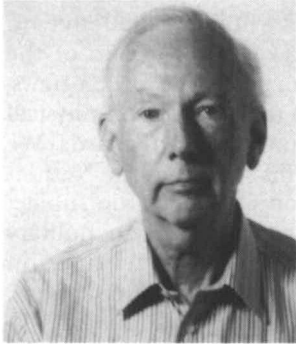


The Psychology Professor and the Nation's Bad Dreams

An Interview with J.E. Hueting



On the second day of the conference on decolonization, held in Leiden in May 1995 by the Centre for the History of European Expansion, one of the lectures, 'Between Sawah and Archives', stood out for not having a specifically historical subject. The speaker was the initiator of the Dutch debate on decolonization: dr Joop E. Hueting, retired Professor of Experimental Psychology of the University of Brussels' Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy. In his talk Hueting refuted old arguments and cliché explanations for extreme violence in war situations by describing very carefully the mechanisms at work in the processing of information. The following interview will emphasise the discrepancy between human experience and its reflection in the report, or in the historian's language: be aware that only filtered information reaches the archives and pay heed to channels of the lower level where this process is begins.

Itinerario: As a 19 year old conscript you were sent to fight the newly declared Republic of Indonesia during the Independence War of 1945-1949. You stayed in the Dutch army for two and a half years and participated in the two military operations in 1947 and 1948, the so-called 'police actions'. Why did your experiences compel you to speak out on military violence by the Dutch in a television interview as late as January 1969?

Hueting: What I experienced is comparable to what other young soldiers went through. I was a soldier on the lower level. My task in the army was two-sided, actual fighting and going on patrol and, on the other hand, as

was the case for many others who came from school and were going to study at university, I had an intelligence task which was to gather information about the enemy. This military Intelligence Service should be distinguished from the far more general Intelligence Service gathering information about politics at large. This was done by a group of professionals, most of whom had returned from Australia, where they stayed after having been driven out by the Japanese. After my return to Holland I studied Psychology and worked in the field of Experimental Psychology in laboratories, first in Amsterdam and the last twenty five years in Brussels.

It was truly by accident that I was given a chance to tell my story. Although I had been trying to reach the media in the fifties when I wrote letters to some newspapers, somehow without result, it was only at the end of the sixties that there was an audience. In 1967 a reporter of the Dutch newspaper the *Volkscrant* came out with an interview on my research on physical maximum performance in sports and we had a little talk afterwards. We exchanged some experiences of our military lives, his service in the Netherlands and mine in Indonesia. He promised to come back to the subject which he indeed did one year later, resulting in an article on military violence, 'Shooting at Everything that Moves', in the same newspaper on December 19, the exact date of the beginning of the second 'police action', the large Dutch operation to conquer the Republican headquarters in 1948. Then the socialist broadcasting corporation VARA called for a television interview. So to be consistent with my earlier statements I appeared on television on January 17, 1969 with a story, which apparently not only shocked the Dutch viewers but also went around the world from the *New York Times* to *Pravda*. What shocked people was that I gave them some examples of the extremes of military violence and the employment of cruel behaviour, in the broader context of warfare and the responsibilities borne by a Parliament and a nation when sending troops. It was clear that neither the Dutch population nor politicians had ever realised what had happened during those years in Indonesia.

Itinerario: Starting in 1945, immediately after the Japanese surrender and the proclamation by Soekarno and Mohammed Hatta of the Republic of Indonesia on August 15, about a 100,000 Dutch volunteers and marines were shipped to Indonesia. These troops were soon added to conscripts to a total of 170,000 fighting men. Do you have an explanation for the fact that you were the only one to speak out? And were you aware of a complaint made as early as 1949 by Reverend Hildering on military behaviour in a particular Indonesian village?

Hueting: Yes, but we met for the first time at the forum of the second broadcast which included politicians like the former Prime Minister Schermerhorn and a young politician called Hans van Mierlo, but also Koets, who had been Van Mook's private secretary, and General Thompson, who was General Spoor's representative in the diplomatic talks of May 1949. The two former Prime Ministers responsible for the two main operations,

the 'police actions', Beel and Drees, as well as other politicians directly responsible, had refused to come.¹ It is difficult to say why I was the only one to bring this nasty business out in the open. However, if I think of it in terms of a group-secret – the silence within a profession, the mistakes you do not talk about, like near-crashes for pilots – there is nothing special.

