Anti-Chinese Violence in the Indonesian Revolution

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In the stream of publications on violence in Indonesia that has appeared over the last five years, very little has been said about the revolution years. Without doubt, the years between 1945 and 1949 can be considered as one of the most ‘violent’ episodes of Indo

nesian history. Not only was there the conflict between the Indonesian Republic and the former (and still present) colonial ruler, the Netherlands, but extortion, intimidation, looting, abduction and murder hit many inhabitants of Indonesia in these years. Perpetrators were as diverse as were the victims: bandits, revolutionaries and would-be revolutionaries, religiously and socially inspired insurgents, local strongmen, national armies, Dutch, British, Japanese, Indonesians and many more.

The violence against Chinese during the revolution is only one of the many examples of large-scale violence during the Indonesian revolution. If mentioned, it is in passing, and it has received little thorough analysis. The circumstances of the violence is often shrouded in legend and neglect. Much Dutch literature tends to concentrate on the experiences of the Dutch nationals and the political debates during the revolution, while Indonesian writers have, until recently at least, shown little interest in the acts of violence that were perpetrated in the shadow of the formal revolution. Studies of Indonesian-Chinese communities that appeared in the early 1960s hardly mention the hardship, fear, and worse of the late 1940s.\(^1\)

We could rightfully ask, why it is that Chinese have been the target of so much violence during the revolution? We cannot see this issue in isolation from other bouts of violence against Indonesian Chinese throughout the history of Indonesia of the last centuries. But here we face a problem: if anti-Chinese violence was a fixed part of the repertoire of violence in Indonesia, how should we interpret the violence committed against Chinese during the revolution? Were the clashes, reported from many places in the archipelago, a simple reflex of ‘violent’ Indonesians, occurring any moment the authority structure collapsed? Or were they politically inspired and were the Chinese the target of national ethnic cleansing?

As always, the ‘either…or’ question is not very satisfactory. The distinction between ‘ethnic repertoire’ and ‘revolutionary cleansing’ is an artificial one, as they reinforced each other. But then, what do we know about the mechanisms of anti-Chinese violence during the years of revolution? Even if some work has been done on Chinese identities during the revolution, no study has tried to look at the specific dynamics of the clashes between

Indonesians and Chinese in these years. The main concern here is not the effects on Chinese identity and Chinese political organization, but on the mechanisms of Indonesian society producing this particular kind of violence.

Of course, most revolutions come with a considerable degree of violence, and Indonesia is no exception. But, as the next few pages will show, it is important to distinguish between the different events and to look at the specific roots, backgrounds and dynamics of every separate ‘incidents’. For this occasion, I will concentrate on a few events of large-scale violence: the pressure on Chinese in the first months of the revolution, the conflicts of Bagan Siapiapi in March-October 1946, the Tanggerang killings in May-June 1946, and the violence during the two large Dutch offensives in July 1947 and December 1948.

August-November 1945: The Early Revolution

In publications of the period, and in later studies, it is alleged that the Chinese have not been persecuted during the early months of the revolution, and that violence started only several months after the proclamation of independence. In general, this is true, but there were signs of the things to come. Mohammad Hatta remembered seeing Chinese houses burn on the day he and Soekarno were brought to Jakarta after their forced retreat to Rengasdenklok on 16 August 1945. According to Hatta’s memoirs the pemuda leaders Sukarni and Wikana had called for the killing of Ambonese and the burning of Chinese properties. Broadly speaking, this is what indeed happened. Throughout the archipelago, fights broke out between ‘Indonesians’ and ‘Chinese’ in the weeks after the Japanese capitulation. It seems to be a repetition of the large-scale ‘rampokan’ of early 1942, when local people attacked Indonesian shops and homes in the wake of retreating Dutch-Indies’ forces. In several towns, shops became the target of the impoverished population and of gangs, with some horrid effects. In Jakarta, most violence occurred on the fringes, where local gang leaders dominated the scene, apparently with little political programme, but nevertheless with a gusto for terror.

Not everywhere tensions resulted in open violence. In Pekanbaru, the situation remained fairly quiet and the co-operation between Japanese, Indonesian administrators and Allied went fairly smoothly during August and September. On 4 October, some clashes occurred between Indonesians and Chinese, resulting only in a few lightly wounded, and the fights were soon quelled by the Chinese kapitan and local (Indonesian) officers. Many of the Chinese were coolies; they were concentrated in camps and preparations were made to ship those who came from British Malaya off. The situation started to change after early October. The arrival of representatives of the Indonesian Republic, and propaganda messages by supporters of the Republic started to be spread, accusing the Dutch government of 300 years of ‘abominable’ rule and inciting people to join the Republic. To make matters worse, Chinese started to hoist the Chinese national flag, clearly demonstrating where their loyalty

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2 See f.i. Mary F. Somers Heidhues, ‘Citizenship and Identity: Etnic Chinese and the Indonesian Revolution’ in: Jennifer W. Cushman and Wang Gungwu ed., Changing Identities of the Southeast Asian Chinese since World War II (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press 1988), pp.115-138. While preparing this paper, it appeared that the only copy of Mary Somers’ Ph.D. dissertation in a Dutch library, in the Sinological Institute in Leiden, had disappeared, and could therefore not be consulted.


