CHAPTER 1

Imperialism after the Great Wave: The Dutch Case in the Netherlands East Indies, 1860–1914

Elsbeth Locher-Scholten

Introduction

Liberalism and imperialism are generally considered to be the nineteenth-century twin forces, or “partners in crime,” that conquered the non-Western world, divided the globe among Western powers, and thus laid the base for later globalization. In the Netherlands, their relation was more complex and paradoxical. An early imperialism halted all further imperialism, albeit temporarily. The protracted Aceh War, which started in 1873 under the political responsibility of a liberal government, put an end to any further expansion for more than 20 years, the decades of modern imperialism and expansion in the rest of the world. Only after 1894, after the first wave of European imperialism, Dutch expansion got on the move. Which role did Dutch liberalism claim for itself during these decades with regard to imperialism? How did liberal civil society prepare the hearts and minds in the Netherlands to expansion in the East, the Netherlands-Indies, if they did?

Albeit not completely uncontested in its fringes, the Netherlands-Indies were already internationally recognized to be under Dutch sovereignty. Yet within this colony, Dutch imperialism took place, imperialism in depth, filling the “blank spaces” of Dutch power with direct or indirect rule. The rich “girdle of emerald” around the equator touched the Dutch imperial imagination far more intensely than the disparate parts (Surinam and the Dutch Antilles) in the West.

In order to develop the Dutch case of liberal imperialism, this contribution has three parts: a first on nineteenth-century liberalism and its ideas about
empire in the East before 1870, a second on some representative voices of liberals from Dutch civil society between 1870 and 1900, and a third devoted to Dutch “Ethical (or not so ethical) Imperialism” of the late 1890s and 1900s. I argue that it was the respite of nearly 30 years in Dutch expansion that prepared the hearts and minds of the Dutch public for a morally and historically defined imperialism. Imperialism is conceived here in its more specific meaning of military conquest, expansion, and the (forceful) introduction of colonial administration, implicating more general ideas about the colony and its population.

The Development of Liberalism in the Netherlands

As in most West European countries, Dutch liberalism developed only slowly in the first half of the nineteenth century. The post-Napoleonic restoration had been influential in creating a strong buffer zone to the North of France. It added the former Austrian part of the Low Countries, the later Belgium, to the new Kingdom of the Netherlands. The British government also returned the Netherlands East Indies, which the British had occupied during the almost 20 years of Napoleonic warfare. It provided the Kingdom with the trade-based heritage of the United East Indies Company, extinct in 1799. Even if the Dutch could claim direct power only in Java, the Moluccas, and the coasts of the other big islands of the Indonesian archipelago, an important source of international influence and colonial income was reclaimed. A dwarf in Europe, the Netherlands with 4 million inhabitants in the late nineteenth century could behave like a middle power, ruling over a colony in Asia more than 55 times its size—in length the equivalent of the distance from Ireland to the Ural Mountains in Europe—and more than seven times as populous.

The new Kingdom of the Netherlands, which replaced the former Republic of the Seven United Provinces in 1813, was an authoritarian state with only a shadow of representative democracy and a strong position for the King. Even after the Belgium revolt and its independence (1830–1839), when a new constitution was required, this did not fulfill any of the liberals’ wishes, such as ministerial responsibility. The colonies remained a royal prerogative; the parliament acquired only the right to decide about the spending of colonial profits.

It was the liberal revolt of 1848 elsewhere in Europe that turned monarch Willem II (1840–1849) from conservative into a liberal within 24 hours. He introduced a liberal constitution, by which the principle of ministerial responsibility was introduced. The king lost his power to a directly elected Second Chamber; the census system gave the Dutch well-to-do the influence in politics for which they had longed. For the first time, an annual report