

Review

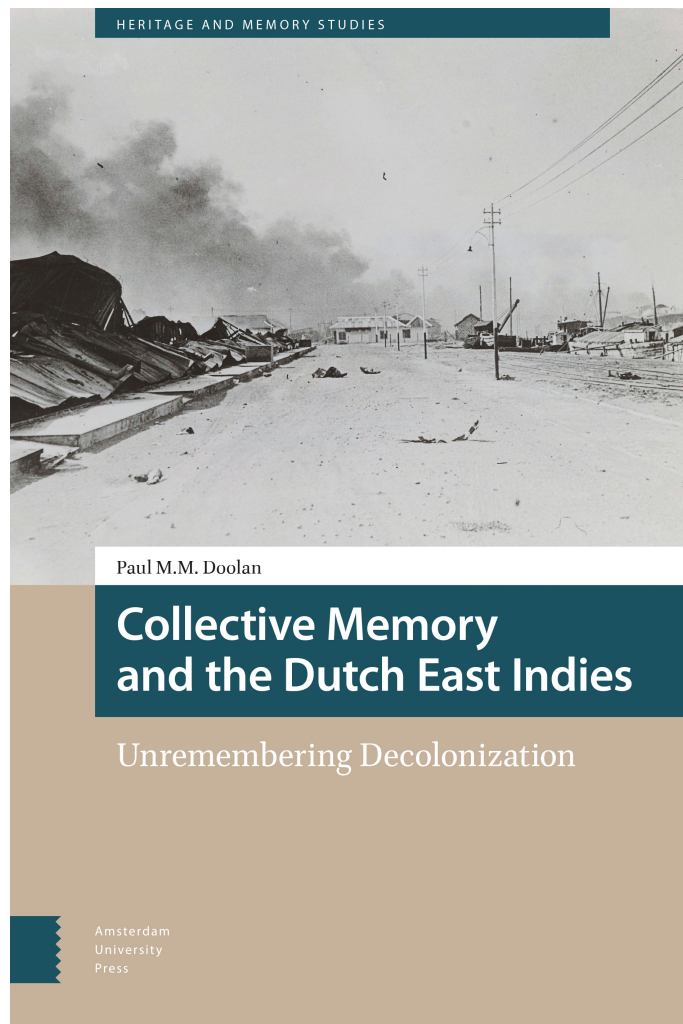
Paul M. M. Doolan:

***Collective memory and the Dutch East Indies:
Unremembering decolonization***

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Reviewed by Liesbeth Rosen Jacobson



Lately, the subject of the decolonization war in Indonesia (1945-1949) finds itself repeatedly at the centre of public and media attention. With the publication of several groundbreaking studies, such as Gert Oostindie's *Soldaat in Indonesië* in 2015, Remy Limpach's *De brandende kampongs van generaal Spoor* in 2016, and David van Reybroucks *Revolusi* in 2020, the discussion about the alleged structural nature of massive violence and the occurrence of war crimes seems to have broken new ground. These books were also explicitly meant for a more general interest reading audience, beyond the purely academic readership. Thus, after decades of collective amnesia, silencing and obscuring by historians as well as journalists, veterans and politicians, the conclusions of the books mentioned above seem to reveal a rather inconvenient historical reality: war crimes did occur, and massive violence took place on a structural, rather than on a merely incidental basis. Of course, evidence is sketchy and in the confusing circumstances of a guerilla war spread out over several islands, not every Dutch soldier was involved in extreme violence.

With his book, Paul M.M. Doolan addresses the creation of this repressed or covered-up collective memory, sketching quite accurately the process of the collective silencing act of this inconvenient truth in media outlets (newspapers, tv series, radio bulletins) as well as in novels and historical accounts. He convincingly labels this process with a novel word, *unremembering*, in the introduction. He clearly distinguishes it from, on the one hand, *dismembering*, which means breaking up the past in structured parts to make sense of it, and on the other hand ordinary remembering. In this sense, *unremembering* means not entirely forgetting, but the memories are temporarily stored in "a cold storage, awaiting the trigger that would result in involuntarily remembering" (20).

This reminded me of another publication that recently appeared, namely the edited volume by Ron Eyerman and Giuseppe Sciortino, *The cultural trauma of decolonization: Colonial returnees in the national imagination*. In that book, the authors use the conceptual framework of cultural trauma to understand the short and long-term consequences of decolonization for the people directly involved along with the following generations. They "argue that even extreme forms of suffering become traumatic only if they are interpreted and made meaningful to an audience in terms of wider symbolic structures" (Eyerman & Sciortino 2020, 7), available in that particular society. It would have been interesting to link the concept of cultural trauma to Doolan's term *unremembering* to explore whether and how they overlap. Certain traumatic elements of decolonization were apparently hidden from public view for a long time. As such, they could not become a cultural trauma and the *unremembering* could go on for decades. Adding the (in my view) missing explanatory, theoretical link (why could this

unremembering endure for such a long time) could clarify that aspect of Doolan's work.