6 NIOD, IC, inv.no. 055.680, ‘Some informations about the political situation’ (5 Oct. 1945); NIOD, IC, inv.no. 055.681, ‘Politieke overzicht Pakan-Baroe 15/9 tot 20/10-45, [p.1].
was directed. Within a few days, the atmosphere became highly politicized and tense. In Mid-October, the Chinese coolies embarked, but Indonesian activists tried, without success, to prevent their departure.

These small ripples show the potential of conflict between the population groups in the early revolution, but the relatively low level of actual violence – as compared to what was to come. The level of violence remained fairly low in the first months after the Japanese surrender. Elsewhere too, conflicts became more frequent in and especially after September 1946. Paradoxically, the rising level of violence did not run parallel to a breakdown of authority, as is often alleged, but followed the heightening degree of politicization, following the establishment of revolutionary administrators, the creation of the Badan Keamanan Rakjat, and the arrival of, first, Allied, and later Dutch officials and military. Not only Chinese were the targets, also Dutch, Ambonese, and many Indonesians. The violence against the Chinese followed the overall level of military engagement between revolutionary troops, of whatever ilk, and the Allied and Dutch units. In Surabaya, aggression against Chinese (and others) really started only by late September, when political tensions heightened.

Why were the Chinese targeted? This crucial question receives little attention. Was it because of their pro-Dutch attitude, because they were ‘ethnic out-groups’, or because of their wealth? Most Chinese were not wealthy and certainly not explicitly supporting the Dutch government. When victim of plunder or (more exceptionally) murder, it did not concern outspoken supporters of the Dutch, nor necessarily wealthy businessmen. Apparently, the violence was the expression of a pre-existing idea of the Chinese as obvious target, much in line with the boisterous cries by Sukarni and Wikana of burning the Chinese homes on 16 August 1945.

There is not an overwhelming evidence of large-scale propaganda against Chinese and other groups. However, there were other pressures too. Chinese around Java and Sumatra were pressed to contribute money and goods to the ‘revolution’. In many cases, it offered an argument for local strongmen to rob the neighbourhood. Not only the Chinese were targeted. In October 1945, whole neighbourhoods in Jakarta received message to donate to the ‘Indonesia Merdeka’ fund, which most did in order to be protected from attacks. In Medan in the early revolution, pasukan which dominated different parts of the city, press-ganged not only Chinese, but also Indians.

Some Chinese explicitly hoped for a return of Dutch authority, as they saw their lives and interests best safeguarded by the former colonial rulers. In general, they carefully adopted a neutral attitude. In Batavia, Chinese refrained from chumming up with the nationalist groups, probably because they were already pressurized to donate to the struggle.

On 10 October, the Chinese national holiday, the Chinese refused to fly the Chinese flag, for which the Republican administration had given (unasked for) permission. According to a Dutch observer, this greatly annoyed the nationalists. Chinese organizations generally kept aloof. It certainly did not help that the Dutch, from their side, saw in the Chinese as possible

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7 NIOD, IC, inv.no. 055.681, ‘Politiek overzicht Pakan-Baroe 15/9 tot 20/10-45, [p.2].
8 NIOD, IC, inv.no. 055.680, ‘Report of October 16th 1945’.
allies in their attempt to restore their order. Both Dutch attempts and the Chinese reaction of strict neutrality was not their image little

Do the fairly spontaneous outbreaks of low-level violence explain the systematic violence of the years to come? What seems to be a prelude to the bigger thing, was of an entirely different order. Still, they could draw on the same set of prejudices and reflexes. The big difference was the political motivation and the level of organization of the clashes to come.

March-October 1946: Bagan Siapiapi

The Chinese community in Indonesia was ethnically, economically and politically far from unified. Most Chinese on Java were peranakan, who had been born and raised on Java and had to some extent mixed with the Javanese. Some of them were outspoken supporters of Indonesian independence and as such acknowledged and recruited by the Republican leaders. Many other Chinese, especially in West Kalimantan and on Sumatra, felt much stronger ties with China, and were political supporters of the Kuo Min Tang.

