



***BERSIAP* AND VIOLENCE IN
INDONESIA'S REVOLUTIONARY
PERIOD, 1945-1949: A REVIEW**

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INTRODUCTION

- Research's Position
 - It is part of the project “Dutch Military Operations in Indonesia, 1945-1950”
 - It aims to review historical studies concerning ‘the *bersiap*’ period, particularly those of scholarly works.
 - To bridge the project with Indonesian historians.
- Objective
 - To introduce the *bersiap* concept to Indonesian audience, particularly historians and students
 - By doing so, it might stimulate new debate and understanding of Indonesian revolutionary period.



THE HISTORICAL & HISTORIOGRAPHICAL SETTING

- The chaotic period of Indonesian decolonization (national revolution, social revolution) as the aftermath of the end of Japanese military administration, the declaration of Indonesian independence, and the Dutch efforts to reestablish its colonial administration
- The condition of *vacuum of power*, weak authorities, and euphoric *merdeka* and revolutionary spirit (*daulat*) among Indonesians led to the explosion of mass violence
- But up to the 1990s the violence was slightly overlooked in the international as well as Indonesian historiography.
- They focus on the ‘formal warfare’, internal decision-making process and political bickering on both sides (Raben 2012)
- Romantic-nationalistic and apologetic approaches view the violence as part of ‘self-defense’ for Indonesian or ‘excesses’ for the Dutch’, was featured in state-sponsored historiographies.
- The conflicting memorial attitudes: a long silence and repression of honest assessment, and the myth of the unifying heroic resistance (Scagliola 2007, 2012)



THE NATURE OF VIOLENCE

- It was multilevel violence: interstate (Dutch-Indonesia) warfare, internal Indonesian conflicts, regional movements, and civil war
- The atrocities occurred in the 'formal battle' and in the irregular warfare, not only between Indonesian, British, and Dutch, but also among Indonesians.
- From a victim perspective, there were five forms of violence (Raben 2012):
 1. The military casualties during the confrontations
 2. Killings of special military/paramilitary strategies
 3. Collateral civilian casualties
 4. Casualties of more or less systematic Indonesian violence against minority groups
 5. Victims of internal Indonesian conflicts
- These overlapped each other, triggering one another involving almost all groups of society, resulting in total \pm 100,000 - 1,000,000 casualties and other physical devastation.
- So, *bersiap* is one of the violence (under 4th category)



BERSIAP: THE CONCEPT

- It is: ‘The period when Indonesians paramilitaries terrorized and murdered European and Eurasian civilians, lasted from September 1945 until November 1946’ (Bussemaker 2005).
- The origin of *bersiap* term is still unclear. Yet, local (Dutch) newspaper first mentioned it on 2/2/1946
- Up to the end 1946, the term referred to its generic meaning: the situation of ‘get-prepared for defense’ among Indonesians, signaled by the shout ‘*siap*’ and ‘*bersiap-alarm*’
- Since April 1947, media started using the term to refer to ‘the time of terror and killing’.
- The *Tweede Kamer* adopted that definition in February 1948 after the *ODO (Opsporingsdienst Overleden)* accomplished its survey from 1946-1948.
- ODO itself used various concepts, such as *Merdekalusten*, *Merdekamoord*, *Bersiapmoord*, to identify the victims.
- *Bersiap* is chosen to differentiate the victims of Indonesians’ actions from those of Japanese military occupation.



THE VIOLENCE

- The victims were Dutch and Indo civilians (men, women and children), but also Chinese, and other Indonesian minorities
- The number of casualties was (and is) disputed:
 - 3,500-8,000 Dutch-Eurasians found dead and 20,000-30,000 missing
 - Around 10,000 Indonesian Chinese, and hundred other Indonesians
- These were victims of deliberate but rather unsystematic extreme of violence, mostly in urban areas.
- The perpetrators generally known as *pemuda*, militias, members of *badan / laskar perjuangan* (struggle groups), or mobs consisting of *kampung* people, criminals, etc.
- But, in Surabaya the violence were more systematic, involving members of prominent organization consisting of educated youths and military (Frederick 2002, 2012)
- Yet, there were evidence also individual Eurasians or other group involved in the violence (Frederick 2012; Raben 2012; Luttikhuis & Moses 2012)



