

The Pitfalls of Independent Historical Research

In the interesting article 'Predicaments of Commissioned Research', published in the November 2003 issue of the *IIAS Newsletter*, professor Hans Blom expounds the practical problems surrounding commissioned research. Describing how the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD) dealt with these problems in two of its projects, Blom stresses the importance of the independent nature of commissioned research. I was involved as adviser on the commissioning side in both these projects and although I am in general agreement with Blom's reasoning, I want to add some comments from the perspective of a particular stakeholder, the Indisch Platform, which is based on my own experience with this type of research.

Forum >
General

By Herman Bussemaker

The historical research that NIOD conducts is commonly organized on a contractual basis. The contract involves two parties: the organization 'ordering' the research to be undertaken, and the executing organization. A public organization in almost all cases, the party ordering a historical project has, in most cases, hardly any historical expertise of its own. Obviously, this gives the executing organization a strong and unchecked position. Such a situation stands in sharp contrast to private business. An oil company that wants to build a refinery will use a contractor to do the design and the building, but the design specifications are drawn up by the oil company's own specialists, who have the same scientific academic background as the engineers employed by the contractor. This normally ensures easy communication, a shared vision of the expected results of the project, and the efficient progress of the design, building, and final acceptance of the refinery. In historical contractual research, this is seldom the case. A stronger role for specific stakeholders in historical research could bridge the unfortunate gap in knowledge between the ordering and executing parties.

At this point, it may be wise to call back to memory why NIOD had been founded in the first place. After the Second World War, there was general agreement in Dutch society that this traumatic period in the country's history should be adequately documented. The government ordered NIOD (at that time still RIOD) to write such a history, and over a period of twenty years Dr L. de Jong completed a magnum opus of thirteen volumes about the war. Having been granted almost complete scientific freedom by successive Dutch governments, De Jong took to using 'co-readers' for writing this history. These co-readers, who were experts in the specific fields covered by the research carried out by RIOD employees, made sure that adequate feedback was given to De Jong and his staff.

This set-up seemingly worked until 1983, when one of the co-readers, C.A. Heshusius, former colonel of the Royal Netherlands Indian Army (Koninklijk Nederlands-Indische Leger, KNIL), disagreed with the draft text of Volume 11A, which was De Jong's first part on the history of the war in the Far East against the Japanese. When the co-reader could not convince De Jong, he went public with his disagreement. This public disclosure caused a lot of commotion in the Indies community in the Netherlands, and led to a judicial process against De Jong in order to have him rewrite his text. In respect of scientific independence, the judge decided otherwise, but the whole affair raised a negative image of the RIOD among some people in the Indies community.

In 1996 a Dutch Committee was funded by a Parliamentary decision and charged with the task of organizing the festivities around the commemoration of 400 years of relations between Japan and the Netherlands in the year 2000. Contracted to organize an exhibition at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam in 1999, which was to feature the history of these relations and emphasize the Japanese occupation of the Netherlands Indies, NIOD set up the exhibition 'Dutch, Japanese, Indonesians: The memory of the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies'. Possibly due to its negative

experiences in the 1980s, NIOD did not at first seek to involve the Indies community in the Netherlands in the early set-up phase of the project, despite the fact that it was of extraordinary emotional importance for precisely this group. Therefore it was not until early 1998 that the Indisch Platform was contacted and asked to contribute to an Advisory Council for this exhibition.¹ As one of those advisers, I quickly discovered that the concept of the exhibition had already been agreed upon, and could not be changed. I was not alone in advising that the position of the Dutch Eurasians during the Japanese occupation should receive more emphasis. Notwithstanding the fact that, in sheer numbers, there were two times more Dutch Eurasians outside the internment camps than Dutch inside them, they were more or less left out of the exhibition. A shift in emphasis was not possible, alas, and the ensuing exhibition encountered extremely mixed reactions from the Indies community. In my opinion this dissatisfaction could have been avoided through the earlier involvement of representatives of this community in the Advisory Council. Somer's publication that Blom mentions in his article, deals with all aspects of what was in the end still a groundbreaking exhibition.

