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Occupation at Sea: Rethinking the ‘In-Between’ Spaces of Empire in Colonial Indonesia and China

Kris Alexanderson

Introduction

The political atmosphere in colonial Indonesia changed dramatically between November 1926 and January 1927 when rebellions – likely carried out by a small group armed with revolvers, rifles and hand weapons – broke out first in western Java and then Sumatra. Swift suppression by Dutch police and military forces ended both rebellions within a few days and, while one European was killed, thousands of Indonesians felt the effects of state repression following the protests. Of the 13,000 arrests made after the uprisings, those found to have engaged in the destruction of property or life were executed, 4,500 others were sentenced to time in prison, and 1,308 were interned at Boven Digoel prison camp in Western New Guinea (now West Papua). Eventually, the number of internees at Boven Digoel reached nearly 5,000. They were deemed a ‘potential threat to the law and order’ of the colony (Mrázek 2013: 38–9; Ricklefs 2007: 241). The Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, or ‘PKI’) was outlawed and most of its leaders were incarcerated or forced into exile abroad (Shiraishi 1997: 3; Mrázek 2015: 255). The Dutch colonial administration was left scrambling to make sense of these unanticipated rebellions and quickly enacted strategies to prevent further political unrest.

Intensified Dutch surveillance and policing policies – driven as much by colonial paranoia as actual threat – were born out of colonial insecurities following the 1926–7 uprisings. The 1901 Ethical Policy’s focus on modernity and technological innovation inadvertently helped promote this growth in state surveillance, as surveillance was itself an ‘outgrowth of scientific modernism’

(Thomas 2008: 4). Surveillance undertaken by the Dutch Political Information Service (Politieke Inlichtingendienst) and General Investigation Service (Algemeene Recherche Dienst) was subsequently increased and centralized. The General Investigation Service began distributing monthly circular police political surveys (Politiek-Politioenele Overzichten), containing surveillance updates from sources across the archipelago and sent to police and administrators throughout colonial Indonesia, including the Governor General's Office. This circular helped infuse the entire Dutch administration with 'surveillance psychology' and a policing-centred mentality (Friend 1998: 38). The Dutch administration also became more involved in collaborative surveillance projects across Asia, disproving common conceptions that, due to its history of neutrality, the Netherlands 'did not dare to enter into intelligence activities outside Dutch territory' (de Graaff 1987: 564). State surveillance was meant to prevent future attempts at political organization, temper political participation and slow the dissemination of anti-colonial propaganda. The Dutch implementation of a police state, and a system of punishment based on exile to internment camps, was aimed at teaching colonial subjects to obey the limits set by the government and warned colonial subjects not to 'trespass' beyond these limits through participation in anti-colonial activities or associations (Shiraishi 1997: 44).

The maritime world played an important role in the subsequent imperial project to clamp down on subversive people and ideas. Both Dutch administrators and popular opinion blamed the 1926–7 turmoil on foreign influences entering the colony's shores from abroad – what Ann Stoler (1985a: 79) terms 'the phantom of external agitation' – rather than acknowledging a home-grown movement reacting to inherent shortcomings within the colonial system itself. Activists who were not killed or imprisoned in the months following the uprisings were assumed to have fled the colony on ships bound for ports across Southeast and east Asia, as well as Middle Eastern ports associated with the hajj. While some Indonesians did flee the colony following the unrest, colonial insecurities and fears dictated the increase in regulations over the maritime world following the 1926–7 uprisings. Surveillance on land, where colonial officials relied on definitive legal boundaries and national jurisdiction, differed markedly from surveillance at sea, where maritime fluidity replaced the 'elemental solidity' found within the terrestrial confines of the colony (Peters 2014: 428).

The same fears and paranoia felt by the colonial authorities over threats to Dutch authority were shared by maritime businesses, which became increasingly protective of their interests in the years leading up to Japanese occupation. As

imperial enterprises, Dutch shipping companies were exposed to imperial instabilities during the interwar years including two economic depressions, rising nationalism, worker strikes and the communist-fuelled uprisings in 1926–7. While some historians acknowledge the interwar period was financially difficult for the Dutch shipping industry, these difficulties resulted not only from economic instability, but also from political and cultural uncertainties affecting corporate decision making. Despite increasing technological hegemony both at sea and on shore, Dutch fears over the oceanic ‘wild space’ surrounding colonial Indonesia grew substantially during the interwar period due to heightened paranoia over increasing imperial instability (Tagliacozzo 2005: 3). Colonial fears over the maritime world’s transformative possibilities stemmed from the spatiality of ships themselves, which served as diminutive models of colonial society – what Paul Gilroy calls ‘a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion’ (Gilroy 1993: 16). Dutch authorities were often challenged by colonial subjects who expressed their own ideas about how the sea could – and should – be used. Beyond simply playing an economic role in imperial expansion, Dutch shipping companies served as political and cultural agents of empire and facilitated connections across global maritime networks that helped define anti-colonialism during the interwar years.

This chapter briefly examines one of the largest Dutch shipping companies of the interwar period, the Java-China-Japan Line (Java-China-Japan Lijn, or JCJL), which moved cargo and passengers between colonial Indonesia, Southeast Asia, China and Japan and shared a ‘bilateral monopoly’ of economic and political power with the colonial government (Campo 2002: 188–9). Both were highly invested in maintaining the colonial status quo and, like the colonial administration, JCJL’s management took a strong stance against communism, enacting policies supportive of the government’s fight against political ideologies seen as threatening to both Dutch business *and* politics. JCJL played a role in these policing efforts, as maritime workers were specifically targeted for their anti-colonial affiliations. Additionally, Dutch consulates in Shanghai and other port cities worked together with British and French intelligence agencies to track the movements and activities of known or suspected Indonesian communists across transoceanic networks linking Russia, China and colonial Indonesia. Ultimately, this chapter reveals the ways imperialism and colonial control existed outside the geographic connections linking metropole and colony by uncovering networks used to control flows of communist ideology, activists and weapons from port cities across Asia to colonial Indonesia.¹ It also suggests that, in thinking about colonial rule – as many contributors to this volume have done for

examples across Asia – we need to acknowledge what I refer to as the ‘in-between spaces’ of empire.

