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THE LESSON OF INDONESIA

By Klaus Mann

Amsterdam, August 1947

"Isn't it wonderful how much we've learned from the Nazis?" a Dutch friend asked me bitterly. "The Herrenvolk complex seems to be contagious. For five years we were the victims of German arrogance; now it's our turn to prove our racial superiority by violating a weaker nation..."

Such sardonic remarks can be heard rather frequently in this country today. Fair-minded, intelligent Dutchmen are profoundly shocked by what their government has done, and is still doing, in the East Indies. While official announcements and communiqués refer euphemistically to a "police action" taking place in Java, most people here speak with undisguised apprehension of a "koloniale oorlog" that might drag on for years.

Oorlog, the Dutch expression for "war," is a word fraught with ominous connotations. Like many other terms of ^{the Dutch} ~~that~~ language, it has been taken over, unaltered, from medieval German -- an idiom long forgotten in the country of its origin but curiously kept alive in the conservative Netherlands. And there is indeed something medieval, something atavistic and sinister about those two dark, ponderous syllables -- oorlog --: a suggestion of primeval terror and tragedy. One can hardly pronounce the word without being reminded of Moloch, the monstrous idol and devourer of human sacrifice...

The Dutch people do not like oorlog. What they want is not another war but, first of all, recovery from the last one. Their country has been most cruelly affected by the German occupation; it was here, in the Netherlands, that the Wehrmacht held out to the bitter end -- much longer than in most other parts of the Continent. No wonder

then that the process of rehabilitation is taking longer here than in certain other formerly occupied countries. At a time when Belgium and Denmark were already enjoying an almost peace-like prosperity, things still looked rather grim in impoverished, exhausted Holland.

Amsterdam was among the first places I revisited after the end of the war. Having lived here during the initial phase of exile, from 1933 to 1936, I was anxious to find out what had happened to my Dutch friends under the Nazi terror. Many of them had been active in the Resistance movement; some had perished in gass chambers or concentration camps. The faces of the survivors showed the unmistakable marks of physical and mental suffering -- hunger, fear, nervous tension. But however weakened by the hardships of the past few years, most of the people I talked to seemed hopeful and ^{resilient} ~~enterprising~~. Living conditions -- they admitted -- were still far from satisfactory; there was not enough to eat, there were no clothes, no shoes, no tobacco, no material to rebuild destroyed homes or repair damaged bridges, highways, dams, machinery. -- "But just wait a couple of years or so!" my Dutch friends demanded. "Just give us a little time, and you'll see how things pick up in this country! Reconstruction is well under way and will proceed according to schedule. We're a hard-working people, you know -- and we're stubborn, too. A few years of peace -- that's all we need to get ourselves out of this mess!"

That was in the fall of 1945. When returning to Amsterdam, about twenty months later, I found a greatly improved situation. It is true, there still were shortages and difficulties; but life seemed to have settled down to something like normalcy. Business men were reasonably optimistic about the country's economic future; artists and intellectuals -- tired of politics which had been dominating their thoughts for the past six years -- concentrated on their specific tasks and interests; the average citizen was looking forward to a new bicycle

or radio set he might get hold of by Christmas. Not very many people talked about Indonesia. Nobody talked about war.

Not that the Dutch public failed to realize the vital significance of the East Indian question! Nearly a fourth of Holland's national wealth is invested in Java and Sumatra; about fifteen per cent of its national income has come from East Indian trade -- everybody here was fully aware of these facts. Also, it was generally known that the negotiations between Dutch authorities and the Indonesian Republic did not proceed quite so smoothly or swiftly as might have been desired. There were certain ticklish problems which seemed to cause considerable headache in Batavia -- especially the question of the local police force which the Dutch wanted to share with the Republicans. Some of my more conservative acquaintances suggested that the Indonesians were being unduly difficult -- partly still under the influence of Japanese propaganda (had ² the President of Indonesia, Soekarno, not been openly pro-Japanese during the war?); partly under Communist pressure. (Was not the Indonesian Communist leader, Alimin Prawirodirdjo, known to be inexorably opposed to any understanding with the Netherlands?)

While those champions of a "strong policy" appeared somewhat irritated by what they regarded as "Indonesian stubbornness," my more liberal friends alluded darkly to a militaristic "war party" in The Hague and Batavia that would risk, or even provoke, a showdown, rather than grant real independence to the young Republic. But not even the most pessimistic observers seemed to believe that the militarists would actually ^{have} ~~get~~ their way. After all, there was the agreement of Linggadjati -- allegedly the cornerstone of Dutch policy in the East Indies --, according to which the people of Java and Sumatra were to be given complete self-government, by 1949, within the framework of a Dutch commonwealth. The government, it was thought, could not afford ^{to deviate} from the principles ^(laid down) ~~incorporated~~ in that solemn document. Even if certain elements within the Administration

might have liked to sabotage the Magna Charta of Indonesian Independence -- there was at least one governmental party, the Socialist ~~Partij~~ Partij van de Arbeid, that would never allow this to happen. As long as the Social Democrats belonged to the ruling coalition, the danger of a clash in Indonesia did not seem acute. No doubt, a workable solution would be found eventually...