In December 2000, the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS) and the Indisch Platform reached an agreement on a number of issues, among which was that of how independent historical research was to be undertaken on the subject of the loss of property and (lack of) compensation and rehabilitation suffered by the Indies community in the Netherlands during the Japanese occupation and the Bersiap period (1945-1946). The Government agreed to pay for the study and, on account of NIOD's independent status, the Ministry soon selected the institute for the job, signing the contract in December 2001. While the organizational set up of the project was discussed with the Indisch Platform, the subjects to be studied were carefully left out of any of the discussions, by the executives of both the Ministry and NIOD. In other words, the lessons of the previous project about involving the stakeholders as early as possible were lost some-

where in the decision chain. When NIOD revealed the contents of its research project 'Indonesia across Orders, 1930-1960' on 4 December 2002, the fact that no study would be undertaken on losses and rehabilitation at the Bersiap period thus came as a shock to the Indies community in the Netherlands. It turned out that even the Academic Steering Committee of the project had been left out of the discussions on the contents of the project, as their first meeting with the project staff was to take place four months after the contents had been revealed. I fully accept the independence which professor Blom so fiercely wants to protect in a research project like this one, but I cannot escape the impression that too much insistence on independence can be harmful, because of the loss of valuable comments and feedback. In an open society like ours the quality of scientific research can only be enhanced by as much debate as possible, with openness, the will to listen, and respect for the opponent, and of course with the final responsibility resting with the organization charged with the commissioned historical research.

Leaving out such an important part as the Bersiap period from the study on loss and rehabilitation against the instructions of the Minister of VWS has resulted in an escalation of the debate about what went wrong in the process to the level of the highest political responsibility, i.e. the Cabinet.² Quite possibly because of the negative publicity among the Indies community in the Netherlands, which resulted from the conflict about contents, the project 'Indonesia across Orders' has not been warmly received by this community. It is a pity for the Indies community that NIOD has thus missed the chance to produce a clear and well-researched history about the very important transitional period from 1930 to 1960. As all parties involved are writing history at this moment, we have to await the final results. In apprehension of those results, it appears that however valuable independence in historical research may be, overly stressing the independence in historical research also comes with its pitfalls. ◀

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Response from NIOD

It was with great interest that I read Dr Herman Bussemaker's reaction to my article on 'The Pitfalls of Independent Historical Research'. Although I interpreted his contribution as a confirmation of much of what I wrote, there are a few things that might need emphasis.

Dr Bussemaker's contention that NIOD's research projects are executed unchecked is perhaps understandable but, alas, off the mark. As I tried to explain in my contribution to the *IIAS Newsletter*, much research carried out under the aegis of NIOD is of a sensitive nature, in the sense that it touches upon the often unhappy life stories of large numbers of men and women in Dutch society and beyond. For this reason, NIOD operates with a complicated structure of advisory boards, not only to guarantee the scholarly standards of the research, but also to elicit ideas and feedback from experts and activists from non-academic backgrounds. Thus, its present research concerning the issues of back-pay, war damage, and rehabilitation is monitored by a special advisory committee, consisting of representatives of the Indisch Platform and academics, who meet regularly to discuss research progress and provide the researchers both with advice and source materials.

One could argue, as Dr Bussemaker does, that NIOD follows its own course, regardless of the existence of sounding boards from the communities involved. In truth, NIOD has closely paid heed to suggestions from its discussion partners, and has amended its plans according to their feedback. This approach characterized both the 1999 exhibition 'Dutch, Japanese, Indonesians: The memory of the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies' in the Rijksmuseum and the current project 'Indonesia across Orders'. As a result, the period known as the Bersiap has, from the start, received ample attention in all the component studies of the latter programme, including the research into war damage and rehabilitation. Those among our discussion partners who criticize the choices NIOD has made, underestimate the extent of their own influence on these choices.

Nevertheless, it should be stressed that in the end only one party will be held responsible for the results of the research, and that is NIOD. In fact, only if there is a decisive point where NIOD is responsible for making choices and for selecting research problems, will NIOD be able to avoid allegations of bias.

On many occasions over the last decade, and prior to that, NIOD has cooperated with many members from the Indies community in the Netherlands – who, it should be emphasized, are far from one-minded – and often, to mutual contentment. Dr Bussemaker has been a valuable voice in our past projects and will hopefully continue to be so in the future. ◀

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- 1 The Indisch Platform is an association that represents the community in the Netherlands with roots in the Netherlands Indies.
- 2 Source: Letter, dated 12 December 2000, from Els Borst, Minister of VWS, to the Cabinet and Parliament. In this letter the Minister records the agreements that had been reached with the Indisch Platform one day earlier. Concerning the 'Breed Historisch Onderzoek' it is stated that there will be 'a Historical Inquiry into, amongst other things, the damage and the (judicial) redress in the period of the Japanese Occupation and during the Bersiap.' It is my finding that the Ministry's civil servants have not executed the latter agreement. The 'Breed Historisch Onderzoek' that NIOD is undertaking does delve into these topics during the Japanese Occupation, but not during the Bersiap.