Surveillance at sea

Ships played an important role in Dutch maritime surveillance both as sites of colonial policing and as vehicles enabling the spread of subversive agents and ideas across global maritime networks. The colonial administration regarded Dutch shipping companies as allies in their fight against subversive agents and anti-colonial ideology. Ships were used as imperial tools to help protect the archipelago from communist infiltration through policing the maritime contiguous zones surrounding the Indonesian archipelago. JCJL participated in the colonial surveillance project by working together with government authorities in colonial Indonesia and local port authorities in China to intercept suspicious passengers and confiscate smuggled communist propaganda and weapons. JCJL’s management took a strong stance against communism and the company’s policies supported the colonial administration. By instructing European crew members to police on-board spaces, shipping companies and ships themselves served as political agents across global maritime networks.

The ‘bilateral monopoly’ of power shared between JCJL and the colonial government meant both were highly invested in maintaining colonial peace and order. Shortly after the 1926–7 communist uprisings, JCJL stated: ‘it is our duty, so far as it is in our power, to fight against the Bolshevik danger in Netherlands India’ mainly due to ‘the recent outbreak of disturbances in Java and the west coast of Sumatra that bore a distinct Bolshevik character’; JCJL recognized that its ships were ‘the connecting link’ between colonial Indonesia and China and were thus extremely exposed to communist networks, making their ‘effectiveness in [fighting communism] especially difficult’ (Koninklijke Java-China Paketvaart Lijnen 1927).

JCJL considered its European captains and officers were the best defence against the spread of communism and directed all European crew members to act as the frontline in the fight against Bolshevik supporters and propaganda. Captains had to police both crew and passengers and were reminded that such on-board surveillance ‘must bear a very confidential nature’. Captains policed crew members for any subversive activities and were obligated to ‘[a]s much as possible watch and monitor the acts of the Chinese crew’, suspected as most likely to support communist ideology. Other European crew members were

expected to aid these policing efforts and captains were advised to 'keep discipline of the Chinese' crew members by using their European officer corps. Policing was carried out through the '[r]egular and if possible daily thorough searches of the entire ship, including the hold, for opium and "stowaways" and the keeping of daily accurate and complete records of such in the ship's logbook' (Koninklijke Java-China Paketvaart Lijnen 1927). Captains were also advised to withhold 'monetary advances to the crew, so that when leaving service, they are not in possession of as large a sum as possible', possibly aiding their subversive activities after disembarking (Koninklijke Rotterdamse Lloyd 1929).

In terms of passengers, JCJL instructed captains to 'keep a sharp eye on all passengers in all classes headed to Netherland East Indies ports'. Captains were specifically looking for communist sympathizers and any passengers espousing such ideas. If found, the captain was required to 'immediately telegraph the authorities at the destination port, so that they can follow the steps of these individuals' (Koninklijke Java-China Paketvaart Lijnen 1927). Captains were responsible for alerting government officials to the presence of suspicious passengers on board before docking in port. By doing so, captains either enabled terrestrial surveillance units to follow suspicious passengers once they disembarked or prepared law enforcement to make an arrest before or immediately after the suspicious passenger left the ship.

JCJL captains were also responsible for sharing intelligence with the colony's foreign surveillance collaborators. Captains worked together with the Dutch colonial authorities and foreign allies in a maritime surveillance project networked across Asia. Frederic Wakeman describes the collaboration between European colonial intelligence agencies as 'a kind of distant early warning system' alerting each other of dangerous elements across global maritime networks (1988: 412). Captains on individual ships worked together with port city nodes such as Singapore to warn colonial authorities across Asia about revolutionaries and radicals travelling through the Straits of Malacca. For example, Mahmud Sitjintijn, who also used the name Mohammad Jusuf, arrived at Singapore in February 1928 after living in Russia and attending Moscow's Communist University for Toilers of the Far East or 'KUTV' (Poeze et al. 1986: 251; McVey 2006: 484).² A communist and nationalist who formerly directed the nationalist organization Indonesian Union (Perhimpunan Indonesia), the Dutch worried that Sitjintijn planned on spreading communist ideas to colonial Indonesia and, therefore, 'requested collaboration with the Straits authorities for them to covertly observe him and signal [Dutch colonial authorities] with which ship he sails towards Java' (Consulaat Shanghai 1928c).

Foreign surveillance agencies shared their intelligence information with each other and sometimes also their surveillance tactics. This was particularly true within transoceanic maritime surveillance, where colonial surveillance could greatly benefit other colonies due to the fluid nature of maritime travel. To aid the management of subversive agents on its ships, JCJL worked together with the Dutch colonial authorities in Batavia (now Jakarta) to implement the most effective maritime policing tactics. For example, in 1928, Governor General A.C.D. de Graeff suggested the company meet with a British captain named Shelley who was an 'expert in the matter of subversive movements in these parts of the world'. All three parties – the colonial government, the shipping company and the expert consultant – would 'consider together with the colonial authorities the advisability and, on agreement, the means of cooperation between the Netherlands Indian and British services concerned' (Consulaat Shanghai 1928h).

Another important element in maritime surveillance were inspections of JCJL ships by foreign customs officials. Foreign customs agents acted as an additional set of 'eyes' helping captains and officers police on-board spaces, passengers and crew members. The Chinese Maritime Customs Service (CMCS) was a Chinese state agency that, until the late 1930s, consisted of an 'outdoor' branch largely staffed by Chinese workers who inspected the ships, and an 'indoor' executive branch staffed by Europeans. While the CMCS was an agent of the Chinese state, it had historically been managed by foreigners and used English as an official second language (Bickers 2008: 222). The racial composition of the CMCS further complicated Dutch shipping company interactions with Chinese customs officials, and inspections could lead to JCJL and its captains being fined for smuggled goods or people found on board.

