

The Politics of Apologies and Colonial Aphasia: Dutch Colonial Violence in Indonesia's War of Independence (1945–1949)

<https://doi.org/10.22151/politikon.61.3>

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Abstract

The colonial violence in Indonesia's War of Independence (1945–1949) remains a controversial subject in Dutch society up to this day. In 2022, former Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte apologised for the “systematic and widespread extreme violence,” prompting renewed debate on how official statements and apologies function as forms of hegemonic remembrance. This paper revisits Ann Stoler's concept of colonial aphasia and Gloria Wekker's concept of white innocence. It examines several critical moments that reveal the persistent difficulties of remembering and forgetting colonial violence. Each section presents primary sources related to a specific critical event, followed by speeches, statements, or reports issued by the Dutch government. This research highlights how reports, statements, and apologies have historically been instrumentalised by the Dutch state to construct a nationally accepted hegemonic narrative—one that acknowledges colonial violence while simultaneously evading deeper accountability.

Keywords: Colonial Aphasia; Indonesia's War of Independence; Perang Kemerdekaan Indonesia; Indonesische Onafhankelijkheidsoorlog; Dutch Colonisation; Politics of Regret; Colonial Violence; White Innocence

Introduction

Colonial violence during Indonesia's War of Independence (1945–1949) remains a deeply contentious subject in Dutch society. Dutch influence in the archipelago dates back to the early 17th century with the establishment of the United East India Company (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, VOC), which later transitioned into formal colonial rule that lasted until the Japanese occupation during World War II. Shortly after Japan's surrender, taking advantage of the vacuum of power, Indonesia declared independence on August 17, 1945, but the Netherlands refused to recognise the proclamation, leading to a protracted and violent struggle for independence. A figure from the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) estimated that 100,000 Indonesians died as opposed to as few as 5,000 Dutch soldiers (Harinck, Van Horn, and Luttkhuis 2017). Complicating the situation further was the participation of pro-colonial groups not only from Indo-Dutch population but also from segments of the Moluccan and Chinese-Indonesian communities.

In its effort to reassert colonial authority, the Dutch colonial government conducted two military offensives: first, Operation Product (July 21-August 4, 1947), and second, Operation Kraai (December 19 1948-January 5, 1949) against the *de facto* Republic of Indonesia. This paper limits its scope exclusively to these two instances of postcolonial violence, while bearing in mind that they can never be disentangled from the broader history of Dutch colonisation in Indonesia. The topic of colonial violence has historically been a subject of controversy from the two sides. In Dutch history, the dominant narrative has traditionally referred to both operations as “police actions” (*politieacties*) intended to restore Dutch authority over the rebellious territory, while in Indonesia, they are known as “Dutch military aggressions” (*agresi militer Belanda*) in the attempt to restore colonial power.

It was not until February 17, 2022, that the Dutch prime minister at the time, Mark Rutte, apologised not only for the “systematic and widespread extreme violence” committed during the independence war but also for the failure of past governments to acknowledge it (Rutte 2022a). One year later, he finally “recognise[d] fully and without reservation” Indonesia’s independence on August 17, 1945, instead of December 27, 1949, which was during the transfer of sovereignty (Pascoe 2023). This was the second-highest level apology, following the apology from King Willem Alexander in 2020.

These apologies not only raise the question of why it took over six decades for the Dutch state to come to terms with its colonial past, but also highlight a more fundamental question: how the process of (dis)remembering has unfolded and continues to unfold. Rather than adopting a teleological reading of the apology, this paper situates the apology in the process of remembering and disremembering by understanding its meanings and social implications, echoing what Jeffrey Olick coined as the “politics of regret” (Olick 2007). In this light, political apologies are not merely symbolic gestures of acknowledging perpetration; they must be understood alongside material reparations and sustained post-apology engagement, with a focus on victims’ perspectives and their need for an apology (Wohl, Hornsey, and Philpot 2011). When applied to colonial violence context, it recognises the apology itself just as one important milestone among others.

Prominent Indonesian figures have dismissed the apology as meaningless because it avoids addressing war crimes and responsibility. For example, former Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda noted “Indonesia paid a compensation of 4.3 billion guilders to the Netherlands during the transfer of sovereignty... to cover the cost of Dutch military operations, including the ‘extreme violence’” (Wirajuda 2022). Despite the fact that the Netherlands recognised the systematic and widespread use of violence, Jeffry Pondaag, the head of the Netherlands-based Dutch Honorary Debts Committee Foundation, regarded the apology as “not sincere” or even “huge insult” as it avoided

the question of responsibility, compensation, and legal repercussions of such acts (Yuniar 2023). He also cited Mark Rutte's statement that the remarks "would not change any existing legal grounds" and that "[they] see the proclamation as (just a) historical fact" (Yuniar 2023).

Only in the last two decades have historians begun to ask why the process of remembering took so long in the Netherlands. Scagliola (2012) put the blame on the differing experiences faced by veterans on the "nature of the struggle," scarcity of evidence, and the mutual interest of both the Indonesian and Dutch governments to ignore the issue of war crimes. Later, Oostindie further substantiated these arguments by bringing the idea of (selective) collective victimhood of postcolonial migrants who focused on their own communities' sufferings in the colonial violence memory and by examining the Dutch government's cover-ups, while also acknowledging the Indonesian government's limited interest in addressing the issue (Oostindie 2020; Oostindie and van der Kaaij 2022).