Still I can tell you why it had such an impact. In the first place it was on television and the word 'crimes' was used. In the second place, as I was told many times, I told about horrible events in an unemotional way, which was on purpose because emotions may obscure both your capacities to analyze and your view on what indeed was done right by the army. People want to hear from me the cruel stories but many examples can be given of situations where the soldiers acted in a restrained manner and did not even carry out orders. Examples of human responsibility, when an order to shoot a man was refused. And in the third place the recognition. Until that interview most of the men who had fought in Indonesia had assembled a lot of loose data in their heads, happy and unhappy data-driven memories put together in a primitive way, but they were aware that the true story was not told. I tried to explain what the pattern of these loose data was and out came a concept, the picture of an army at war with a gruesome task. The interview was the first step towards a more concept-driven memory.²

Itinerario: In this respect it is interesting to know how this is seen in the context of your profession.

Hueting: Two processes start on a different level: one from the lower levels of the sensory system up to the higher levels in the brain but without recognition of what goes on in the outside world. A second process starts at the top to make a first guess of the context. These two processes meet each other and the inside idea matches what goes on in the outside world: we come to perception or decision. This was displayed by many ex-soldiers and by politicians confessing that they had an idea, but it only fitted together after the interview.

Itinerario: Politically speaking, the impact of your two television appearances led to questions being asked by a socialist member of the Dutch Parliament, J.M. den Uyl, and to the instalment of a fact-finding committee by the Government. Three months later the so-called *Excessennota* ('Report on Excesses') appeared. It was written by the Committee's Secretary, C. Fas-seur (now the University of Leiden's Professor of Indonesian History and Indonesian-Dutch relationships). It contains every reported and punished misdeed and crime during the war in Indonesia.³ Was this the answer to the point you were making?

Hueting: I never denied that cases of criminal behaviour were punished. Many soldiers were reported and sentenced on misbehaving, very often in peaceful situations for rape and theft. But it is not the reality of what happened in the field. My point was that the most important things took place on the lower levels in direct interaction with the enemy, on the level of patrolling. No-one talked about what went on during patrols, because

if you did, the group, already under heavy strain by reductions, would disintegrate. So the information was already filtered in the patrol reports. Commanders do not know, let alone the politicians. It was significant that General Thompson, sitting next to me in the broadcast of 1969, told me that as a commander he was not aware of what took place on the level of the individual soldiers.

Itinerario: The follow-up of the 'shock of 1969' was disappointing. Only in eruptions of incidents some interest remained. Most of the debate centred on the following question: must we speak of 'war crimes', as you do, or is the word 'excesses' used in the official investigation report and by the sociologists J.A.A. van Doorn and W.J. Hendrix in their famous book of 1970 more appropriate?⁴

Huetling: Yes indeed, the kind of research I asked for, a study of the juridical, sociological, historical, psychological and military aspects of the war, has not been done yet. I have always used the word 'war crimes' for the serious wrongdoings by the Dutch military, as this is a well established concept in international law ever since Hugo Grotius. Even in a war the rules of good behaviour and the rules of justice remain valid and when these laws are violated the crimes must be prosecuted. A war crime has very realistically been defined by the conventions of The Hague 1909 and of Geneva 1927; it is, for instance, forbidden to shoot down captives, to burn villages, to retaliate against the civilian population with theft, rape, murder. All of these are civil crimes, but in a war situation they are war crimes. That was also the point of the American prosecutor of the Nuremberg trials after the Second World War and professor of Harvard University, Telford Taylor: it is not so that a war is without laws.⁵ And I agree with him. Extreme violence is not simply an unavoidable part of warfare, *à la guerre comme à la guerre*.

The conclusions of the Nuremberg trials distinguish three kind of crimes in a war. On the one hand the classical war crimes of Hugo Grotius, defined by the conventions of The Hague and Geneva. On the other hand two new concepts, crimes against humanity, meaning the Nazi camps, and crimes against peace, committed by Nazi leaders. I have a feeling that in the Netherlands war crimes and crimes against humanity are considered to be the same thing and that the word war crimes must be avoided at any cost, being reminiscent of the horrible memories of the Nazi camps. While the French also speak of *crimes de guerre*, the Germans of *Kriegsverbrechen*, the Dutch therefore invented a new word *exces* (excess) which is not even known in international law. While I want to emphasise the systematic use of violence, the non-incident, the chosen word excess means something out of the order, something that should not happen, but also something that does not happen often. It was chosen in 1969 as a euphemism by a government composed of Christian parties and liberals.

Itinerario: The fact that the then Prime Minister P. de Jong was a former Navy commander could also have played a role. Could there be an explana-

tion for the extremities in the behaviour of the Dutch during this war with Indonesia in the fact that two wars were fought at the same time so to speak, one by national armies sent by politicians with all the irritations between political and military leadership involved and another war on a small scale, a guerilla in the field?