CMCS officials, often accompanied by soldiers and police agents, searched for communists or communist propaganda on Dutch ships. JCJL captains were happy to cooperate in the search and questioning of individuals and their belongings before docking in Chinese port cities. For example, on SS *Zosma* Captain Kornelis Egbert Dik stated that '[t]wo persons in grey' came on board to ask 'if I had Bolsheviks on board, for, they said, that was especially what they wanted to look for' (Consulaat Shanghai 1927c). Inspectors told Captain Pieter Abbo on SS *Tjisalak* they intended to take with them 'three Chinese because they were in possession of Bolshevik literature' (Consulaat Shanghai 1927d). When one naval officer, three army officers and twenty armed soldiers boarded SS *Tjikini*, Captain J. Van Rees 'ordered all Chinese passengers on deck, whereupon they were interrogated and partially searched. Letters, already written and sealed, were opened and the contents examined.' The soldiers and officials ultimately left

the ship 'taking with them different visiting cards and a photo', while one of the officers in civilian clothes named Lou wrote a few lines in Chinese in the ship's logbook. Captain Van Rees understood the inscription to mean 'Russian communists sometimes come to Shanghai in Netherlands ships and these communists must be arrested' (Consulaat Shanghai 1927b).

Surveillance and policing of individuals went hand-in-hand with policing ships for communist propaganda and literature, but the fluidity of maritime networks complicated attempts to censor subversive literature at sea. Two changes in the colonial law facilitated press censorship in colonial Indonesia. The first were the 'hate-sowing laws' (*haatzaai artikelen*) that allowed the government to punish anyone creating 'a writing or illustration, in which feelings of hostility, hate or contempt toward the government of the Netherlands or the Netherlands Indies are awakened or encouraged'. It also punished those who 'intentionally awaken or encourage feelings of hostility, hate or contempt among or toward groups of the population of the Netherlands Indies' (McVey 2006: 454). The second was a new regulation passed in 1931 that gave the governor general the right to ban any periodical for up to a year without first needing permission from the courts. Victims had no right to appeal the governor general's decision (Maier 1991: 70). Together, these two laws made it easier for the Dutch colonial authorities to control publications within the colony, but most of the subversive publications found on ships came from abroad and therefore had to be intercepted by authorities to stop their entry into colonial Indonesia (Maier 1999: 247).

Censorship was a tool in the colonial surveillance project difficult to translate to maritime conditions. Propaganda moved rapidly across global maritime networks and connected colonial Indonesia with centres of communist activity in Russia, China, Europe and the United States. The shared goal of the colonial authorities and JCJL was to not only control subversive people on board, but also to 'stop the spread and publication of pestiferous lecture on our fleet and in our colonies'. JCJL was particularly concerned with literature expressing anti-Western sentiments 'inspired by Moscow' (Koninklijke Java-China Paketvaart Lijnen 1931). Soviet-inspired literature began entering Southeast Asia as early as 1921, including pamphlets such as 'Methods of Communist Teaching in Russia and China and the Russian Revolution of October 1917', only some of which were confiscated by colonial censors (Yong 1991: 630). JCJL also suspected persons responsible for the 1926–7 uprisings were 'no stranger to Russian/Chinese influences as far as their preparations were concerned' (Koninklijke Java-China Paketvaart Lijnen 1927). Research such as W.M.F. Mansvelt's 1928

study on 1,000 internees at Boven Digoel prison camp – all accused of participating in the 1926–7 communist uprisings – showed extremely high levels of literacy amongst the prisoners and may have fuelled Dutch fears over the possible influence foreign literature was having on communist underground circles in colonial Indonesia (Mansvelt 1928: 202–25). This threat of foreign communist propaganda infiltrating colonial Indonesia was heightened due to the transoceanic mobility of maritime passengers and workers who could easily penetrate the colony's fluid surrounds. The Dutch knew maritime actors were travelling between dozens of port cities – interacting with thousands of crew members, passengers and people ashore – and feared their goal was to distribute communist propaganda to as large an audience as possible in Southeast Asia.

European crew members put in charge of on-board surveillance were important political agents within the larger colonial project of protecting colonial Indonesia from dangerous foreign political influences. Captains were instructed to pay special attention for 'the reading of Bolshevik literature, making Bolshevik propaganda on board, or otherwise.' One example of subversive literature found on JCJL ships was an issue of the newspaper *Nanyang Monthly*, which was banned in colonial Indonesia due to its anti-Western propaganda. The issue found on board was a special edition on colonial Indonesia and painted a negative portrait of Governor General de Graeff and the colonial government as a whole. While using different English names to sidestep Dutch censors, for anyone who could read the Chinese characters the names remained brazenly similar. One article in the special edition entitled 'The Crisis of the Chinese in Netherlands India and the Regulations Against Them' spoke of the oppression of Indonesians and Chinese residents in the Dutch colonies (Koninklijke Java-China Paketvaart Lijnen 1927). JCJL was outraged that a paper with such a 'red character' was circulating on board and the company immediately alerted Dutch authorities (Koninklijke Java-China Paketvaart Lijnen 1931).

In addition to subversive people and literature, an additional target of Dutch maritime surveillance was the smuggling of weapons. Dutch shipping companies and colonial Indonesia's governors general together pledged a strong 'interest in all matters relating to the traffic of arms in Eastern waters' (Consulaat Shanghai 1926b). As a member of the League of Nations, the Netherlands abided by the St Germain Convention for the Control of the Trade in Arms and Ammunition (1919) and the Geneva Convention for the Supervision of the International Trade in Arms and Ammunition and in Implements of War (1925), both prohibiting arms from being in the hands of private persons or organizations. While the convention restricted weapons amongst 'barbarous' or 'semi-civilized

peoples', it did little to stop arms trafficking amongst what it called 'civilized states' (Stone 2000: 218).