Bagan Si Api-API is a small fishing town south of Medan, opposite Malacca. Most inhabitants in the town are of Chinese background. According to one report, there are 14,000 Chinese against about 3,000 Indonesians. There had previously been tensions between the two communities when on 12 March 1946, the Chinese wanted to commemorate the day of Sun Yat Sen’s death, 21 years before. The Chinese in Bagan Siapiapi were reportedly strongly oriented towards China. The Indonesian district head, when asked for permission, allowed them to hold their commemorative festivities and even to raise the Chinese national flag, but only until 1 p.m. Not surprisingly, this enraged some members of Republican fighting groups, who in protest entered the Chinese settlement to confront the Chinese. The Chinese kapitan, who tried to avert a violent clash, was killed by the fighters – the Dutch report of the event even mentions the instrument of killing: a Japanese sword. In retaliation, seventeen Republican fighters were killed by Chinese.

The Republican authorities in Pekanbaru tried to placate the Chinese by conceding some (temporary) rights to the town of Bagan Siapiapi. One such concession was to prohibit TRI forces to enter the town. In the months following the conflict, the Chinese entrenched in their village and organized a protection corps, which received military training, dressed in the uniform of the Chinese national army, and was well-armed with pistols, guns and even some machine guns, probably acquired through smuggling from the Malayan peninsula. According to Dutch (intelligence) reports, they stopped most of their fishing activities, as the fishing fleet was increasingly troubled by inroads of the Republican navy.

Bagan Siapiapi became an object of prestige in the struggle for power. There were rumours that troops of TRI and ALRI were concentrating in the neighbourhood, and in early September, the Republican Navy (ALRI) occupied Panipahan. By mid-September the conflict came to a head. On 15 September the wedana had asked the Chinese troops to disarm and

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15 NA, AS, inv.no. 3971, NEFIS Publication No. 31 (very secret): The political situation in Bagan Siapiapi, 1 Oct. 1946.
16 Accounts of the events, including intercepted messages from TRI, can be found in: NA, AS, inv.no. 3971, NEFIS Publicatie no 31, ‘De politieke situatie op Bagan Si Api Api’ [c. 1 oct. 1946]; NA, AS, Inv.nr. 5521, Stukken betreffende de extremistische akties tegen de Chinese bevolkingsgroep, met name de roof- en moordpartijen te Bagan Si Api, Tangerang en Malang 1946-1947, containing Memo van Oen aan Teunis, ‘Aanteekeningen over Bagan-Siap-api – 18.9.1946’ [compiled from several reports, among which by the
deliver their weapons at the Republican police. The Chinese refused, saying that they needed their arms to protect themselves against pirates. The Chinese had large amounts of arms, probably acquired through smuggling, including several machine guns. In the morning of 17 September, about 1,000 ALRI and TRI troops launched an attack on Bagan Siapi-api, but met with fierce resistance of the Chinese, who were extremely well armed and apparently had prepared themselves for the defense. The attack went together with large-scale plunder. From the house of one eyewitness ‘even the blankets of my children’ were taken by the attackers. Women and children were herded in a school. The local police remained passive. The Chinese, after initial losses in the early hours of the battle, was able to regroup and reconquer the town. Some reports mention 200 Chinese dead, but a later Dutch intelligence report, drawing on Chinese sources, count only 12 dead and 69 wounded. Allied forces intercepted messages between TRI troops in Bagan and in Pekanbaru. The former asked for weapons and reinforcements, which were promised by the headquarters in Pekanbaru.

Literally, the message from Pekanbaru read: ‘Reinforcements are on their way, fully armed. Defend Bagan Siapi-api, if impossible, burn the place down.’ But the Chinese had entrenched themselves, all Indonesians had fled the town, and all the TRI troops could do was to lay siege on the town. The violence spread to the surroundings of Bagan Siapi-api. After the battle, the retreating Republican troops attacked Chinese settlements in the neighbourhood, killing several dozens of inhabitants and burning down the villages. By early October several representatives arrived from Pekanbaru, who negotiated a peace. It was decided that Bagan would be governed by a ‘security council’ consisting of five Chinese and five Indonesians, under presidency of an Indonesian with military title. The Republican authorities again promised not to send troops to Bagan. Meanwhile many Chinese fled the town; in Malacca only two thousand of them had arrived in the first days of October.

It is difficult to make a precise reconstruction of the events, and to In any case, the Chinese fishermen had been greatly annoyed by the piracy methods of the Indonesian Navy and that they feared to become the target of looting by Republican forces. It also seems that they refused to become part of the Riau province, but preferred to be included in the province of Sumatra’s East Coast. As for the protagonists on the Indonesian side, one police inspector mentioned several local members of the Komite Nasional Indonesia to be the main instigators of the attack.