Despite my observation, this is quite an impressive, courageous, and ambitious attempt to sketch the whole process of the development of collective (un)remembering. Doolan does this by systematically referring to various expressions and representations in which the seminal 1969 interview with veteran Joop Hueting in the Dutch national TV-program *Achter het nieuws* justly receives ample attention. It was the first time that a mainstream Dutch audience learned about the atrocities that took place in the Dutch East Indies just before its formal decolonization in December 1949. Broadcast media coverage, novels, and memoirs, as well as the academic historical field are meticulously analyzed and contextualized. Doolan furthermore describes the reception of novels or scholarly monographs by including excerpts from reviews of these books in prominent Dutch newspapers. It creates a complete and detailed overview, covering all facets. It also provides for the necessary nuance, as the author points to early, cautiously described critical notes concerning the official governmental statement of the *Excessennota* of 1969, asserting "that the armed forces in general behaved in a correct manner" (149). For example, Doolan is quite critical of what he calls "the historian guild" (199) in Dutch academia, but he also admits that at an early stage some historians, such as Joop de Jongh, Petra Groen and Stef Scagliola carefully began to write about some horrific acts of actual warfare while the consensus had been for decades that professional historians would limit themselves to studies about diplomacy and politics. To that end, they would only use formal legalistic terminology (as found in the official colonial archives), they would avoid sweeping statements, and refrain from speculation and controversial claims for which they could not offer sufficient proof.

Unfortunately, in such an elaborate and in-depth analysis, the criteria on which the selection of representations of collective memory (whether it is a tv series, documentary film or novel) is based, are not entirely clear. At times, some cherry picking appears to have occurred. In addition, while the book gives a complete view of all important publications and related events (for example, the controversial Poncke Princen affair is covered as is the Boomsma affair), the list of these representations also gives the impression of a rather random catalogue without establishing any proper links to the fascinating conceptual framework of *unremembering* presented in the introduction. Some clustering in the catalogue and references to the conceptual framework presented in the introduction in the form of sub conclusions after every chapter would have helped here.

Further, I would like to note the rather brief conclusion. In fact, it ends with a rather unsatisfying remark about the statements of Gert Oostindie, Jonathan Verwey and Irene Hoogenboom who argued that "repatriates, military veterans,

Dutch politicians and Indonesian authorities had obstructed investigation of the war” (303). Doolan contends that Oostindie absolves Dutch historians of the responsibility for unremembering and with that statement he writes in the last sentence that “the conclusion of the present study disagrees” (303). I feel that this is a rather disappointing and unsatisfying sentence with which to finish. It represents a loose end, and a couple of lines explaining this rather bold statement, while summarizing and highlighting the main innovative points of this study, would have been of enormous help here.

Also, I think it is a pity the timespan of the study ends in 1995. Since then, many more interesting studies and popular accounts on the colonial period and the decolonization war in the former Dutch East Indies have emerged which deserve proper analysis by Doolan. He does refer to the publication of *Revolusi* in the final pages, but it is more of an afterthought than a real assessment. An example of another cultural artefact which would have fit Doolan’s analysis perfectly is the recent Dutch movie *De Oost* (‘The East’) (Taihuttu, 2020), in which the infamous Dutch military officer Raymond Westerling and his notorious warfare method on Celebes (now Sulawesi) are portrayed.

Another important element which would have added even more to Doolan’s already quite thorough work is the presentation of the results of a large-scale research project funded by the Dutch government, *Independence, decolonization, violence and war in Indonesia, 1945-1950* (Ind45-50, n.d.), undertaken by three leading Dutch research institutes, the NIOD (Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies), the KITLV (the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies) and the NMHI, (Dutch Institute for Military History). The pivotal official announcement of that project’s research results took place on February 17, 2022. Although Doolan mentions the project on the last page of his book, unfortunately he neglects to analyze the process that led to the creation of the project, nor does he give an assessment of its preliminary results. Notably, the new insights provided by the research changed the official viewpoint of the Dutch government on its role in the decolonization war. On the same day of the presentation of the research findings, Prime Minister Mark Rutte made an official statement: he apologized deeply to the people of Indonesia for the structural violence during the decolonization war. He also added an apology to all those in the Netherlands who were touched in any way by the violence (NOS 2022).

In short, I very much hope that these more recent representations can be included in a discussion in a revised edition of the book *Collective memory and the Dutch East Indies*. To me, the process of *unremembering*, which continued for decades after the end of the decolonization war in 1949, as Doolan systematically

and convincingly argued, truly seems to be on the edge of breaking down in February 2022.

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About the reviewer

Liesbeth Rosen Jacobson studied social history at Leiden University (Netherlands). In 2012, she graduated cum laude with a Research Master thesis about the decolonization experiences of the Parsis, a former colonial elite in British India. In 2018, she received her PhD from Leiden University, publishing her doctoral dissertation as a book: *The Eurasian question: The colonial position and postcolonial options of colonial mixed ancestry groups from British India, Dutch East Indies and French Indochina compared, 1900-1975* (Verloren, 2018). Currently, she is working as an assistant professor in economic and social history at Utrecht University.