Hueting: We were counter-guerillas fighting a war in isolation together with our enemies. It is very important to learn more about the experiences of soldiers engaged in guerilla warfare, about what is going on in a man's head, as up to forty per cent of them break down. My explanation as a psycho-physiologist is as follows.⁶ When tensions are high there are two drives: high anxiety levels leading to avoidance or flight behaviour and high rage levels leading to aggressive behaviour. When both drives, fear and rage, are very high at the same time a person can go either way. In the case of the Dutch, at this stage there should be someone or just a few people who hold the group together. If not, things get out of hand and members of the group explode. These situations should be subject of study during training because cruel behaviour will harm the person himself for the rest of his life; it harms the group and the nation too.

Itinerario: Historians are often quite reluctant to use psychology and psychological theories. Looking at the research done by Dutch historians on the Indonesian revolution up to now we must admit that it has usually emphasised political, diplomatic and military factors. Between 1971 and 1996 a lot of official documents from the available archives have been published.⁷ Almost all of these documents are political sources. What do you expect of historians who study this subject?

Hueting: I have often been asked, especially by journalists from Germany, Belgium, and Britain, why Dutch historians did not proceed on the path set out in 1969 and 1970. Many historians do not seem to find the clashes exposed in the 1969 interview, the *Excessennota* and other books and articles very interesting, although there are exceptions as you know. In most cases historians concentrate on the political side of the problem and just have no idea of the mechanism involved in the other levels of warfare. Knowledge from the field of experimental psychology can contribute to historical research in the sense that it shows how people perceive situations, how they organise and store their perceptions and how they retrieve the stored information and use it for their own purposes. For instance, we can use a model of the communication channels between the politicians in the capitals and places where the action is, between the higher commands and the lower commands, and thirdly the 'feedback' from the level of actual fighting and control in the area. The people on the lower level are the first to filter the information for the patrol-report, so more attention should be paid to their part in the selection of data. Many fruitful lessons are still to be learned because time and again the same classic instances return, as we could recently learn. What had actually happened in Srebrenica in former Yugoslavia turned out to be a surprise for the Dutch Government. A study

of the communication channels between the levels of planning and the levels of action might disclose some interesting facts. Summing up, historians should realise that their sources are products of personal experience and a series of filters and that a lot is going on the road from rice-field to archives.⁸

Notes

- 1 Their names in full: W. Schermerhorn, W. Drees and L.J.M. Beel, the first postwar prime ministers of the Netherlands; H.A.F.M.O. van Mierlo, presently minister of foreign affairs; P.J. Koets; General A.A. Thompson; General S.H. Spoor, chief army commander in the Netherlands Indies.
- 2 See J.E. Hueting, 'Over Demonen in het Nederlandse Geheugen'. Paper presented to the conference: 'The Silenced Past: On the Nature of Historical Taboos', Erasmus University, Rotterdam, 15 November 1990.
- 3 *De Excessennota: Nota Betreffende het Archiefonderzoek naar de Gegevens Omtrent Excessen in Indonesië Begaan door Nederlandse Militairen in de Periode 1945-1950* (The Hague 1969; reprinted 1995).
- 4 J.A.A. van Doorn and W.J. Hendrix, *Ontsporing van Geweld: Over het Nederlands/Indisch/Indonesisch Conflict* (Rotterdam 1970). For a general overview of the debate, see Remco Meijer, *Oostindisch Doof: Het Nederlandse Debat over de Dekolonisatie van Indonesië* (Amsterdam 1995).
- 5 See, e.g., Telford Taylor, *Nureinberg and Vietnam: An American Tragedy* (Chicago 1970); Telford Taylor, *The Anatomy of the Nuremberg Trials: A Personal Memoir* (New York 1992).
- 6 J.E. Hueting, 'Some Clichés about Guerilla Warfare and the Proposal of Psychological Models Explaining So Called Excessive Behaviour' in: J. Niezing ed., *Urban Guerilla: Studies on the Theory, Strategy and Practice of Political Violence in Modern Societies* (Rotterdam 1974) 142-147.
- 7 Completed in March 1996 by the publication of the twentieth volume. S.L. van der Wal, P.J. Drooglever and M.J.B. Schouten eds, *Officiële Bescheiden Betreffende de Nederlands-Indonesische Betrekkingen, 1945-1950* (The Hague 1971-1996).
- 8 Some of Hueting's publications on human memory: J.E. Hueting a.o., 'Perception of Memorised Words and Nonwords', *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 53 (1981) 59-66; J.E. Hueting a.o., 'Effect of Amphetamine on Long-Term Retention of Verbal Material', *Psychopharmacology* 119 (1995) 155-162; on trauma: J.E. Hueting, 'Psychosociological Mechanisms of Short-Term and Long-Term Reactions to Violence', in: *Helping the Victims of Violence* (The Hague 1983) 13-20; on stress-reaction: J.E. Hueting a.o., 'Automatic Aftereffects in Two-Choice Reaction Time: A Mathematical Representation of Some Concepts', *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 10 (1984) 581-598.