But the affair was not over by October 1946 and the negotiated arrangement. A year later, the conflict was resumed, triggered by the Dutch attack on the Republic in July 1947. Since the beginning of the offensive, Indonesian forces started to arrest Chinese, of whom about a thousand were interned. But again the Chinese of Bagan Siapiapi showed their strength and liberated their fellow countrymen. In September, a force of two hundred Indonesians started to round up Chinese, but these too were released after heavy fighting. According to the press report, more than 200 Indonesians were killed. In revenge, about 100 to 200 Chinese were killed in neighbouring villages.

The affair seems fairly exceptional in the history of the revolution, as Chinese were actually able to put up a strong resistance and even to defeat the raiders. In this, the situation in Bagan Siapiapi much more resembled the Chinese ‘repulics’ in West Kalimantan, with

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18 The Dutch report mentions 20 killed in Bangko, 40 in Mentaga, 34 in Telok Poelau and 75 in Djembra.
20 NA, AS, inv.no. 5521, citing a report by police inspector 2nd class Prajitno, 27 Sept. 1946.
the big difference that Kalimantan had soon returned to Dutch rule, while on Sumatra the Chinese were facing an ambitious Republic.

May 1946: Tanggerang

Tanggerang is easily the most well-known case of Indonesian Chinese conflict during the revolution. In contrast to Bagan Siapiapi, the Indonesian-Chinese inhabitants of Tanggerang had a long history of settlement in the area, had mixed with the Javanese and Sundanese population, and were much less geared to China. The Chinese community in Tanggerang, numbering – according to official censuses, for what they are worth – about ***[check volkstelling], had grown from a Chinese settlement established in the eighteenth century around a market place. Many of them were farmers. But despite the apparent closeness of ‘Indonesians’ and ‘Chinese’, Tanggerang had seen clashes between Javanese and Chinese in the past. Already in 1800, the two groups clashed, and several kampung went up in flames.

In the early revolution, Tanggerang, as most of the area west of Jakarta and around Banten, had become the domain of the charismatic Haji Achmad Khaerun, who established his own republic. Only by February 1946, it seems, the Tentara Republik Indonesia (TRI) was established in Tanggerang, which discarded the local leaders and tried to establish a more regular administration. But the groups of lasykar remained active, and so was the Islamic inspiration of the struggle. Meanwhile, the Dutch were gradually strengthening their hold on the area around Jakarta. In May 1946, the TRI and Allied commanders had agreed on a retreat of the Republican forces behind the river Cisadane, and demilitarize the area around Tanggerang. The Dutch would occupy the area on 28 May.

A fascinating document shows a little bit of the conflicting interests on the ‘Republican’ side. These are the confiscated minutes of meetings of local civil administrators, TRI and lasykar on the issue of the retreat from Tanggerang.22 It is worthwhile to consider them in some detail, as they demonstrate the different attitudes of the several sections on the Republican side. It becomes clear that opinions differed widely among the local administrators, the TRI commanders, and leaders of the Lasykar Rakjat. The deliberations went on for four days. The civil authorities were in favour of retreating, and so was the TRI commander, Nasution, who proclaimed that ‘the TRI will retreat west of the Cisadane on the highest orders. Discipline should rule in the TRI’. But as regards the intention of the Lasykar Rakjat to defend Tanggerang, I leave it entirely to them.’ The leader of the Lasykar Rakjat, Kiai Hajj Arsjoeedin bin Hajj Arsjad, refused to withdraw and was determined to face the enemy. He assured the meeting he would receive support from Banten. Fellow commanders of the Lasykar Rakjat joined him. The head of the (kepala Jawatan Agama) of the kabupaten, KH Moeh. Djoenaedi, tried to convince the fighters to retreat, on the argument that the Lasykar were subject to the TRI command. Moreover, he told the others, the five conditions for starting a holy war were not met. His plea was to no avail. At the last conference, the leaders of the Lasykar Rakjat exclaim ‘Berontak’ and Perang Sabil’.

The upshot of it all was that the area of Tanggerang was rendered to the will of the irregular lasykar troops. On 28 May the military and most civil authorities retreated, making room for the small dealers in violence that had abounded in the area, but also to larger units of Lasykar Rakjat. A pattern developed that became standard procedure in the revolution: the deportation of Chinese inhabitants, and the subsequent looting of their properties. In several villages west and south of Tanggerang the lasykar caused havoc. Praoe offered the grisliest scene. Some six hundred Chinese were killed; only a few could escape. Large parts of the villages and countryside were set on fire. When Dutch troops arrived in Tanggerang, they found the town deserted by the Republican troops, but they had set fire to the public

22 NA, AS inv.no. 5523, containing ‘Peringatan dan tjatatan rapat (notitie en notulen) dari Badan Pekerdja K.N.I. Kaboepaten Tangerang’.
buildings and offices. Schools and prisons were burnt down, but the train station was left intact. Not all local inhabitants had left. According to a Dutch army pamphlet, ‘a very small section’ of the Chinese population had been deported by the retreating Republican fighters, and the remaining Chinese ‘welcomed our people with food and cool drinks’. The villages around Tanggerang had been deserted, however. The population had been chased from their villages, and the houses were looted and burnt down.