More critical accounts draw upon Ann Stoler's concept of colonial aphasia, a condition marked by the inability to generate the vocabulary needed to speak within a national framework shaped by what historian Gloria Wekker (2016) calls "white innocence"—the belief that the Netherlands was innocent of wrongdoing in its colonial past, rooted in its self-image as a leader of the international human rights regime (Captain 2017; Bijl 2012, and Doolan 2021). The term itself entails three defining features: 1) an occlusion of knowledge or memory; 2) difficulty generating a vocabulary and associating appropriate words with appropriate things; and 3) difficulty comprehending the relevancy of what has been spoken. Previous accounts have yet to fully explain how this "colonial aphasia" comes into being, especially in the context of Dutch colonial violence. Much of the scholarship focuses on discourse incoherence as the primary difficulty, rather than on the deliberate occlusion of knowledge. Stoler (2011) outlines the mechanism, noting that "knowledge is disabled, attention is redirected, things are renamed" and, as a result, "disregard is sustained."

Building on this body of work, this paper moves beyond asking why the process took so long or why it appears to be a Sisyphean task for the Dutch government. More importantly, it examines how the state has used reports, statements, and apologies in the process of forgetting—not merely unremembering—the colonial violence in the *longue durée* perspective. This paper argues that these instruments have historically been carefully employed by the Dutch government to construct a nationally accepted hegemonic discourse that acknowledges colonial violence in Indonesia while simultaneously avoiding further responsibility. This process illustrated the ongoing difficulty of the Dutch state in coming to terms with the truth of its colonial past.

Methodology

This paper will revisit Ann Stoler's concept of colonial aphasia by focusing on the more critical account of history based on the intentional and structural dimensions: deliberate act of occlusion of knowledge, the difficulty in generating a vocabulary, which causes the difficulty in articulating a critical account of the past. It will do so by analysing chronologically the three critical moments that led to difficulty to "comprehend the relevancy of what has been spoken" and "difficulty generating [new] vocabulary" to associate the new phenomenon, which will be divided by a periodisation (Stoler 2011, 125). Each period will present primary sources on the critical event(s) followed by the primary sources of the narrative formation by the state through speeches, statements, or reports, supplemented by secondary sources on forgetting, censorship, and the long process of remembering colonial memory.

Using a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis, this paper recognises that the state—in this case, the Dutch government—plays a crucial role in creating and sustaining a "regime of truth." At the same time, this framework enables an examination of the legitimising and/or subverting voices from other groups such as the veterans, Indo-Dutch (*Indisch*), Moluccans, and the Indonesian victims. The paper traces the historical development of the discourse over time, identifies key actors and the socio-political climate of that shapes it, analyses the components of official statements, and examine recurring themes and shifting ideas. It will also explore instances of disunity, discontinuity, and the limits of the discourse, as well as the challenges posed to it—where they originated, why they were rejected, by whom, and for what purposes (Grbich 2007).

The analysis begins with the first period after decolonisation, characterised by the sustained legitimisation of violence as "police actions" (*Politieele Acties*). This era was marked by censorship of war reporting, widespread silence, and attempts to justify the "police actions." The second period examines the moment when this silence was broken in 1969 (the first critical moment), when war veteran Joop Hueting publicly confessed to the war crimes he had witnessed and committed (Oostindie and van der Kaaij 2022). His testimony pressured the De Jong government to publish the *Excessennota*—a report portraying the violence as incidental "excesses," thereby concealing the systematic nature of the war. The third period considers the intense scrutiny and growing memorialisation that emerged alongside the collective memories of Indo-Dutch and Moluccan communities entering the public sphere in the 1980s (the second critical moment). This development eventually led to the first official statement from the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2005, which framed the war as unfinished business and emphasised "comparative victimhood" rather than offering an apology. The final period begins with the 2008–2009 Rawagede case (the third critical moment), in which the widows of Rawagede won their lawsuit

against the Dutch state (Scagliola 2012). In 2016, the Rutte cabinet commissioned a major research project, yet avoided addressing the issue of “compensation,” which remained the central unresolved concern. The conclusion will synthesise these findings and examine both continuity and change in the long-term process of (dis)remembering.

Two Decades After the “Police Actions”: Censorship, Concealment, and Cover-Up Narratives

On December 27, 1949, the Netherlands formally transferred its political sovereignty over the former Dutch East Indies following the Roundtable Conference Agreement in The Hague. Far from being the culmination of decolonisation, this was just the starting point of the long-overdue process. Indonesia was compelled to assume financial responsibility for Dutch colonial assets and initially was even pressured to pay for the cost of “police actions.” The agreement authorised the formation of confederate relations under the Netherlands-Indonesia Union, which dissolved in 1959. The dispute over New Guinea was resolved in 1963, whereas the unfulfilled promise of South Moluccan independence remains a historical grievance until today.

The transfer of sovereignty ended not only in the demobilisation of veterans, mass exodus of Dutch personnel, and large-scale postcolonial migration to the Netherlands, but also two decades of concealment and censorship. The veterans remained silent about their actions in the Dutch East Indies due to the military’s code of silence (Scagliola 2012; Scagliola and Vince 2022). Meanwhile, the postcolonial migrants—particularly the Indo-Dutch community—preferred not to discuss these issues publicly, confining their dissatisfaction and resentment largely to their own circles (Oostindie & van der Kaaij 2022).

