day, forward units reported a white flag flying on the Wonokromo bridge on the southern approaches to the city. At 1:30 PM, after some hesitation, Tsuchihashi called off a planned 2:00 PM artillery bombardment of Surabaya. For the howitzer battery of the 17th Field Heavy Artillery Regiment, "which had come in high spirits from Manchuria" (565), the Java operation ended with them not having fired a single shot. Owing to the loss of the radio sets at Banten Bay, there was no communication between Imamura's headquarters in the west and Tsuchihashi's division in the east until a Japanese plane dropped a communications

¹⁴ The motorized 48th Division had originally been earmarked for the Malaya campaign. In August 1941 it was switched to the invasion of the Philippines and Java.

cylinder at Surabaya nine days after the landings, advising that the Dutch had surrendered.¹⁵

In the meantime, other motorized columns, under Major General Sakaguchi Shizuo, had raced southward and westward, capturing the oil fields at Cepu and the court cities of Solo and Yogyakarta before sweeping on to the south coast port of Cilacap, to prevent Dutch forces escaping to West Java. Although headed by a two-star general, the Sakaguchi Detachment was a force of barely two battalions. To disguise this fact, it divided up into three echelons, each with a strength of fewer than three companies, hoping to convince the Dutch they faced an entire division. This ploy, and Sakaguchi's bold and rapid charge across Central Java, succeeded. Unnerved, the KNIL was soon in disarray. In Yogyakarta on March 5, Major Kanauji Ken'ichi's echelon surprised the Dutch commander and took seven hundred prisoners. Barely pausing for breath, Kanauji swept on toward Cilacap, leaving his prisoners in the hands of three Japanese soldiers—a captain, an NCO, and a private. In the first six days, the Kanauji Echelon had averaged an advance of one hundred kilometers a day.

The Japanese had anticipated in December 1941 that it might take them twenty to sixty days to capture Java. In the event they gained control of the island in just nine days, for the loss of 255 dead. (More than 3,500 Japanese officers and troops had been killed in the Malayan campaign.) They took 82,600 prisoners of war, including about 10,600 British soldiers, 4,900 Australians, and nearly 900 Americans. They also captured 85,000 rifles and machine guns and 89 million rounds of ammunition.

In some ways it is a pity that this volume was not translated into English decades ago: it would have been of great interest to many non-Japanese who fought in the East Indies or who experienced the horrors and upheavals brought on by the war; it would have been a boon for historians who did not have ready access to Japanese-language material. Laments of that kind can be made about many works of history, however. Whatever the delay, we are fortunate to have such a book. And fortunate, too, that Remmelink is translating a second War History volume: *Senshi Sosho 26, The Naval Drive to the Dutch East Indies and the Bay of Bengal*. Perhaps it is not too much to hope that he may be able to include as an appendix in that volume the short section from Volume 5 on the occupation of northern Sumatra in early 1942.

If additional funds become available, it would round out the story if someone were to translate the relevant parts of Volume 92 (*The Defense of Malaya and the Dutch East Indies*). That volume includes an account of Japanese preparations for a “climactic battle” on Java against the forces of either General MacArthur or Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander, Southeast Asia Command. The battle was averted only by the Japanese surrender. As the Japanese were bracing themselves for a fight to the death that might have resulted in greater carnage than that seen at Iwo Jima, Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta were positioning themselves for a proclamation of Indonesian Independence, which they made on August 17, 1945, two days after the surrender.

¹⁵ Late in 1942, Tsuchihashi and his 48th Division were transferred to Timor.