The resignation of the Indonesian Premier, Dr. Soetan Sjahir, caused a certain alarm in politically minded Dutch circles. Sjahir enjoys great prestige in this country -- not only on account of his moderate views, but also as a man of unusual culture and integrity. When Republican extremists forced him to quit, last June, the gravity of the situation became obvious. There were rumors about an imminent crisis; but the nervous public calmed down as another moderate, Amir Sjarifoedden, was appointed Sjahir's successor. The new Premier, who spent several years in Japanese captivity, was known to be a personal friend of the Dutch Acting Governor in Batavia General Hubertus van Mook. Clearly, he would have refused to take over the government, at that critical juncture, if the Dutch had not promised him to make certain concessions...

All those Dutchmen who had been hoping for a peaceful settlement of the Indonesian problem were to be bitterly disappointed. General van Mook's announcement of 21 July was tantamount to a formal declaration of war.

The General's contention
~~General van Mook's explanation~~, to the effect that "in view of the almost constant Republican violations" his government had been "compelled to resort to police measures," failed to convince world public opinion. Especially the American press ~~did not~~ ^{no} mince words in criticizing ~~the~~ Dutch policy. U.S. commentators, while appreciating the Dutch desire to hold on to the profitable ^{commerce} ~~trade~~ of the East Indies, wondered whether "police measures" would ~~prove very helpful in~~

help attain that ~~sensible~~ goal. The St. Louis Post Dispatch undoubtedly spoke for most Americans when concluding an editorial with the following words: "A trenchfull of cannon fodder is not a proper avenue to trade, and the world is sick of salesmanship by armed force. If the Dutch want Indonesia's business, let them win it on their own merits."

But if our newspapers were both outspoken and just in their approach to the Dutch-Indonesian conflict, they proved much less well-informed, and consequently less fair, in what they had to say about the Dutch people. Curiously enough, most of our commentators seem to take it for granted that the vast majority of the Dutch nation is enthusiastically behind the war effort -- a misconception which becomes understandable only if one remembers that there are ^{very few} ~~no~~ U.S. correspondents stationed in this country and that Dutch reporters, even when working for U.S. news agencies, might not always be without bias.

Even so reliable and highly respected a newspaper as The New York Herald Tribune presented a completely erroneous picture of the situation. One of its editorials of 29 July, "The Dutch Case," tried to do justice to "the contentions of the Dutch" ~~to~~ to which, according to that commentator, "little attention has been given" so far. The author of the article first suggests that "Dutch officials believed they had strong reasons for the action they took in Java," and then ventures the following statement: "The reasons were good enough so that the Dutch people, with the exception of Communists, gave wholehearted support to their government."

Now, that happens to be not so. It is true that the Communists are the only party to oppose as such, collectively, the colonial war; but that is not to say that all the other parties -- let alone "the people" -- gave wholehearted support to their government. The plain truth is, quite the contrary, that the "police action" against Indonesia is extremely unpopular with most Dutchmen. There happen to be no Communists among the many people I know in this country. Yet there is ^{nobody} ~~not one~~ among my numerous acquaintances here who would con=

sider this war inevitable or desirable. They all agree that Dutch authorities in The Hague and Batavia have been blundering in the most shocking fashion; that the Netherlands, by taking recourse to brutal force, jeopardize both their international prestige and the good will of the Indonesians, so vitally needed in the interest of future collaboration; that it is, moreover, in poor ^ataste to play the strong man, after having been victimized by an even more husky fellow, just a few years before, and attempt to "recolonialize" the East Indian isles (as Premier Sjarifoedden put it), at the very moment when the world's foremost colonial power, Great Britain, withdraws from the Indian mainland.

Of course, the powerful Partij van der Arbeid is well aware of these arguments. But just as the ^{German} Social Democrats ⁱⁿ 1914 felt they had to prove their loyalty to the Imperial ^{regime} government by voting for the imperialistic war, the Dutch laborites stick ^{officially} to their government -- a policy which has been denounced by ex-Premier Sjahir, in a recent interview (Cairo, 5 August) as "almost criminal short-sightedness." It must be said, however, that the "Party of Work" does not even attempt to conceal its grave qualms and misgivings. The communiqué issued on the occasion of a recent Party congress (18 August) carefully avoids all nationalistic phrases but is full of expressions like "regret," "concern," "it is our earnest hope that...", and so forth.

But if the Socialist leadership seems reluctant to come out openly against the government, some of the more progressive laborites have been remarkably outspoken in their public statements. A strongly worded protest against the "police action" was signed by more than twenty influential Party representatives, and the language used by certain Labor papers is indeed of extraordinary boldness. Het Parool, for instance -- an Amsterdam evening paper of considerable popularity -- opened its front-page editorial of 21 July with these bitter sentences:

tences:

"At the beginning of the war against Indonesia -- yes, unfortunately, we are de facto at war! -- all the familiar propagandistic tricks are tried on our nation. Just as Hitler's march to Vienna was to serve only one lofty purpose -- namely, the 'protection' of the poor Austrians --, our 'Christian' radio now proclaims with blaring persistence that 'charity' is the sole motive behind the Dutch march to Djokja. Just as the Austrians implored the Fuehrer to rush to their help, the people of Indonesia -- according to the official version -- appealed to the Netherlands for protection against the increasing terror." And so on, in the same scathingly scornful vein.