Dutch authorities worried that foreign ships carrying illicit arms and ammunition were docking at Indonesian ports. Ships carrying illicit munitions were susceptible to explosions and fires, potentially costing lives and damaging local port infrastructure or other ships. For example, in 1926 the German SS *Adolph von Beyer* caught fire while docked at Sabang and was suspected of carrying illicit munitions. While investigators eventually found other causes for the fire, it was a warning to Dutch authorities to take extra precautions moving forward (Consulaat Shanghai 1926b). More alarming was the fact that weapons could be smuggled ashore from these foreign ships and make their way into the hands of communist, nationalist or anti-colonial activists. To counteract this threat, twenty-four-hour watch was placed on all suspicious vessels for the duration of their time in the colony's ports (Consulaat Shanghai 1926a). Further, individuals suspected of arms smuggling were kept under close observation while in port (Consulaat Shanghai n.d.).

One such suspected arms smuggler was Ethel Wiesenger, an Austrian-born resident of Shanghai who arrived in Tanjung Priok on the German-owned SS *Nordmark*. According to shared memoranda between British and Dutch intelligence agents, Wiesenger – together with her husband, who was a merchant in Shanghai principally trading in watches, clocks and chemicals – chartered European ships for the express purpose of smuggling arms from Germany, Britain, the United States and France to destinations in Japan and China. While in Tanjung Priok, Dutch agents covertly searched Wiesenger's cabin and copied telegram codes from a notebook left there. Other agents followed Wiesenger and the ship's captain, E. von Aswegen, while ashore, tracking the two so closely that 'from time to time it was even possible to hear their conversation'. Although the ship carried 417 cases of Mauser rifles and 6,304 cases of ammunition, Dutch authorities were unable to prove the illegality of the shipment. Unlike the British authorities who, due to a lack of proper paperwork, had already confiscated 300 cases of rifles while the ship docked at Durban, Dutch authorities allowed Wiesenger and the shipment of weapons to depart colonial Indonesia headed for a 'secret destination' believed to be in China or Japan (Consulaat Shanghai n.d.). Wiesenger's example reveals how easily smuggled weapons could make their way around the globe and, despite intra-imperial surveillance and policing efforts, the difficulties faced by authorities to halt such shipments.

In the face of such difficulties, Dutch intelligence worked together with British surveillance agencies to police the waters of Southeast Asia. British and Dutch

authorities were particularly suspicious of Russian ships smuggling arms to the Chinese communists. Since the nineteenth century, Russia's role as an arms buyer and imperialist actor helped increase the import of arms across Eurasia and – together with the ideological sympathies shared with Chinese communists – made for a particularly dangerous fleet within Asian waters (Grant 2007: 17). For example, in September 1925, British intelligence alerted Governor General D. Fock that the Russian ship *SS Deabrist* – en route from Constantinople to Sabang – was 'carrying arms and ammunitions for the communists in Canton.' This early-warning telegram allowed Dutch authorities to prepare for the ship's arrival and if the steamer called at any Indonesian port, the highest colonial authorities ordered they be warned before the ship docked (Consulaat Shanghai 1925a). Dutch and British customs officials were also alerted to other ships arriving with crew members appearing well off financially, a sign the crew may have 'shared to some extent in the profits of the shipment of munitions' (Consulaat Shanghai 1926a).

While some crew members profited from smuggling, others became informants for CMCS officials, police agents and military personnel who conducted investigations on board. In 1929, Chinese soldiers boarded the Dutch *SS Oudekerk* docked at Shanghai, where smuggled weapons were found 'with the help of an informant' crew member (Consulaat Shanghai n.d.). This informant alerted authorities to a large cache of weapons retrieved from under a water tank near the ship's left beam: twenty-three revolvers with 1,867 cartridges and twenty wooden cases; thirty-two Chiao Loh revolvers with 3,740 cartridges and thirty cases; two cartridge feeding machines; thirty pistol handles; thirty-six cartridge holders in a secret hold along with 185 Mauser pistols; one automatic pistol; and 19,522 cartridges of ammunition. The large number of weapons seized was not unusual, as many arms smugglers thought 'it was only remunerative to [smuggle arms] in large quantities, as expenses were too high on small consignments' (Consulaat Shanghai n.d.). The Dutch consulate in Shanghai blamed two Chinese crew members who 'during or immediately after the incident ... disappeared without leaving any trace so that it is to be supposed that with them the guilty persons have escaped'. Whether or not there existed any responsibility or negligence on the part of the captain or other Europeans on board was 'difficult to say, since no data [was] available'. However, the consulate reported the matter to 'competent authorities' which would carefully investigate the case (Consulaat Shanghai 1929a).

However, not everyone was so quick to place blame on the 'escaped' Chinese seamen. Wong Tsen-Hsing, Chief of the Public Safety Bureau in Shanghai, placed full blame on the Netherlands and expressed strong disdain towards what he saw

as an egregious case of Dutch maritime smuggling. He wrote to the mayor of the Shanghai Municipality:

[I]n the recent years, dangerous elements have been very active. People are deprived of peaceful living and disturbed by assassination and kidnapping. Communists in various parts of the country also join hands with loafers and massacre people and burn their properties. The military and police authorities spare no time in their efforts to wipe out the communists and the bandits. The root of all this lies with the smuggling of arms and ammunition by treacherous merchants with the cooperation of their foreign confederates. Now the Netherlands vessel SS *Oudekerk* smuggled such a large quantity of contrabands. If it were not for the search, the cargo would certainly have gone into the hands of communists and bandits, and the harm which will entail is more than that can be expressed in words . . . When communists and bandits get these supplies they would become as uncontrollable as tigers provided with wings.