The result, according to one report of the Federation of Chinese Associations (Chung Hua Tsung Hui), citing Red Cross reports, 653 Chinese lost their lives and about 1,500 houses burnt or razed. Another report mention a number of 1085 killed. Thousands of refugees streamed to Batavia to escape the terror.

The perpetrators were, without doubt, members of the Lasykar Rakjat. Eyewitness reports often mention ‘lasykar’ and ‘pelopor’, who often came from the same village. Eyewitnesses recognized many of the looters, who came from the same village or from its neighbourhood. Not seldom they were accompanyed by soldiers of TRI, who were much better armed, with pistols and Japanese swords. Most extortion, looting and arson was done by small groups, mostly of local origin. Only some of the attacks were executed by a large force, and mob violence was relatively rare.

What were the root causes of the violence in Tanggerang? The famous journalist Rosihan Anwar wrote that many private lands were owned by Chinese: ‘Mereka kaum kapitalis, dan menindas kaum petani.’ In short, they had solicited the violence by their capitalist suppression of the poor. But most of the ‘Chinese’ inhabitants, however, were not large landowners, nor even merchants or shopowners, but farmers and land labourers, and the looting and killing was so indiscriminate, that even if the roots of violence lay in the class relations, there must have been other forces at work.

The dynamics of extortion and looting – and sometimes murder – was to be perfected in the following year, when the boundaries between Republican and Dutch-held territories came under pressure along its full length.

July-August 1947: West-Central Java

The Tanggerang terror had set a pattern, which was often reenacted in the years to come. Palembang saw an outburst of anti-Chinese violence in January 1947. Again, it was a foreign attack that triggered the violence. According to the Chinese consul in Palembang, about 250 Chinese inhabitants were killed and many more wounded.

In the second half of July the Dutch launched a large offensive against the Republican forces on Java and Sumatra. The Indonesian army and ‘irregular’ forces embarked on what they called a ‘scorched earth policy’, which, however seemed to be primarily directed against Chinese property and people. There seems to be system in the events. Several days before Dutch troops arrived, the Republican civil administration would retreat, delivering the

24 NA, AS, inv.no.5520, Rapport Korban Sakiter Tangerang dari tgl. 3/6 – 15/7 – 1946.
25 Memorandum outlining acts of violence and inhumanity perpetrated by Indonesian bands on innocent Chinese before and after the Dutch police action was enforced on July 21, 1947. Chung Hua Tsung Hui (Batavia 1947), p.5-6.
26 NA, AS, inv.no.5520 has 82 eyewitness reports to the CHTH.
population to the will of the fighting units, which often combined with TRI troops. Often civil authorities were involved too, although at times they were instrumental in curbing the extortion or even avoiding murder. The pattern is general; there is hardly any difference in method in the different places in western Java.

Interestingly, the Chinese had in general been left untouched in the previous two years under Republican administration.29 A merchant from Cirebon told the newspaper: ‘It wasn’t so bad under the Republic. We were hardly harassed, as long as we paid. Which we did, of course, there was no other choice. It was very normal.’30 But in late July hell broke loose for many Chinese in the areas of the Dutch advent. They were ordered out of their houses, concentrated, and deported to villages in the neighbourhood. For weeks on end, Chinese would be dragged around the countryside. In a few cases, they were executed. How this worked, can be shown in an intelligence report on the Chinese from Majalengka, south of Cirebon in West-Java. In the night of 28 July 1947, all Chinese men were gathered on the alun-alun and brought to nearby Sukasari. This was done by Republican soldiers, assisted by several pemuda from Majalengka. The next night, the women and children were deported in the same manner. Both groups were pushed from village to village for two weeks, until they were united in Cipanas on 11 August. That same day, a group of at least hundred soldiers arrived too. The next day, the Chinese men were taken to the edge of a wood, killed and dumped into three large pits, which the locals use to catch wild pigs. The women and children, after several days of more trekking, faced the same fate. Most of them were buried alive, some were shot. The last group was murdered on 17 August. Before the deportation, Majalengka had 189 Chinese inhabitants. According to an eyewitness, the number of deported men had been 70; the group of women and children had numbered 108 on 13 August. The executioners operated in small groups of only several men. According to an eyewitnesses, they spoke Malay and probably came from the area of Jakarta. They had military ranks, but their precise position is not known.31