As Stoler (2008) cautions, this period should not be described as “collective amnesia,” for colonial memories did not simply disappear. Nor is this a case of “colonial forgetting,” since the whole society never fully remembered these histories in the first place, placing this period somewhere in between (Doolan 2021, 18). It is an overstatement to characterise these two decades as marked solely by silence; critical voices did exist, albeit on the margins, and memories of violence continued to circulate within private sphere (Oostindie and van der Kaaij 2022, 406).

The Dutch state played the central role in sustaining the “silence.” The attempt to publicise documentation of violence was suppressed through systematic censorship of wartime records and through official framing that left no room to acknowledge or discuss colonial atrocities. This constituted an active and deliberate process of “occlusion of knowledge,” which later contributed to the absence of a public discourse capable of addressing the violence. While Scagliola (2012) claims that the challenge stemmed partly from a lack of evidence, but this scarcity was itself largely

constructed: many records and documents were destroyed, disappeared within the archives, or were discarded by veterans (Lorenz 2015).

By the end of 1949, photographs taken by military photographers during the First and Second Police Actions disappeared from the archive and were subsequently destroyed by the order of military leadership. The few that survived were only released decades later. As photo historian Louis Zweers notes, “photos that had not survived the [military] censorship were under no circumstances allowed to be published in the Netherlands nor fall into the hands of the Indonesians.” He demonstrates this through an uncensored photograph from the First Police Action in Deli, Sumatra, that did not pass military censorship (Moll 2023). Zweers further argues that operated not only through the Army Information Service but also through the self-censorship of newspaper reporters and editors (Vlasblom 2013).

Published photographs sought to recast Dutch soldiers in a benevolent light. For instance, one widely circulated image (Figure 1) depicts an Indonesian girl playing a banjo while sitting among Dutch soldiers, surrounded by local residents; it is believed to have been taken in Surakarta, Central Java, on December 21, 1948 (Sidarto 2016). The photograph suggests that Dutch soldiers were welcomed by the local population, emphasising positive interactions and portraying the military presence as accepted—even embraced—by indigenous civilians.

Images that revealed violence were censored before reaching the Dutch public, allowing the military to justify the “police actions” and instead promote a humanitarian narrative. As shown in Figure 2, *De Spiegel* magazine published an article on June 15, 1946, portraying Dutch soldiers and local residents helping one another and distributing aid (Sidarto 2016). Such representations framed Dutch troops as morally upright actors assisting Indonesian “natives,” who were depicted as victims of the circumstances. These photographs reinforced a moralising narrative in which Dutch “police actions” targeted guerrillas, “terrorists,” or thieves (“*rampokkers*”), casting the broader population as passive victims and presenting the conflict as an internal Indonesian problem rather than a colonial war.

Figure 1: A girl sitting with a banjo surrounded by residents in Surakarta who greeted the incoming Dutch soldiers



Source: Schilling, T. 1948. *Untitled*. DLC, National Archives, The Hague.

[illegible]

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This framing aligned with official justifications advanced by Prime Minister Louis Beel (1947), who argued that the Dutch colonial government is responsible for “order and security” and that military force would be used “as limited as possible” to remove the “untenable nature of state emergency” and to pave the way for the Linggadjati agreement. More than a truce, the agreement recognised the Republic’s sovereignty—albeit only over Java, Sumatra, and Madura—alongside two other Dutch puppet states that would form the United States of Indonesia. This region, in turn, would be incorporated into a Netherlands-Indonesian Union, with the Dutch monarch as its formal head. From the Republic’s perspective, this arrangement amounted to an attempt at recolonisation. Beel dismissed such interpretations as “enemy propaganda” or “hostile propaganda” emanating from the Republic’s side, insisting that such narratives needed to be suppressed (Beel 1947).

Gloria Wekker (2016) argues that the euphemistic label “police actions” represents the Dutch self-representation as a small, ethical, and fundamentally innocent nation. This narrative refigured the members of the Indonesian guerilla movement as merely rebels against order and security maintained by the Dutch colonial government. Such narrative fits into the post-World War II hegemonic narrative of “innocence” and “victimhood” in Dutch society, which centred on the (mythologised) national experience of suffering under Nazi occupation, the brutality during the Japanese takeover of the Dutch East Indies, and the prevailing self-image of the Netherlands as “a nation that resisted” (Oostindie 2003). Despite Dutch efforts to justify the “police actions,” the international community—especially the United States—pressured the Netherlands to resume negotiations, culminating in the transfer of sovereignty on December 27, 1949.

The occlusion of documentation on Dutch colonial violence made public discussion of these memories exceedingly difficult, confining most recollections to the private sphere. Political leaders in the two decades following sovereignty primarily discussed the broader decolonisation process rather than the violence itself. In several speeches, Queen Juliana (e.g., 1955) addressed returning postcolonial migrants and criticised Indonesia’s nationalisation of Dutch assets. In the early 1950s, the attention focused on the Dutch-Indonesian Union and debates over normalising relations (Juliana 1952). By the late 1950s, the Dutch New Guinea dispute dominated political discourse, especially after Indonesia formally withdrew from the Union in 1956 (Juliana 1959). Overall, this prolonged focus allowed the Netherlands to recast itself, consistent with Wekker’s argument, as an ethical guiding nation seeking to uphold its ideals of decolonisation despite fierce opposition from the Republic (Wekker 2016, 2). These narratives of innocence and self-righteousness would prevail in the following two decades.