Consulaat Shanghai 1929a

Wong further accused the Dutch ship of defying international law and claimed the Dutch 'dared to smuggle such a large quantity of revolvers and cartridges, hoping to make a profit out of it'. Even if true that the principal smugglers had escaped, Wong concluded the ship carrying the cargo should be detained and that 'even though the vessel has departed from this port, the company who control her naturally ought to be held responsible'. This stereotyping of Dutch interests as greedy, treacherous and conniving was an issue repeatedly faced by Dutch businesses during the interwar period and ship owners were often at the mercy of local and international media to present them in a good light. Chinese media outlets quickly saved the SS *Oudekerk* smuggling incident from becoming a bigger public relations issue by highlighting the outcome of the CMCS's 'Outdoor Staffs Club' investigation into the matter: the arms seized on board SS *Oudekerk* originated from Germany and were loaded onto the ship while docked at Hamburg (Consulaat Shanghai 1929b). The need to avoid such controversies grew after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and the attack on Shanghai shortly thereafter, when European worries over arms trafficking increased.

Foreign consulates and maritime surveillance networks

The Dutch colonial authorities did not have the same policing and surveillance tools available in colonial Indonesia to help them exercise control over colonial subjects in Chinese port cities. In the geographic confines of the colony, the

colonial government was relatively well-informed about Indonesian political activities and officials had both police forces and Indonesian informants to provide them with comprehensive surveillance information (Locher-Scholten 2002: 95). Due to the colony's Political Information Service and General Investigation Service, the colonial government projected an image of omnipotent intelligence oversight amongst its colonial subjects in Indonesia (Poeze 1994: 240–1). The loss of these colonial tools abroad hindered the Dutch from projecting an authoritative presence in foreign port cities like Shanghai, where they were forced to rely on cooperation with other Shanghai-based forces, primarily the International Settlement's Shanghai Municipal Police (SMP) and the French Concession Police (FCP) (Stoler 1985b: 655). By the mid-1920s, the SMP had four different categories of detectives working for the International Settlement's Special Branch – British, Chinese, Japanese and White Russian – and both the SMP and the FCP mainly recruited Chinese detectives from the city's underworld (Wakeman 1995: 41). The FCP in particular relied on Shanghai's Green Gang for its police force and used gang members and other informants as detectives (Wakeman 1995: 30; Thomas 2008: 64–92; Martin 1995). These detectives' intelligence reports helped give the Dutch government similar surveillance 'eyes' (*mata-mata*) as those in colonial Indonesia (Locher-Scholten 2002: 95).

Further complicating the Dutch surveillance project in Shanghai was the nineteenth-century treaty-port system of extraterritoriality that, by the interwar period, had transformed Shanghai's French Concession and International Settlement into 'havens of dissent' (Yeh 1997: 378). Indonesian communists took advantage of this lax infrastructure beginning in the early 1920s when 'growing activities of Bolshevik agents in the Far East', including intercepted correspondence and the presence of Henk Sneevliet, Adolf Baars and other Dutch communists, made it clear that communists had chosen Shanghai as 'the Mid-Chinese Headquarters of their inter-regional organization' (Consulaat Shanghai 1922). In response, colonial Indonesia's Governor General D. Fock requested a 'reciprocal exchange of information' between colonial Indonesia and the SMP beginning in January 1922. This information focused primarily on tracking the movements, interaction and whereabouts of Indonesian communists, especially seamen whose mobility most threatened politics within the Dutch Empire.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the International Settlement's Criminal Intelligence Department (CID) willingly shared surveillance information with the Dutch government and CID directors were pleased to 'place at [Dutch]

disposal all the information in possession of the CID (Consulaat Shanghai 1927a). The Shanghai Commissioner of Posts, who oversaw mail and telegraphs, was also willing to offer the registered names at any specific address and vice versa. Other Dutch consulates around Asia also shared surveillance information amongst themselves, agreeing to send telegrams and 'keep certain letters' regarding 'special cases' of interest (Consulaat Shanghai 1925b). For example, the Straits Settlements Police Special Branch kept its connection with Dutch colonial authorities 'close and cordial throughout the year' on all matters concerning international communist movements (Cheah 1992: 74). Anne Foster (1995: 335) shows that the French, British and Dutch secret police forces not only openly exchanged intelligence, but also frequently arrested and deported revolutionaries from each other's colonies. The United States, China and Japan were less willing to exchange secret police reports, although the United States was open to some communication with European security forces.

Colonial Indonesia's communist uprisings in 1926–7, in connection with other actions in China such as the May Thirtieth Movement and the Northern Expedition, made Dutch authorities fearful that communism was gaining ground against Western imperialism across Asia (Thomas 2005: 951). Shanghai surveillance became more intense and, in addition to the monitoring of well-known communist leaders, previously unremarkable maritime seamen became targets of Dutch surveillance. This increased surveillance continued even after 1927 when the Kuomintang leader Chiang Kai-shek massacred thousands of communists across China during the 'White Terror'. By the end of the year, about 85 per cent of Chinese Communist Party members had been killed and Chinese communism was driven underground. Nevertheless, Dutch officials were increasingly worried about the influence of Chinese communism across Asia (Share 2005: 615). A similar trend was happening in colonial Indonesia during the last years of the 1920s, when, despite the thorough suppression of communism following the 1926–7 uprisings, paranoia over subversive elements greatly increased (Stoler 1985b: 653).

Spurred by these heightened fears of communism, the Dutch surveillance project in Shanghai aimed to collect 'complete information concerning [all] natives from the Netherlands India in Shanghai' (Consulaat Shanghai 1933c). The Dutch consulate wanted to know the names of all Indonesian colonial subjects in Asia 'with a view to tracing [their] whereabouts, if possible' (Consulaat Shanghai 1928b). Both well-known communist leaders and previously unknown seamen had intelligence dossiers created in a Dutch attempt at total oversight of the colony's globally mobile colonial population. The Dutch colonial

administration believed anyone approaching its consulate in Shanghai, even those asking for financial, housing or employment assistance, was capable of providing information on others or might themselves be people of interest living under an alias.