The exact number of victims of the July-August killings is unknown, but amounts to several hundreds. By Mid-September 1947 the Chung Hua Tsung Hui established the number of those killed during the month after 21 July at 293.32 A month later, the number had already risen to 675, and by mid-October, another 106 victims were added.33

Far more numerous were the Chinese deported from their homes. There is very little information on them. One resident of Semarang related of the situation of about two thousand inhabitants of Banjarnegara in Banyumas residency, who had been ordered by ‘brigands’ to evacuate to a village at 15 kilometres from their town. Almost two months later, they were still there, packed in small village dwellings, with insufficient clothes and food, living on a ration of 100 grams rice per day, and with dwindling money reserves to buy additional provisions. Their home quarter in Banjarnegara had been reduced to ashes.34

By mid-August 1947, the Dutch attack had come to a halt, army authorities gave out instructions to return the Chinese who were being ‘protected’ in places of asylum to their original homes, if the places had not been occupied by the Dutch. If houses were burnt,

29 Memorandum, p.18.
30 NA, AS, inv.no.5527, containing clipping from an unknown newspaper, 26 Aug. 1947.
32 Memorandum, p.18.
34 NA, Algemene Secretarie, inv.no. 4333, containing report by R. Abdulkadir Widjojoatmodjo, 4 Dec. 1947.
accommodation should be provided. It seems that many Chinese returned, although many remained in their new ‘asylum’, and many others took refuge in the large towns.

The Republican authorities showed their concern for the Chinese victims. President Soekarno expressed in radio speeches his regret over the anti-Chinese actions and assured that ‘all races’ would be welcome in the Republic. Prime Minister Amir Sjarifuddin blamed the hardship of the Chinese on the Dutch, comparing their tactics with those of the German Nazi forces in Europe and those of the Japanese in China. The Dutch, according to Sjarifuddin, were using the suffering of the Chinese as a pretext for pushing their attack further. Although this was twisting the facts to quite an extent, it was a necessary counterpropaganda against the Dutch, who profited from the reports on anti-Chinese violence to legitimize their offensive. That their attack was indeed stimulating the plundering and killing, was an anathema.

Whatever the propaganda use of the situation, the reality was that Indonesian groups, with the military in a leading position, systematically terrorized the Chinese inhabitants in many Javanese places. What was usually known as the ‘scorched earth policy’, was in fact a systematic looting of Chinese properties in the areas which were abandoned before the Dutch troops. Indonesian parts of the towns and villages were often left untouched. The Chung Hua Tsung Hui, drawing from reports from many places, concluded that the main perpetrators were squads of the Indonesian army, operating ‘in line with Policy and orders issues by the Army High Command’. From how far up the orders for the systematic looting had come, will probably remain undisclosed.

The ceasefire did not put an end to the attacks on Chinese and their property. The same mechanisms were relived more than a year later, when the Dutch forces launched their second large attack on the Republic, in December 1948. Again the Chung Hua Tsung Hui produced reports on the losses. In most of the areas in the war zone, Chinese inhabitants were again herded together and deported. Few houses escaped plunder, and almost all of them were burnt down. The number of people killed was less than during the first Dutch offensive: 166, most of whom in Kedoe. And even then, the violence did not stop. As late as 1949, Chinese shops in Surakarta were burnt – as was Kampung Arab, which housed batik workshops.

**Politicization, Purification and Tolerance**

A large number of Chinese have been killed during the revolution and the Indonesian-Dutch conflict. There is no authoritative figure for the casualties of anti-Chinese violence, but numbers run into the several thousands. They were not the victims of war, but the targets of both small-scale terrorism and mass murder. The connection between the two is complicated, but in an intricate way these different types of outbursts of violence were indeed connected.

The violence against Chinese should not be seen in isolation from other cases of violence against other groups. The attacks on individuals in the early months of the revolution was not only directed against Chinese, but to others as well. Ambonese,

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36 Memorandum, p.18.

37 NA, Algemene Secretarie, inv.no. 4546. Stukken betreffende de positie van Chinezen in de nieuw bezette gebieden op Java, m.n. Madiun, 1949. Contains also Report on the condition of Chinese inhabitants in the newly occupied areas in Mid-Java (19/12/1948 – 31/1/1949), compiled by the Chung Hwa Tsung Hui in Mid-Java.

Europeans and to a lesser extent Arabs were targeted, as were officials who were associated with the old order or with a too close collaboration with the Dutch and Japanese. The best candidates for attacks were, understandably, Europeans, including Indo-Europeans. But by early 1946, most of them had been effectively removed from society. Moreover, they had a Dutch government which was extremely concerned about the fate of its citizens in Republican territory. The Chinese, however, had not such protection, they were far more numerous and lived throughout the country.