Breaking the Silence: (Re)framing Colonial Violence as “Excesses”

A major rupture in the government’s hegemonic narrative occurred on January 17, 1969. War veteran Joop Hueting appeared in an interview on *Achter het Nieuws* (“Behind the News”), during which he admitted not only to witnessing “war crimes” (*oorlogsmisdaden*) but also to having participated in them. He described several actions that, in his view, had “no military necessity.” For example, he recalled: “To give you examples, I can tell you that *kampongs* were riddled with bullets [...] The interrogations took place, during which there was torture in a horrible manner” (Histori Bersama 2016).

Hueting emphasised that the violence was not a matter of “incidental cases” (*incidentele gevallen*) but instead constituted “business as usual” (*normale gang van zaken*). He added that “patrol operations” were conducted from *kampung* (village) to *kampung* with “too little military manpower,” which, according to him, encouraged the killing and torture of prisoners of war and even non-combatants when soldiers were confronted. Following the broadcast, Hueting and the programme received numerous letters—some supporting his decision to speak out, though the vast majority expressed anger. One conscript, W. A. de Grijjs, for example, denounced Hueting as a traitor who had damaged the Netherlands’ reputation abroad (Limpach 2016, 5).

In response to this opening of “Pandora’s box,” the Dutch government was pressured to compile the *Excessennota*—literally, a “list of excesses” (*Excessennota*) (Bank 1995). In a rushed attempt to quell public concern, Prime Minister De Jong established a committee tasked with investigating the available official archives in the Netherlands within just three months. However, the commission neither interviewed war veterans nor consulted Indonesians, despite the fact that many witnesses were still alive at the time (Lorenz 2015). In both the memorandum and his accompanying statement, De Jong acknowledged that “excesses” occurred but insisted that “remains of the opinion that the army in its entirety acted correctly in Indonesia,” and argued that the evidence showed no “systematic cruelty” (De Jong 1969).

Yet this apparent ease obscures the intense political struggle over naming the violence, reflected in parliamentary debates during the report’s compilation. The dispute centred on whether the events constituted “war crimes” (*oorlogsmisdaden*), as Hueting claimed; “excesses” (*excessen*), as Prime Minister De Jong insisted; or simply “crimes” (*misdaden*), as Speaker of the House Frans-Jozef van Thiel argued (Bank 1995, 13). Hueting’s use of “war crimes” directly challenged the Dutch narrative of wartime victimhood by casting the Netherlands as a perpetrator of illegal violence. Ultimately, however, the government rejected the term and instead constructed its own vocabulary of “excesses.” This illustrates what Stoler identifies as the “difficulty [of] associating

appropriate words with appropriate things,” whereby states disassociate resemblances and reject viable categories (Stoler 2011, 125).

De Jong’s accompanying statement further denied the systematic nature of the violence, framing it instead as a series of incidental “excesses,” with events such as the purge in South Celebes (1946–1947) treated as isolated aberrations. This rhetorical move aimed to avoid the implications that the broader military campaign as an illegal act. The justification that the Dutch army “in its entirety acted correctly” implies a narrative of innocence and the refusal to accept any responsibility. The avoidance of the term “war crimes” as Scagliola put it (2012, 423), was used to “neutralise” information that might potentially open a wider discussion of colonial violence in Indonesia—discussions that had long remained confined to private or silenced circles of Indies veterans (Scagliola 2012, 423). Yet the purpose of the *Excessennota* extended beyond mere neutralisation: the report acknowledged that the silence had been broken while simultaneously defending a narrative of innocence and even moral superiority.

The report also justified the “police actions” as “counter-terror” acts to restore order against “irregular guerilla,” who allegedly confronted Dutch troops with ambushes and terror (Bank 1995, 11). This framing cast the Dutch forces as disciplined, civilised agents of order and the Indonesian guerrillas as wild, brutal, and uncivilised. Such rhetoric downplayed or obscured the burning of *kampongs*, executions of non-combatants, and purges of prisoners of war, as highlighted by Zaalberg and Lutikhuis (2022). In doing so, the report not only reproduced narratives of innocence but also reinscribed a familiar European “civilizing mission” by portraying Dutch intervention after World War II as a morally guided effort to stabilise the region, while depicting Indonesian revolutionary forces as engaging merely in rebellious disorder rather than resisting recolonisation.

As the *Excessennota* stated:

No matter how devastated and impoverished the country had emerged from the German occupation, the Dutch government decided to form an army for Indonesia. Initially, the aim was to contribute to the fight against the Japanese occupying forces and to liberate the Indies.

The *Excessennota* thus detached the return of British troops to restore Dutch administration and the subsequent Dutch “police actions” from the broader context of efforts to re-establish colonial rule. Its narrative suggested that the Dutch military sought merely to restore order and implement a “gradual” and “appropriate” form of decolonisation, effectively implying that Indonesians needed saving from their own revolutionary movement and that legitimate independence ought to be granted by the Dutch. This narrative became the official government line for decades, enabling

the Netherlands to deny the illegal, excessive, and systematic nature of the military operations by reducing the violence to isolated “excesses.”