The Dutch consulate's interactions with seamen in Shanghai were characterized by suspicion over their real identities, the truthfulness of their statements, and their underlying intentions for residing in Shanghai. Seamen coming into contact with surveillance authorities, whether by asking for support from a consulate, or being arrested by local police, were interviewed and – when possible – their identification documents and photographic headshots were copied and kept on file. Duplicates of these files were often made and sent to other policing agencies collaboratively monitoring subversive persons. This was the experience of an eighteen-year-old Sumatran named Saiman who approached the Dutch consulate in Shanghai on 8 November 1933 seeking financial assistance after his funds ran out and he had nowhere to stay. Dutch suspicions over Saiman stemmed from his history as a seaman. Saiman served on the Norwegian tanker SS *Soli* as a 'saloon and cabin boy' from August 1932 to April 1933. The chief officer on board remembered him as a 'good boy, willing and honest'. At the end of May 1933, he signed onto the Norwegian SS *Willy* in Shanghai and travelled to Australia, Singapore, Colombo, Sumatra, Singapore, Balikpapan, New Zealand and back to Shanghai as a stoker (charged with tending the steamship's boilers) at a salary of 25 kroners per month. In October 1933, Saiman was discharged at his own request, stating 'he did not wish to remain on board on account of the small remuneration for the heavy work he had to perform'. A statement by the ship's engineer claimed Saiman's work and conduct were satisfactory. After being discharged in Shanghai, Saiman received \$27 (Mexican silver dollars)³ and went to live at Ward Road, where he rented a room for two weeks at \$5 (Mexican silver dollars) per week. He then stayed with a Norwegian seaman named Hoken at Kung Ping Road for another week, but after Hoken left a few days later he had nowhere to stay and all his money was spent. Saiman slept somewhere in the Wayside District for one night together with a seaman from Colombo named Fakir before arriving at the Dutch consulate to ask for financial assistance.

Saiman was interrogated over his knowledge of other colonial subjects in Shanghai before receiving \$2.50 (Mexican silver dollars) to pay for a room through to the end of the month and some additional pocket money to purchase food. The Dutch consulate suspected Saiman might shed light on the community of itinerant Indonesian maritime workers in Shanghai and hoped to gain more

information over the community of globally mobile seamen. An eyebrow was raised at Saiman's 'well dressed' friend Eglin, who accompanied him to the consulate and was in possession of Saiman's passport. The dossier noted Eglin spoke English 'rather well' (Consulaat Shanghai 1933c). Consulate employees made numerous copies of Saiman's passport and sent copies to the SMP, the FCP and the head of Shanghai's British Secret Intelligence Service, Harry Steptoe (Aldrich 1998: 183–4). In exchange for a small amount of financial support, Saiman had a surveillance report registered with Dutch, French and British intelligence agencies in Shanghai, complete with his facsimiled headshot (Consulaat Shanghai 1933c).

Amat bin Amat was also interrogated when he approached Shanghai's Dutch consulate for financial aid. Born at Tanjung Pura, Langkat, Sumatra, fifty-five-year-old Amat approached the consulate in September 1933 after the friend caring for him disappeared and left him 'stranded' in Shanghai. He sought the consulate's help in purchasing a return ticket to Hong Kong. Amat had worked most recently as a cook on a steamer between Singapore and Penang for six months, after which he paid his own passage to Hong Kong and again signed on for a six-month stint as a cook on the Japanese SS *Taiku Haru*. Amat claimed he was '[f]orced to join the strike of the Chinese crew' on the Japanese ship, after which he stayed at a boarding house in Hong Kong called 'Wantsjai' owned by a man named Badjo who spoke Malay. After three months, his money ran short and he roamed from one place to another. He had already visited the Netherlands Consulate-General in Hong Kong once before, where he received \$1 (Mexican silver dollars) in financial assistance.

Despite the Dutch consulate's remarks that Amat looked 'old and ragged [like] a man who is returning to his native land to die', he was considered a suspicious person due to his participation in the Chinese strike and because his tuberculosis x-rays from the Municipal Police Hospital listed him under the name of Ahmath, age forty-three. This was enough discrepancy for the consulate to interrogate him in the hopes of finding out if Amat was actually the man he claimed to be. Amat was questioned over who he knew, where they lived, who they lived with, where these acquaintances had travelled in the past, and the reasons behind their travels. Amat's letter of introduction to the consulate was written for him by a Sumatran named Baharuddin Saleh, the former chairman of Padang Pandjang's Indonesian Communist Party branch, who had been imprisoned for sedition in 1926 before moving to Bandung to continue his political work (McVey 2006: 484). The consulate proceeded to compare Amat's handwriting to samples of those by wanted or suspected Indonesian communists already on file. Consulate

workers questioned his knowledge of other Indonesians living in Shanghai and Hong Kong. Amat was shown various photographs of Javanese and Malayan subjects previously or currently residing in Shanghai, but he failed to recognize any of them. Despite his seemingly destitute state, Amat was still considered valuable to Dutch surveillance efforts and the consulate conjectured that any 'information given concerning others may be of assistance in locating [Netherlands East] Indian revolutionaries hiding in Shanghai'. After the questioning was over, he was given \$2 (Mexican silver dollars) to pay his hotel bill and purchase a ticket to Hong Kong on a steamer leaving the same evening (Consulaat Shanghai 1933b).