Considering the rebellious tone of Parool and other Labor organs, it may seem doubtful whether the "Party of Work" will be able, in the long run, to maintain its present line of wary acquiescence. An official split between pro-war and anti-war elements within the Party may become inevitable, unless neutral meditation succeeds before long in stopping the Indonesian conflict.

In addition to the ^{left-wing} Socialists, there are various other groups openly dissatisfied with the present trend of Dutch policy. Protests against the koloniale oorlog have been voiced by independent liberal publications like Vrij Nederland (formerly a clandestine organ of the Underground), De Vlam, De Stem van Vaderland, and, notably, the popular weekly, De Groene Amsterdamer; by distinguished writers like S. Vestdijk (one of the nation's leading literary critics and essayists), Victor E. van Vriesland (noted poet and critic, president of the Dutch branch of the International P.E.N. Club), and Henriette Roland Holst, the venerable poetess, who denounced the armed intervention in Indonesia as "the end of ethical politics;" by democratic youth organizations like the Nieuwe Kreis; by labor unions, artistic clubs, former members of the Resistance movement, and -- most solemnly and effectively -- by the more progressive representatives of the Christian churches. Clergymen -- both Protestant and Catholic -- are among the most vocal critics of the

government; magazines like the Lutheran Kerk en Vrede (Church and Peace) and the Catholic Toors (Torch) play a leading role in the anti-war campaign.

There is one danger of which peace-loving, non-Communist Dutchmen are acutely aware: The Communists, most vociferous in their pacifist propaganda, might succeed in convincing public opinion that they are the only ones to oppose the imperialistic adventure. If the Reds were actually accepted as the sole champions of Indonesia, the inevitable result would be, first, an increase of Communist prestige in the Netherlands and, secondly, a loss of Indonesian prestige in the world, especially in the United States.

It may be partly in order to avoid such an unfortunate development that Dutch Christians and liberals demonstrate their opposition so loudly and conspicuously. And even while they are doing so -- even while the country resounds with their angry protests and complaints, one of the world's best-informed, most influential newspapers boldly asserts that the entire Dutch nation, "with the exception of Communists," is "wholeheartedly" for the war!

Ask the Dutch boys who, only just returned from German labor camps, are now being shipped to the East Indies! Just the other day, I had word from one of the young men ~~was~~ making the trip on the troop-ship, "Volendam": he complained about inadequate food, and that ^{in Malta had} the English refused them fresh water supplies. "I reckon things will get even tougher, once we are over there," wrote the boy. "And it won't be a short war, either. I rather think we are in for several years of guerrilla warfare -- which is no pleasant thought..."

Ask the people who boo in the movie theaters as soon as the newsreels show pictures from the Indonesian front! Ask the housewives who were hoping for a relaxation of wartime rationing and have now to face new scarcity, new restrictions. Ask your waiter in any Dutch restaurant, ask your chambermaid in any Dutch hotel, your taxi driver in any Dutch

city -- and you will find out how they feel about those "police measures."

We will miss the most important lesson inherent in the Indonesian incident, unless we grasp this fundamental fact: that the war is unpopular with the Dutch people. Life may go on as usual in the narrow, busy streets of Dutch towns and cities; but there is an undercurrent of anxiety, of secret tension and uneasiness.

It is curious, and somewhat disquieting, to see once more how powerless the people really are, even in a country of old and deep-rooted democratic tradition. What could happen in the Netherlands, might repeat itself anywhere else. One beautiful summer morning, the radio announcer discloses with macabre cheerfulness that the government "cannot further be bound by the truce and agreement, and retake their freedom of action." And if the government in question happens to represent one of the world's major powers, no neutral mediator, no Security Council will be able to stop the apocalyptic monster, Oorlog, the great destroyer of human life, wealth and happiness.

city --- and you will find out how they feel about those "police measures."

Most of those disgruntled folks have probably nothing to do with Communism. But, being disgruntled, they may be less impervious to Communist propaganda today than they were some weeks ago, before the outbreak of war. By allowing its most rightist, most nationalistic and militaristic wing to shape national policy, the Dutch Government has actually strengthened the radical Left, both here and in Indonesia.

Another lesson the Dutch-Indonesian conflict may teach us is, that a reckless or ill-advised government may plunge its nation into a risky and unjustified war, without the consent, indeed, against the will of the people. It is strange, and somewhat depressing, to see once more how helpless and powerless the people really are, even in a country of old and deep-rooted democratic tradition like the Netherlands. What could happen here, might repeat itself anywhere. One beautiful summer morning, the radio announcer discloses with macabre cheerfulness that the government "cannot further be bound by the truce and agreement, and retake their freedom of action." And if the government in question happens to represent one of the world's major powers, no neutral mediator, no Security Council will be able to stop the apocalyptic monster, Oorlog, the great destroyer of human life, wealth and happiness.