Memorialisation, Collective Memories of Postcolonial Migrants, and the First Dutch Regret

Previous historical accounts of war have mainly featured the Dutch and disillusioned veterans’ point of view of the colonial violence. Decades later, there were growing dissatisfactions and resentment, especially among the postcolonial migrants, which were made up of 300,000 Dutch, mainly Indo-Dutch, and 12,500 Moluccan communities (Oostindie and Van der Kaaij 2022).¹ Their collective memories, as Oostindie and Van der Kaaij (2022) explain, were shaped by two factors: (1) collective suffering that renders painful memories about decolonisation, and (2) disappointment with their new position and new life in the postcolonial Dutch state, which put them in a marginalised position.

The first significant group is *totok* repatriates—white Dutch (“pure-blood”) settlers—whose memories centred mainly on Japanese internment camps (Oostindie 2020). They recalled their suffering under the Japanese occupation and expressed nostalgia for “*tempo doeloë*”—the “good old days” of the colonial era. For instance, this narratives are particularly visible in Fred Lanzig’s memoir published in 2007, where he recounts life in the internment camps during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies (Lanzig 2007).

In contrast, it took nearly three decades before the Indo-Dutch (or Eurasian) community gained space to speak publicly about their experiences. They were excluded from the war narrative and the Dutch culture of remembrance. Their memories of violence revolve around the *Bersiap* period (1945-1947), an early revolutionary phase characterised by violence against alleged pro-colonial groups in Indonesia, especially the Indo-European and even Chinese-Indonesian groups (Oostindie 2020; van der Kaaij 2020). In his memoir, Indo-European Herman Bussemaker recalls the *Bersiap* as a time when pro-Republican militants violently targeted Indo-Europeans, forcing their flight from Indonesia (Bussemaker 2005).² As a result, strong anti-Republican sentiment became deeply embedded within the Indo-Dutch community.

¹ It should be noted that the Indo-Dutch community in the Netherlands consists of those who were legally recognised by their Dutch fathers. Those who were not recognised were unable to claim Dutch citizenship and were instead absorbed into the Indonesian population. For further discussion, see Marjolein van Pagee (2023).

² To some, the term “*Bersiap*” has been regarded as having a racist connotation as it always attaches the primitive and uncivilized label to Indonesians as perpetrators of the violence, meanwhile the root cause of the problem is the injustice that the colonialism has created. For further reference, see: “Rijksmuseum scraps racist term “*Bersiap*” in new exhibition,” *NL Times*, January 11, 2022, <https://nltimes.nl/2022/01/11/rijksmuseum-scraps-racist-term-bersiap-new-exhibition>.

The third major group comprised Moluccan ex-soldiers and their families, who had fought for the Dutch colonial government under the promise of establishing the Republic of South Moluccas. Instead, they found themselves stranded in the Netherlands and eventually marginalised, including within military structures (Oostindie and van der Kaaij 2022). Their frustration escalated into the train hostage crises of 1975 and 1977, perpetrated by young Moluccan activists, who were labelled “terrorists” by the Dutch government. These violent acts reflected decades of disillusionment, as many Moluccans had lived in temporary camps such as De Schattenberg (1950–1971) and felt the Dutch government had abandoned their cause (Rozema 2018).

The growing collective trauma prompted massive scrutiny as the topic gradually received attention from historians, who, in general, previously would display indifferent stances from the government. Notably, Loe de Jong, director of the Dutch Institute for War Documentation, initially used the term “war crimes” in first drafts of *The Kingdom of the Netherlands During World War II*, but was forced to remove it later on under political pressure (De Jong 1988; Oostindie 2022). Even so, he represented early anticolonial voices within Dutch historiography, which gained prominence only from the 1980s onward. The vocal expressions of disappointment and exclusion among postcolonial migrants also shaped the expanding memorial landscape. Oostindie and Van der Kaaij (2022) report that after 1995, approximately 370 memorials were erected, commemorating primarily Dutch victims. This period also saw the inauguration of the Indies Monument in The Hague (1998) and the establishment of the Moluccan Museum in Utrecht (1990–2012).

This massive scrutiny and memorialisation made it difficult for the Dutch government to form a single narrative of its colonial history. In 1995, Indo-Dutch and veteran communities influenced Queen Beatrix’s visit to Indonesia so that it occurred only a few days after August 17, thereby strategically avoiding any indirect recognition of the 50th anniversary of Indonesia’s Independence Day (Oostindie and Van der Kaaij 2022). Calls for the national debate on the apology have subsequently failed due to opposition from postcolonial migrants, especially the Indo-Dutch and veteran communities.

Ten years later, Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Ben Bot visited Indonesia on the 60th anniversary of its proclamation of independence. He stated that his presence signified the Netherlands’ “political and moral acceptance of [the] date,” acknowledging that the country had been “on the wrong side of history” and expressing “profound regret for all [...] suffering” (Bot 2005). This constituted an acknowledgment and expression of regret, rather than a formal apology.

Equally significant was the speech Ben Bot delivered during the national commemoration of August 15, 1945, known as the East Indies Commemoration. He began by referencing the “Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies” and the Bersiap period, framing these as shared experiences of suffering among “Dutch East Indies and Indonesian citizens” (Bot 2005). Bot emphasised not only the physical but also the psychological suffering endured, drawing on his own experiences as a member of the Dutch-Indies community (Bot 2005).