Other seamen who came to the consulate for financial assistance were suspected of being wanted communist activists using aliases to hide their true identity. A man named Amat bin Ali, claiming to be twenty-seven years old and born in Tanjung Priok, came to the Dutch consulate in Shanghai for financial aid in June 1933. Ali was asked to relate his life history in detail. After coming to Singapore at the age of fifteen or sixteen to work for his uncle, he served as a ship's 'boy' for six months with the Dutch shipping giant Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij and then became a seaman making numerous trips to the United States with the Holland America Line. He also worked on the Irish SS *City of Bremen* travelling between Singapore and Rotterdam. He was last engaged on the SS *Highland Bank* travelling from Singapore to London, Japan, Australia and Hong Kong, where he lost his position when the Southeast Asian crew was exchanged for a Chinese crew.⁴ Most of his compatriots returned to Singapore, but he thought it might be easier to find employment in Shanghai and arrived three or four months prior to coming to the consulate with no place to stay. Amat bin Ali claimed not to know anyone in Shanghai 'except Sadri, whom I met once [but] I cannot stay with Sadri because his place is too small'.

The consulate believed Amat bin Ali was using an alias to hide his true identity as a communist agitator previously exiled from colonial Indonesia. The only papers he produced to consular employees were 'pawn tickets for a total value of not yet \$3' and he had nothing else proving he was a Dutch colonial subject. He spoke 'Riouw [Riau]-Lingga Malay, the language spoken in Deli and Singapore. He does not speak any Javanese, neither the typical Javanese Malay language. To others he stated to be the son of a Javanese father and a mother from Manado (Celebes). In appearance, he certainly does not look like a native of Java.' To make matters worse, Amat bin Ali refused to stay at the boarding house for which the consulate offered him a voucher, finding it not to his liking and

requesting to stay elsewhere. When told the substitution would be impossible, he unsuccessfully asked for the cash instead (Consulaat Shanghai 1933a).

After looking through surveillance files, Consul Jan van den Berg suspected Amat bin Ali was in fact Mohammed Ali, a leader of the communist uprisings at Tangerang in October 1926. Mohammed Ali had escaped the mass arrests by fleeing to Singapore and later attended a training period in the Soviet Union before returning to Southeast Asia. Shortly after his arrest in Singapore on 16 March 1930 – together with a group of other Indonesian communists in the city – Amat bin Ali was released from jail and served as a seaman on a ship sailing between Pekanbaru and Singapore under the name Magid Bin Hamid. While at sea, he was suspected of being ‘in charge of the compilation and distribution of pamphlets of an inflammatory nature, printed in the Malay language on behalf of the Communist Society “Seamen’s Union” *Sarikat Boeroek Laoet*’ (McVey 2006: 202). Despite being interrogated about his history and relationship to other Indonesians in Shanghai, Amat bin Ali denied being Mohammed Ali, stating simply ‘[i]n Hong Kong I called myself Amat bin Amat, here I sometimes use the name Ali’. His true identity was never discovered, but his surveillance dossier was added to Dutch intelligence reports as well as those of the SMP. His file included a description of the missing top of his left middle finger – lost to an accident at sea five years earlier – that would make it easier for police to identify him in the future. Five months later, Amat Bin Ali still appeared to be in Shanghai, and the consulate received a complaint from the local JCJL branch office – Amat bin Ali’s former employer – about the ‘objectionable manner in which he asked for money there a short while ago’ (Consulaat Shanghai 1933c).

Discovering the true identities of Indonesian seamen in Shanghai was difficult due to the nature of maritime communities. Seamen in Shanghai often had networks of friends who could aid them with money, accommodation and employment. For seamen involved in communist politics, clandestine political networks could also provide assistance. Patchy access to these communities further hampered colonial surveillance and kept the Dutch government in the dark over many activities of globally mobile Indonesian seamen. Making things more difficult was the fact that only seamen with no other options approached government officials for help.

This murky knowledge of seamen in Shanghai also led to mistakes being made by the Dutch when attempting to apprehend wanted communists. For example, Johannes Waworuntu, an active communist in colonial Indonesia since the early days of the Indies Social Democratic Association (*Indische Sociaal-Democratische Vereeniging*), called at Shanghai’s Dutch consulate in November

1927 'without papers or funds' and applied for assistance (Consulaat Shanghai 1928d). He claimed to be born around 1897 in Manado and was temporarily lodged in a seamen's home and working at the Municipal Shelter. The consulate tried to obtain a new passport for him from the Resident of Manado and, if unsuccessful, planned to 'provide funds from the State to repatriate him' (Consulaat Shanghai 1928a). Before instructions were received from Java about his repatriation, Waworuntu left Shanghai on 12 December on the Danish SS *Kina*, working as a stoker.

The Dutch consulate realized only in May 1928 that Waworuntu was a wanted communist activist, but by that time he was no longer in Shanghai. The consulate inquired at the places he had stayed six months prior, but 'none of the inmates or the manager of that place know anything about him'. It also found '[n]o trace of his having been in the Work Shelter that can be found and if he did obtain work there as stated in a letter from the Netherlands Consulate-General it must have been under an assumed name'. In the meantime, it was ascertained from local agents of the East Asiatic Company that Waworuntu had been voluntarily discharged from the SS *Kina* upon arrival in Shanghai on 25 January 1928 (Consulaat Shanghai 1928c). With much dismay, the consulate discovered the ship had stopped in Vladivostok with Waworuntu on board (Consulaat Shanghai 1928c). Although he was never found in Shanghai, Waworuntu was eventually apprehended upon his return to colonial Indonesia and immediately interned by the police (McVey 2006: 201).

Additionally, the International Settlement's CID began forwarding police reports to the Dutch consulate specifically 'about certain people from Java who went to Russia to become better acquainted with Soviet methods' (Consulaat Shanghai 1928g). For example, Lim Khe-dok (alias Lim Kek-dok), a former student in Moscow who was previously active in the Fujian Provincial Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and served as editor of the communist publication *Red Flag*, was arrested in September 1933 by the Shanghai Public Safety Bureau. He was subsequently escorted to Nanjing and sentenced to life imprisonment by a military court. The Dutch consulate was immediately notified of his arrest, as government officials in Batavia had previously sent them a photograph of a wanted communist activist who had fled colonial Indonesia. The arrested man and the image in the photograph were identical (Consulaat Shanghai 1934).

