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Book Reviews



Kris Alexanderson, *Subversive Seas: Anticolonial Networks across the Twentieth-Century Dutch Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, xiv + 300 pp. ISBN: 9781108472029, price: GBP 75.00 (hardback).

Historians have written extensively about Indonesia's anticolonial struggles against Dutch colonialism. While the metropole-colony interactions are almost always among the key issues addressed in such research, scholars have typically focused on sociopolitical events that occurred within the geographic confines of the colonial state. More recently, a growing number of scholars have investigated the impacts of Indonesian anticolonialism on the metropole by relating to a wide array of global issues facing the Dutch empire during the interwar period. Among the most discussed themes is the widespread sense of insecurity and fear permeating Dutch colonial circles, perhaps most vividly illustrated by the sensational expression *Indies verloren, rampsgoed geboren* (Indies lost, disaster born). Many in the Netherlands shared the belief that without Indonesia—undoubtedly the single most precious possession of the Dutch empire—the Netherlands' economic prosperity and international standing would be significantly compromised.

Kris Alexanderson's *Subversive Sea* is the newest addition to the growing scholarship on the twentieth century Dutch empire. Adopting a fresh approach, this groundbreaking work examines the transoceanic aspects of Indonesian anticolonialism by examining the shipping networks stretching beyond the geographic boundaries of the metropole and colony. Based on her solid archival work, careful reading of existing literature, and well-structured analysis, Alexanderson demonstrates how the "oceans' permeable boundaries created a simultaneous liberating and threatening maritime spatiality" and that "the maritime world is not a liminal space but an active political arena" (p. 27). Specifically, she points out Dutch shipping companies "connected disparate bodies of water into intertwined transoceanic networks" and played a "unique role in navigating interwar power struggles between imperial hegemony and anticolonialism" (p. 25). By "repositioning colonial Indonesia to a sub-imperial

center," *Subversive Sea* reveals that the interconnected maritime networks were not only critical in defining colonial structure within the colonial state but also reflected "fundamental differences between terrestrial and oceanic characteristics particular to the interwar Dutch empire" (p. 2).

The main body of the book consisted of two parts. The first part, "At Sea", shows how different shipping routes evolved into stages for intense political, economic, and socio-cultural contestations between the Dutch hegemonic power and forces of anticolonialism. Chapter 1 concentrates on the transport of Hajj pilgrims between Southeast Asia and the Middle East, characterizing the growing challenges posed by Indonesian Muslims while traveling outside the empire and reactions of the Dutch administration in maintaining colonial order overseas. Chapter 2 examines the Dutch shipping industry's vulnerable position in operating the highly profitable yet increasingly competitive Java-China-Japan Line, especially the dire situation facing the Dutch liner in balancing public opinions and sustaining racial integrity and imperial authority. Chapter 3 illustrates how steamships cruising from Western Europe to Southeast Asia served as "colonial classrooms" of the empire; passengers from disparate backgrounds were taught to form a unified European identity and became accustomed to racialized colonial norms by interacting with non-Europeans on board.

The second part, "In Ports", seeks to situate Dutch imperialism in the shifting political landscape across the globe. With the advancement of transport technology and rapid expansion of shipping networks, suspicious colonial subjects and hostile foreigners regularly traveled between port cities, creating enormous fears and paranoia within Dutch colonial circles. In this part, Alexanderson has carefully studied Dutch policing cooperation and intelligence sharing with their Western allies in curtailing subversive activities. Chapter 4 focuses on the surveillance network in the Middle East, in which the Dutch Consulate played a pivotal role in countering pan-Islamism and nationalism by tracking Indonesian pilgrims, students, and merchants residing in the area. Chapter 5 investigates how Dutch officials monitored the flow of communist ideology and activists by working closely with shipping companies and British and French intelligence agencies in Shanghai. Finally, with Japan's rising political and economic power in the 1930s, Dutch shipping companies experienced intensified rivalry with their state-sponsored Japanese counterparts; Chapter 6 demonstrates how such Japanese companies used nationalistic and pan-Asian rhetoric to justify their competition with Dutch shipping routes.

In my opinion, *Subversive Seas* has made several significant contributions to the studies of the Dutch empire and Indonesia's anticolonial struggles during the interwar period. First, Alexanderson's research on the transoceanic networks challenges the terrestrial norms of colonial states and complicates the

established metropole-colony relationships. As she has convincingly shown us, Dutch shipping companies “served as political and cultural agents of the empire and facilitated connections across global maritime networks that helped define anticolonialism during the interwar years” (p. 2). Second, the author has done an exceptional job of using business archives to reveal dynamics usually missing in narratives based on archives generated by hegemonic colonial institutions. Distinct from the conventional perception that business achieves concern primarily with financial and commercial matters, records of Dutch shipping companies contain a sea of valuable information reflecting interactions among business leaders, government officials, foreign agencies, competing firms, and a wide variety of crew members and passengers. Alexander’s innovative interpretations of such primary sources have deepened our understanding of the everyday operation of the Dutch empire. Moreover, *Subversive Seas* is effective in exposing a wide variety of people who participated in anticolonial struggles outside the colony. Such an approach challenges traditional historiographies with terrestrial or territorial focuses and illustrates that tensions between colonists and the colonized could easily transcend geographic boundaries.

Excellent as the book is, my only criticism lies in its heavy reliance on Dutch and English materials with only a few Asian-language references. To be fair, if the primary focus of *Subversive Seas* is the Dutch empire, then relying on colonial archives should be less of an issue. As the work seeks to address “a myriad of global actors engaged with and were influenced by the Dutch empire,” however, it is crucial to include the original voices of these actors, as the author claims to do, and demonstrate their real experiences with the maritime networks. The author uses blanket terms such as communists and nationalists—sometimes indistinguishably—precisely as colonial administrators saw them. As a result, this book has not sufficiently discussed factionalism and internal conflicts within these groups. Writings of exiled communist leaders such as Tan Malaka and Djameluddin Tamin, for instance, might be useful sources to ameliorate the shortcoming; their nuanced perspectives will further enrich Alexander’s already well-developed narrative. Despite this minor concern, I highly recommend this book to scholars in the field of colonial, maritime, and global history. It is also an essential read for anyone interested in Dutch imperialism and Indonesia’s long-term struggles for independence and decolonization over the twentieth century.

Kankan Xie

Peking University, Peking, China

xiekankan@pku.edu.cn