Symbolically, he acknowledged the suffering of Indo-Dutch migrants, Dutch military personnel, and Indonesians alike. He expressed his “hope for the understanding and support of the Dutch-Indies community, the Moluccan community in the Netherlands, and the veterans of the police actions” (Bot 2005), recognising that the military deployment had been painful for all involved. This message functioned as a signal to domestic audiences, aimed at preventing potential backlash, particularly from Indo-Dutch, Moluccan, and veteran communities, by reassuring them that their perspectives and grievances were being recognised.

This period marked what Stoler (2011, 125) described as “difficulty comprehending the relevance of what has been spoken.” As the once-separate collective memories of anticolonial violence entered the public sphere, the Dutch government faced increasing pressure to acknowledge its role as a perpetrator. At the same time, this proliferation of narratives made such acknowledgment more difficult. Beyond the fear of provoking anger among postcolonial migrant communities, the government also confronted the challenge of crafting a single, hegemonic historical narrative in the face of competing memories. Consequently, it adopted differentiated and deliberately ambiguous messaging for domestic and Indonesian audiences. Domestically, official statements foregrounded memories of the Japanese occupation and the Bersiap period, while in Indonesia they conveyed political regret and only partial, cautious admissions of responsibility.

A decade later, Ben Bot’s visit, despite his own history of internment during the Japanese occupation, did not provoke significant backlash from veterans or the Indo-Dutch community. His spokesperson stressed in the press that the visit would not “disavow” these groups and would serve only as a “political and moral acceptance of the date” (Oostindie and Van der Kaaij 2022, 413). This formulation functioned as an appeasement strategy, offering a carefully calibrated acknowledgment of Dutch wrongdoings that remained sufficiently ambiguous to satisfy both domestic and Indonesian audiences. Similarly, Bot’s description of the Dutch military deployment as being merely “on the wrong side of history” minimised responsibility by reducing the issue to the Netherlands having fought on the opposing side of the Indonesian independence movement, rather than engaging with the nature or severity of the violence itself.

As evidence of colonial violence continued to accumulate, the Netherlands faced repeated pressure both to confront its colonial past and to maintain positive relations with post-authoritarian Indonesia. Yet expressions of regret consistently avoided addressing the character of the violence. In official discourse, the incidents remained labelled as “excesses,” a term that persisted for years in the Dutch state’s formal position.

Subsequent Apologies: The Widows of Rawagede Case and the Politics of Compensation

The legal proceedings concerning the Rawagede victims started in 2009 and gained a landmark conclusion in 2011 in a decision by the Civil Law Chamber of the District Court of The Hague. The case illustrates the first civil lawsuit brought by “widows from Rawagede” with the help of the Committee of Dutch Honorary Debts, accusing the Dutch state of committing war crimes in a mass execution in a village in West Java in 1947. They won their claim, and this was the first time the colonial violence perpetrated by the Dutch military in Indonesia was condemned. The court ruled that “the state acted unlawfully towards claimants,” executing the widows’ spouses on December 9, 1947, and further determined that “the state [was] liable for the resulting damage” (District Court of The Hague 2011). The widows were awarded €20,000 each, and the state agreed to an extended apology. By contrast, the descendants or children of the victim received way less (BBC Indonesia 2020).

It was arguably the first time or, indeed, a breakthrough that Indonesian victims’ voices were heard within the Dutch legal system (Immler 2022). It is not exaggerating to say that the Rawagede ruling inaugurated a period of successive apologies offered by the Dutch state. Immediately after the verdict in 2011, the Dutch Ambassador to Indonesia, Tjeerd de Zwaan, delivered a formal apology before villagers in Rawagede (The Guardian 2011). This was the first time the word “apology” was officially mentioned. In 2013, the Dutch Ambassador offered a formal apology to the Indonesian state as a whole ahead of a trade mission led by Prime Minister Mark Rutte (Deutsche Welle 2013). In 2016, Dutch Foreign Minister Bert Koenders reiterated the apology during his visit to the Rawagede village memorial (Deutsche Welle 2016).

The apology from the highest level of government came only in 2020, during a state visit, King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands not only reiterated the “political and moral” acknowledgement of the independence but also expressed “regret and apologise for excessive violence on the part of the Dutch in those years.” The state visit was in parallel with the Dutch trade mission in 2020, which prompted speculations that the apology was rather an attempt of the

Netherlands to gloss over its colonial past and to establish better economic engagement with Indonesia (Netherlands Water Partnership 2024).

The court cases also prompted a four-year research project starting in 2017 to investigate war crimes in Indonesia's War of Independence done by researchers from three institutions: the Royal Institute for the Linguistics, Geography and Ethnology, the Netherlands Institute for Military History, and the Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (Pieterse 2019). The new investigation used the broad term "extreme violence" in the study to include war crimes and also other crimes. The study concluded that the Dutch armed forces were guilty of torture, extrajudicial killings, rape, theft, burning of villages, shooting civilians, and act of purges. Moreover, violence on the Indonesian revolutionary side was also highlighted.

After the research was concluded and presented, Prime Minister Mark Rutte admitted the "systematic and widespread use of extreme violence, even to torture" and that the extreme violence in most cases "went unpunished" (Rutte 2022a). It changes the official stance from singling out the colonial violence as mere excesses and of incidental nature. Mark Rutte then offered "deep apologies" and one year later "recognise[d] fully and without reservation" Indonesia's independence on August 17, 1945 (NRC Handelsblad 2023).