Anti-communist surveillance in Asia was part of a larger project to establish a boundary protecting the Dutch colony from Comintern infiltration. Shanghai had strong connections with Russia through the 'Red Underground

Communication Line', a clandestine network of Chinese communists forming a transportation route between Shanghai, Hong Kong and the central Soviet region, and largely used by those fleeing purges in China (Chan Lau 1999: 192–203). Shanghai also served as the Comintern's Far Eastern Bureau, which oversaw and was responsible for the direction of communism across Asia. It was also the centre for the Comintern's International Communications, which handled money, communications and logistics for communist agents (Fowler 2007: 5). Despite these very concrete connections between the Comintern and Shanghai, Dutch fears over the Comintern's influence on Asia were more powerful than actual evidence of such connections. Additionally, Dutch officials may have been quick to focus on Russian involvement in their colonies because, rather than confronting Dutch imperialism's fundamental flaws, it was less threatening to presume that dangerous ideologies and activists were caused by foreign influences entering the colony from abroad (Thomas 2005: 935). Nevertheless, the Dutch administration feared Comintern organizational models were being used by anti-colonialists in colonial Indonesia. While the Dutch consulate in Shanghai worked together with British and French intelligence agencies to track the movements and activities of known or suspected Indonesian communists across transoceanic networks linking Russia, China and colonial Indonesia, communist supporters routinely subverted these controls and were able to build networks connecting Indonesian communists with the Comintern and other organizations around the globe.

Conclusion

While oceans are often seen as conduits between terrestrial locales – where the most important dynamics of empire are assumed to transpire – terrestrial and oceanic worlds were mutually dependent on each other to transport goods, people and information required to ensure the logistical integrity and profitability of the imperial project. As the oceanic world became more congested, increasingly contentious and less controllable during the 1920s and 1930s, exchanges facilitated across oceanic networks helped destabilize colonial power and compelled the Dutch Empire to extend its influence beyond Southeast Asia through transoceanic projects of surveillance, policing and control. The imperial system was at its most vulnerable in the oceanic world, which provided opportunities for anti-colonialists to exploit Dutch vulnerabilities in ways more difficult to achieve in the terrestrial world. The maritime world, therefore,

exposed the Dutch Empire's fragility in maintaining hegemony both within colonial Indonesia and abroad. Oceanic empire was a fundamental part of modern imperialism. Essential in unravelling the transnational scope of the Dutch Empire during the 1920s and 1930s is understanding that Dutch imperialism did not merely exist within the spaces of metropole and colony but rather was a transoceanic and transnational project spanning the globe. Revealing how this oceanic empire functioned and the ways it both supported and subverted terrestrial empire presents a more complex picture of not only the Dutch Empire but *all* empires during the early twentieth century.

Investigating global maritime networks, including seamen and ships, exposes how Dutch imperialism travelled beyond the borders of the Indonesian archipelago and the ways in which anti-colonialism penetrated its watery surrounds. Global maritime networks enabled exchanges of communist ideology, activists and weapons between port cities across Asia. With ships serving as active sites of colonial policing and surveillance, shipping companies themselves became political agents active in the fight against anti-colonialism. Companies such as JCJL played a role in these policing efforts, as maritime workers were specifically targeted for their anti-colonial affiliations. The company was asked by the colonial administration to patrol ships for subversive people, anti-colonial propaganda and smuggled armaments, and it willingly collaborated with the colonial administration. The Dutch consulate in Shanghai worked together with British and French intelligence agencies to track the movements and activities of known or suspected Indonesian communists across transoceanic networks linking Russia, China and colonial Indonesia. Ultimately, seafarers exercised a dangerous mobility in the eyes of Dutch authorities, fostering political networks targeting the same colonial expansion oceanic connections had helped to create.

This chapter contributes to a growing body of historical research seeking to decolonize the Dutch colonial past and uses a transoceanic lens to critically re-evaluate the late colonial period. Oceanic de-colonization provides historians with a powerful tool in re-conceptualizing modern empires by interrogating archival materials 'against the grain' of terrestrial norms. First, the oceanic world complicates established metropole-colony relationships by moving the metropole to the margin and instead focusing on the 'inter-constitutive networks' connecting colonial Indonesia with littoral peripheries around the globe (Banivanua-Mar 2014: 10). Second, incorporating trans-oceanic empire into the historiography of the twentieth century – and into debates about the spatial history of colonialism and occupation – exposes a myriad of global actors who

engaged with and were influenced by the Dutch Empire, helping provide a voice for the 'other' hidden within colonial archives. Third, transoceanic analyses require historians to complicate colonial and business archives by challenging the narratives that hegemonic colonial institutions tell about themselves and exposing everyday acts of resistance within systems of oppression and occupation. Incorporating transoceanic empires into twentieth-century historiography illuminates both the regulatory aspects of terrestrial worlds and transgressive aspects of oceanic worlds – ultimately exposing the multifaceted, chaotic and complex ways these worlds overlapped, mingled and collided.

Notes

- 1 For a broader examination of issues discussed in this chapter, see Alexanderson 2019.
- 2 The Communist University for Toilers of the Far East (Kommunisticheskii universitet trudiashchikhsia Vostoka or KUTV) was first suggested by Dutch communist Henk Sneevliet (also known as Maring) at the second Comintern Congress in 1920 and was formally established in Moscow in 1921 by Soviet government decree. The KUTV was intended to provide communist training for activists to use in their own nations' political movements.
- 3 The Mexican silver dollar was still used in Shanghai in this period.
- 4 The use of ethnically homogenous crews was common practice for Dutch shipping companies during the interwar period and continues to be practised in today's global shipping industry.

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