As to why the Chinese were targeted, explanations most often gravitate towards a lawlessness and absence of a strong state authority. The perception of a power vacuum giving criminals a free leash, is not a satisfactory explanation, although it probably is the one most frequently used. Remarkably, it is exactly the explanation offered by the Dutch (Indies’) authorities. For them, it was the ‘extremists’, the ‘chaos’ and the ‘mob’ who were responsible for the explosions of violence and the atrocities. By using this explanation, the Dutch avoided responsibility for the fate of the Chinese. A Dutch report of August 1947 demonstrated how little they understood of the forces at work: ‘The existing rogue elements, partly bred during the Japanese occupation, had an open field. In large section of the population a desire to let off steam.’ The report was drawn up when the aggression against the Chinese in Central Java had just started, and the Dutch authorities, partly under pressure of Indonesian Chinese associations, were asked to act in protection of the Chinese. The report not only fell short in explaining the violence, but also served to deny responsibility. What the anonymous compiler had in mind with ‘rogue elements’, or the ‘Japanese stirrings’, is not clear, but they were clear topos of Dutch political analysis of the situation in Indonesia in the immediate postwar years.

Scholars writing after the events usually discard the Japanese education theme, but fully embrace the rogue explanation. The ‘vacuum’ theory in particular has many adherents. In her attempt to explain the lootings and killings in Tanggerang in May 1946, Mary Somers pointed at the role of ‘outside troublemakers’ (mainly ‘fanatically Islamic groups from Bantam’, the breakdown of authority, economic differences, the revolutionary zeal of the youth, and Islamic inspirations that mobilized the masses. This set of explanations: the power vacuum, the stirrings of revolutionary (and Muslim), in combination with ‘the masses’, would explain the revolutionary violence. Although undoubtedly holding many truths, these generic explanations remain somewhat unsatisfactory. They do not explain why the violence was not general, why it occurred on one place and not the other. If jealousy of the economic performance of the Chinese was a constituting element of anti-Chinese feelings, why were Chinese coolies targeted (if only mildly) in Pekanbaru? If religious inspiration would have been instrumental, why do we hear so little of them in, for instance, the July–1947 terror?

Systematic violence
Revolutionary violence tends to be described as chaotic, riotous, spontaneous. But what is clear from the actions against the Chinese, is the orchestration of the events. The violence was systematic and to a large extent premeditated. Where violence is premeditated, there is not only a motive and a will, but also an initiator, an organisation, and an environment tolerating the violence.

The attack on Bagan Siapiapi was planned; Tanggerang was wilfully left to the discretionary power of the Lasykar Rakjat; the terror of July–August 1947 followed standard procedures and was probably organized by Republican authorities. The large-scale extorting and murdering of Chinese and the plundering and burning of their possessions was often performed by large groups involving official military, and people and houses were

40 Somers, Peranakan Chinese Politics, p.49.
systematically selected. Most cases of large-scale violence show a large involvement of the Indonesian authorities, in particular the armed forces. In Bagan Siapiapi ALRI and TRI were staging the attack on the town. In Tanggerang the army withdrew and the villages were left to the whims of the Lasykar Rakjat. And during the first Agressi Militer Belanda in July and August 1947 again the civil and military authorities accepted or even facilitated the looting and destruction of houses and the abduction of Chinese inhabitants, in which acts army units participated.

But to blame the authorities would be overlooking some very crucial facts. These extreme cases of anti-Chinese violence took place against the background of wide-scale extortion, kidnapping and looting. A great many Chinese, as well as others, were recurrently pressed to donate funds to irregular groups for ‘protection’, or to revolutionary funds. The killings were to a large extent the extreme end of a large range of anti-Chinese attitudes.

In recent literature on violence in Indonesia, the term ‘repertoire of violence’ has been applied. It suggests that outbursts of violence follow patterns. The same might be argued for the anti-Chinese violence during the revolution. Both in its spontaneity and in its system, the revolutionary violence might be described in terms of a ‘repertoire’. The clashes indeed echoed previous examples of anti-Chinese outbreaks in colonial times. And in their more organized form, they evolved into a pattern, which usually has been described as ‘scorched earth’ policy, but was effectively a manner to loot Chinese properties.

But repertoire is in itself not an explanation, it does not explain why violence is used in the first place. It might give an indication of target groups or methods used, but it is not sufficient to understand what motivated and triggered the violence.

**Politization**
The power vacuum, often offered as an explanation for the violence is not a sufficient explanation. Although clashes between Chinese and Indonesians did emerge soon after the Japanese capitulation, they were seldom a case of mob violence. Where major confrontations took place, it was orchestrated and organized. Most of the large-scale killings and terrorisation took place after the first months of ‘chaos’. Apparently the politicization of the situation engendered a much more systematic anti-Chinese attitude than in the first weeks of alleged ‘chaos’ and ‘power vacuum’. It would also seem that the continuing struggle between the Republic and the Dutch has deepened the politicization of the relations between communities, offering a justification to press the Chinese for donations and targeting them when the military situation turned sour.