It was the first time that the Dutch authority claimed "full responsibility" for the "collective failure" and "consistent looking away" by the previous cabinet (Rutte 2022a). In the speech delivered in The Hague, Rutte's apology mentioned that the blame should not be placed on the individual conscripts or soldiers and recognised the "different painful stories," mentioning his Indo-Dutch background as well as acknowledging the pain of his community, Dutch repatriates, and the Moluccans first generations. It is very interesting that these veteran voices—who were never investigated nor prosecuted—seem to be continuously recognised and continue to be exonerated more in the Dutch state official position rather than the actual victims of the violence (Oostindie, Hoogenboom, and Verwey 2018; Lorenz 2015).

Although representing a rhetorical milestone in the Dutch's remembering of its colonial violence, the apologies and Independence Day acknowledgement lacked legal grounds. The disclaimer Mark Rutte provided to the Dutch media provides a more nuanced understanding as he exclaimed that "we [saw] the proclamation as a historical fact" and that the recognition will not change any preexisting legal conditions (NRC Handelsblad 2023). This means that the official and legally recognised date of independence would remain December 27, 1949. This did not change much from the previous official stance of the Dutch government delivered by Foreign Minister Ben Bot in 2005.

Criticism arose regarding the non-independent nature of the investigation. Gloria Wekker even suspected that the research was aimed to “condone war crimes” and had predetermined conclusions that would favour the Dutch state (Historisch Nieuwsblad 2018). The Indo-Dutch, Moluccan, and Dutch veteran organisations were asked to take part in the Social Focus Group (*Klankebordgroep*) of the research project, but organisations representing the Indonesian victims of the Dutch colonial violence themselves (KKUB), which was the research’s *raison d’être* in the very first place, were not included (Van Pagee 2023). The reason for such exclusion is because of it was a “Dutch Focus Group” (Histori Bersama 2022).

The exclusion means that the research only includes pro-colonial group and excludes critical voices from the research. Van Pagee went as far as describing this as the continuation of the “Apartheid system,” during colonisation which placed the “*inlanders*” (natives) in the bottom of the colonial era apartheid system (Van Pagee 2023). As one would expect, the apology made no reference to “compensation” and “legal consequences,” which was the “elephant in the room” discovered by the Widows of Rawagede trial. The occlusion of the fact was reflected by the difficulty of generating vocabulary as critical voices still miss the term “war crimes” or “human rights violations,” which has major legal consequences if used (Immler 2022).

The trial, followed by a series of apologies, unfortunately had the effect of obscuring and downplaying the issue of compensation for other instances of Dutch colonial violence. The court rulings themselves emphasised the exceptional nature of Rawagede—and later, in 2013, the violence in South Celebes (Veraart 2022; District Court of The Hague 2019). As Veraart (2022) argues, this exceptionalisation imposes significant limits on future claims to reparations by Indonesian survivors.

In subsequent apologies, the term “war crimes” was deliberately omitted, particularly after the parliamentary debate on colonialism on June 14, 2023 (Vermeulen 2023). This omission reflects the Dutch government’s ongoing difficulty in generating a vocabulary that explicitly categorises the violence as illegal. Without such terminology, the apology remains ambiguous: is the Netherlands apologising for “excessive violence” committed in the course of suppressing a rebellion, or for invading a country that had already proclaimed its independence?

It is also important to note that the 2022 apology was narrowly framed around the violence of the independence war, detached from the broader context of hundreds of years of Dutch colonisation in Indonesia. While the Dutch Prime Minister has apologised for slavery in the Dutch Caribbean, no comparable recognition has been extended for the exploitation and coerced labour imposed on Indonesians in their own land (Rutte 2022b).

Although the trial opened the possibility of compensation for victims who filed lawsuits, the subsequent research project avoided addressing the broader question of reparations for the “systematic and widespread violence” widely discussed in Indonesia. Had this issue been taken up, every victim of colonial violence, rather than only the families involved in specific cases, might have been eligible to claim compensation from the Dutch state. The matter of compensation also inevitably touches upon the 4.3 billion guilders Indonesia was compelled to pay the Netherlands during the transfer of sovereignty, as well as the payments made to Dutch conscripts who refused deployment to Indonesia.

Rutte emphasised that the research was initiated because “the Netherlands places a high value on protecting and promoting human rights, international law and the rule of law,” and that investigating the past would play an important role in achieving those aims (Reuters 2016). This framing reveals the nature of the research as an exercise aligned with Dutch state interests: a way of “coming to terms” with its colonial past while reinforcing its global self-image as a champion of human rights and international law. The apology, likewise, must be situated in the context of both countries’ mutual interest in glossing over the colonial past: Indonesia in the name of nation-building and political stability, and the Netherlands in the name of strengthening future bilateral relations, particularly in trade and economic cooperation. These diplomatic priorities often came at the expense of historically marginalised groups, including Moluccan communities in the Netherlands and impoverished Indonesian widows and families in rural villages. In effect, the two states appeared to “agree to disagree,” maintaining divergent narratives of the past.

Nevertheless, Rutte also stressed that history remains an “unfinished past tense” and that the research does not mark an end point but “a next step in joint processing” (Rutte 2022a). This statement provoked anger among Moluccans in the Netherlands, who viewed the recognition of Indonesia’s independence as “an attack on the Republic of South Moluccas’ right to exist” (NL Times 2023). Together with the critical voices of postcolonial scholars and Indonesian organisations, these reactions underscore the need not only to incorporate a wider range of perspectives in the process of (dis)remembering but also to genuinely address and heal the enduring wounds of colonial violence.