THE DEBATE

- The motive: why the Dutch/Eurasians became target?
 - The colonial legacies: racial segregation and political suppression
 - Nationalism and anti-Western sentiment propagated by Japanese
 - Situational factors: anti-colonial euphoria, anti-NICA, suspicion of being spy, revenge, criminals, *amok*, and lack of protection from the Allies and the Dutch side (Mary van Delden 2007).
- The perpetrators:
 - Unidentified mobs: criminals, *pemuda*, uncontrolled mass
 - Identified; militia, military members, *badan perjuangan*, PRI
- The nature of the violence: is this genocide?
 - Brief genocide (Cribb 2008), like those of Chinese (Heidhues 2012)
 - It was not a brief violence, yet not a genocide, but there were some pattern involving educated youth and military (Frederick 2012)
 - It has certain degree of genocidal character, just like other Dutch colonial violence in the past (Raben 2012)
- Its place in national memory:
 - In Indonesia, it is completely ignored, while in the Netherlands, it is well-remembered though slowly fading away (Scagliola 2012)



INDONESIAN PERSPECTIVE

- Some historians do mention the term *bersiap* in their works
- Nasution's *Sekitar Perang Kemerdekaan* (1977) mentions violence actions in some *daulat* events against ex-colonial officers and the Chinese.
- Kartodirdjo (1988) uses *bersiap* term to depict the 'be prepared' situation to defend the independence without mentioning the violence
- *Sejarah Nasional Indonesia* (1975-1984) mentions nothing on it.
- The new book *Indonesia dalam Arus Sejarah* (2012, vol. 6), mentions the *masa bersiap* term and violence associated with it. It says *bersiap* for the Dutch means to get ready to be evacuated from Indonesia.
- On the Surabaya case, (Frederick 2012), some memoirs say:
 - Ruslan Abdulgani (1964) and Soebekti (1966): 'violence against foreigners was part of Surabaya people to defend the independence'
 - Des Alwi (2012): "Indeed there were violence against formers internees, particularly Dutch. *Tetapi semuanya aku rasa masih dalam batas-batas wajar dan bisa dikendalikan*"
 - Brata (2011) gives a contrast story of the infamous Maj. Sabarudin
- On internet, so far I found only a few articles about *bersiap*.



WHY THIS IS SO?

- Under the New Order's regime historical writing is a state enterprise, while historians (scientists) was under state's control, resulting a tiny of critical studies and lack of critical intellectual culture.
- Of the period 1945-49, the extant historiography was dominated by nationalistic and militaristic approaches.
- It was constructed as a 'sacred period', when Indonesians united to defend its newly gained Independence that was endangered of being subverted by returning colonialism (as if no internal conflicts).
- As such, it emphasizes the role of prominent (military) figures or contributions of organization/region to the struggle (heroes)
- 'Unnecessary' stories were deemed irrelevant and have no merit to be part this metanarrative. And, deviant stories would be considered as 'having tainted' the revolution
- Indonesian losses were addressed under the term, 'sacrifice' at the will of the people, without explanation of the real contexts.
- The strong tradition of silencing these victims, because high-level Indonesian officers were often implicated.



THE CHALLENGE FOR INDONESIAN HISTORIANS

- Unlike the 1965 historiography that has been widely challenged, the historiography of 1945-49 is much less debated and seems to have been 'well-accepted' among historians.
- International and Dutch scholars have developed critical assessments on the period, yet Indonesians still very much lag behind
- The dominant nationalistic-militaristic approach of the period 1945-49 is still unchallenged, therefore new societal-centered perspectives needs to be promoted.
- A self-sufficient or inward orientation that has isolated it from international scholarly debates/studies, also must be changed.
- Democratic Indonesia society needs 'a more democratic' historical narratives, a more plural ones, which differ from the extant state-sponsored historiography.
- To start, *bersiap* killing should be accepted as part of the complex realities of the period 1945-49
- More historians should be engaged in this 'unfinished business'
- By doing so, Indonesia and its historiography would grow into a maturity and into a great nation which honors its heroes/heroines without denying the inconvenience truth of its-own history.