**Purification, stigma and the revolutionary spirit**
Although the power vacuum is not in itself a satisfactory explanation, the ‘revolutionary’ environment certainly endorsed the use of violence against Chinese (and others). This had not only to do with the opportunities for criminals and other rogue elements in the chaos. The revolution itself created a justification for violence. Revolutionaries are often romantics, striving for a pure world – one of social equality, religious obedience, or national ‘ownness’. The becoming of Indonesia also entailed a process of what Gyanendra Pandey has called ‘the construction of the unmarked national, the real, obvious, axiomatically natural citizen’.41

There were many possible materials for the stigmatisation of Chinese: as actual puppets in colonial hands, as profiteers of colonial rule; as capitalists; as non-Muslims. But their essential quality was that of racial and political ‘foreigners’. These overlapping images of Chinese made them very vulnerable to ostracism. Sutan Sjahrir declared in Singapore in early January 1948 that ‘the Chinese had been “good guests” in Indonesia’ and that it would not be fair ‘to judge their present behaviour’ in such extraordinary times.42 Although set in a

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42 NA, AS, inv.no.5527, Clipping from Nieuwsgier, 7 January 1948, p.3.
positive tone, the message was clear: the Chinese were alien and they were behaving badly. Sutan Sjahrir’s remark was probably symbol for the attitude of many Indonesians: at best one of acceptance of Chinese as citizens of the new Indonesia, but with a deeper understanding that they were not the real stuff.

The conception of Chinese as ‘foreign’, including even *peranakan* Chinese with a lineage in Indonesia stretching many generations back, seems to be essential as a marker isolating the Chinese from what was considered as *asli* Indonesian. The best Chinese could become was *warga negara*, citizen of Indonesia, which term, ironically, underscores their difference from ‘ethnic’ Indonesians. Even in the prelude to complete independence, there was a strong tension between the civic nationalism propagated by the Republican leaders and the ethnic nationalism at grass-roots level. This diverging outlook on the nation would continue to soar in the decades to come.43

The romantic ideal of a unified nation might have been much stronger than the stigmatization of Chinese as wealthy citizens, that would have caused a feeling of relative deprivation and frustration among non-Chinese Indonesians. In Tanggerang, where the killings of May 1946 took place, many Chinese were small farmers, and many victims of the 1947 terror were as poor as their Javanese neighbours. The violence was directed against Chinese as such. Moreover, the violence against Chinese occurred at such different places, that we have to look at a more generalized conception of Chinese, extending beyond economic frustration at the wealth of (some) Chinese.

Although ethnic, religious and political motivations were instrumental, it was the branding of outsiders, in whatever form, that provided the justification of targeting the Chinese – and other groups such as Europeans, Arabs, and others. It sometimes needed only a vague history of outsidership to become the target of gangs or even military. For Kota Gede, Bambang Purwanto and Mutiah Amini have described how the *orang kalang*, who were considered outsiders, became the victim of robbery and terror.44 Physical appearance was a great help in picking out Chinese at railway stations and in villages. Many Chinese report of being stopped in the street and harassed by Indonesian youth or lasykar. Appearance, although not the primary reason for anti-Sinicism, was a marker of foreignness.

_Tolerance_

The revolution not only stimulated definitions of the Indonesian nation which led to the exclusion of the Chinese, it also produced a high degree of tolerance towards anti-Chinese violence. The main Republican leaders may have rarely stimulated the anti-Chinese sentiments, and sometimes even condemned the cases of murder, it did little to prevent the violence, or to punish the perpetrators. On the local level, Republican military authorities The systematic deportation, looting and burning during and after the two large Dutch offensives in July 1947 and December 1948 do not only point to a fixed method, but also to systematic endorsement by the local commanders, and often complicity of army units. A degree of toleration on the Republican side was mirrored by indifference or at least inactivity by the Dutch authorities, who at times even decided not to publicize the data on the killing and kidnapping of Chinese in the wake of the Dutch assault on Yogyakarta in late December 1948.45 It showed that the authorities had a bad conscience about the killings, which were not of their making, but were indeed triggered by the attack. The Chinese

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45 NA, AS, inv.no. 4546. Stukken betreffende de positie van Chinezen in de nieuw bezette gebieden op Java, 1949.
community, then, was to a large extent left to itself, without much international pressure on the authorities to stop the extortion and killing. The Chinese consuls did try to influence the policies at both the Republican and the Dutch sides, but achieved little. To a large extent, the Chinese were left to their own devices.

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