At this point, it should be clear that Ann Stoler’s concept of colonial aphasia is not a static condition but a dynamic process of “coming to terms” with colonial violence. Doolan (2021) critiques the nominal form of the term and instead advocates for the action-oriented verb “disremembering.” Given the interplay of continuity and change in the Dutch case—where apologies simultaneously function to remember and to disremember—it is more accurate to speak of *(dis)remembering*. In Rutte’s most recent apology, the Dutch state acknowledged its wrongdoing

across the full scope of colonial violence, rather than limiting culpability to isolated “excesses.” However, crucially, the legal consequences and forms of compensation remained largely confined to those so-called “excesses,” leaving the broader violence unaddressed both in the research report and in the apology itself.

It is also essential to note that the politics of state apologies and regrets does not position the government as the only actor articulating history. In contrast, colonial aphasia is experienced and reproduced by multiple actors, and these actors, in turn, influence the government’s own forms of aphasia. However, this paper uses a Foucauldian understanding of power relations, recognising the state as the primary “regime of truth.” State apologies, in this sense, become instruments for establishing a monolithic and hegemonic version of the past—one that often silences or marginalises critical voices under the guise of consensus.

Michel Foucault’s notion of a regime of truth refers to the idea that truth is produced, legitimised, and reproduced by institutions that maintains power relations (Foucault 1980). In the Dutch context, prevailing historiography only includes voices from pro-colonial groups and not anti-colonial groups, specifically the Indonesian victims of the violence during the War of Independence themselves. It is very likely that Rutte and the Dutch government has used the research as a way to close the chapter and avoid further scrutiny of the Dutch’s colonial past. Yet this state-sanctioned version of truth is continually challenged by the “critical moments” discussed in this paper—moments that compel the government to (re)formulate its narrative, often in ways that do not necessarily advance historical truth. This dynamic is especially significant given the collapse of the Rutte cabinet and the growing influence of far-right voices in Dutch politics.

Conclusion

Dutch colonial violence has never been forgotten; rather, it has been continuously (dis-)remembered in the manner Ann Stoler describes as colonial aphasia. Since 1969, the Dutch government has instrumentalised political apologies and expressions of regret through speeches, public statements, and official reports as tools to hegemonically remember colonial violence while simultaneously erasing elements of the past that would demand greater responsibility. Rutte’s apology in 2022, for example, acknowledged colonial violence as “systematic and widespread,” yet avoided terms such as “war crimes” or “human rights violations,” whose legal implications, particularly regarding financial compensation, would be far more consequential.

This colonial aphasia has been sustained through the occlusion of knowledge, enabled by mechanisms of censorship, intimidation, and a national narrative grounded in Dutch victimhood, innocence, and moral self-righteousness. These dynamics kept memories of violence confined to

veterans' codes of silence and private conversations within specific communities. When that silence was broken in 1969, the Dutch government struggled to defend the hegemonic narrative of the "police actions." The terminology shifted over time from "excesses" to "systematic and widespread violence" but never to "war crimes" or "human rights violations," reflecting the persistent difficulty of adopting a vocabulary that accurately names colonial violence and its illegality. This linguistic manoeuvring produced new categories while rejecting viable ones.

The evolution of terminology mirrors the Dutch government's ongoing discomfort with acknowledging responsibility. The state's historical claim to "innocence" gradually transformed into "there were excesses," then to being "on the wrong side of history," and finally to accepting "full responsibility." This long and continuous process of disremembering underscores the challenge of confronting multiple, often conflicting collective memories of victimhood, including those of marginalised. It also reflects the state's reluctance to face the legal and material consequences that would accompany a genuine "coming to terms" with its colonial past.

As Rutte noted, the Dutch apology should not be understood as an endpoint but rather as an invitation to continue a dialogue about the country's colonial past. This paper contributes to discussions of the "politics of regret," a topic that has received only limited attention in studies of Dutch colonial remembrance—most notably in the work of Bijl (2012) and Immler (2022). The theorisation developed here reinforces the insights of critical scholars such as Wekker (2016) and Stoler (2011), whose contributions have at times been criticised for excessive theoretical abstraction and insufficient empirical grounding (Kromhout 2018).

This paper contributes to the operationalisation of Ann Stoler's concept of colonial aphasia by applying Foucault's notion of a "regime of truth" to examine how the Dutch government has continually constructed a hegemonic historical narrative—one that simultaneously remembers and disremembers. This state-sanctioned narrative has been repeatedly challenged by the collective memories of various communities, including veterans, Dutch *totoke*s, Indo-Dutch, Moluccans, and Indonesian victims. Their interventions have generated "critical moments" that compelled the government to reformulate its historical narrative.

The paper acknowledges that the legal aspect and path to reparation have started to be addressed by historians and scholars (Lorenz 2015; Siagian 2018). As the Indonesian and the Dutch states continue to gloss over their colonial past, the painful scars of the Moluccan community in the Netherlands and the Indonesian victims continue to bleed. Their voices and interests need to be included in both countries' commemorative culture. Thus, it is a fruitful future research agenda to consider what path to reparation might look like by considering their colonial experiences. Therefore, the hegemonic narrative formulated during Mark Rutte's rule should

prompt more critical rethinking about the broader debate on colonialism, both from the Dutch and the Indonesian side. At this point, the two countries seem to “agree to disagree” with their own versions of history.

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