Army and navy personnel in colonised territories

Abstract

Army and navy personnel collected objects in various ways in the former Dutch colonies. Objects were looted, gifted or bought from local inhabitants. These objects were of ten donated to museums in the Netherlands at a later date.

Description

Dutch control in the Dutch East Indies, Suriname and the ABCSSS islands relied heavily on the deployment of the Army. The Koninklijk Nederlandsch-Indisch Leger Royal Dutch East Indies Army (KNIL) operated in the Dutch East Indies. The KNIL was formed by officers of Dutch or other European nationality and mostly local soldiers. The colonial force in Suriname and Curaçao in the 19th century was the West-Indisch Leger [West Indies Army], which was in turn part of the Dutch Army. In the 20th century, officers for Suriname were recruited from the KNIL, while non-commissioned officers and soldiers were recruited both in Europe and locally. The Indonesian War of Independence (1945-1949) saw the deployment of tens of thousands of volunteers and conscripts from the Dutch Army.

Only a small number of objects in Dutch museums are official spoils of war sent to the Netherlands by order of the colonial forces. A well-known example is the so-called Lombok treasure. There are many more objects which have come from individual members of the military and ended up in the Netherlands through private initiative. There were several ways in which military personnel obtained these objects; they may have been looted, gifted or bought from the local population. In the case of gifts received and objects purchased by military personnel it is important to remember that there was an unequal balance of power between coloniser and colonised. Objects may have been sold or gifted out of fear, to appease the ruler or because the persistent war situation led to impoverishment of the population.

Provenance research

Military personnel in the colonial armies regularly changed jobs and postings, and they rose in rank. The rank listed in the object documentation may therefore be different from the rank at the time of acquisition in the country of origin. The personnel files (service registers) in the National Archives of the Netherlands and officer's books are reliable sources to find out a person’s rank, job and posting at the time of acquisition. The digitalised newspapers on Delpher are useful for retrieving further information about the wartime actions and further duties of the soldier in question. To find information about a soldier, it is important to first determine which army or army unit they served with, for example the Landmacht (the Dutch Army), the KNIL or the Navy. The research aid of the National Archives can help with this.

The personnel files (service registers) of army and naval personnel are searchable online. There are research aids for the Dutch East Indies, West Indies and the various naval and army units. The service registers contain information about when a soldier or seaman was stationed where, along with brief personal information. A glossary explains the abbreviations used in the records.

The personnel files of soldiers deployed to Indonesia in 1945-1949 will be at the Dutch Ministry of Defence until 2026-2027 and can be requested via the website of the ministry. To access a service record, a death certificate must be provided. Death certificates are subject to privacy restrictions but an extract of the 'persoonskaart' will also suffice. Extracts can be requested from the CBG (Center for Family History). Key information listed in the service record includes the army unit the soldier served in. Archive documents and/or egodocuments relating to almost every army unit can be found in archives and publications. These are mainly held in the collections of the NIOD and the NIMH and at Leiden University Libraries.

Museum Bronbeek is a knowledge centre of the Netherlands' Dutch colonial and military past. The emphasis is on the Dutch East Indies but material from other colonies is also available. You can contact loket.bronbeek@mindef.nl to request information about a particular soldier, event or object.

Related Aids

- Sources
- Select and delineate
- Civil servants in colonised territories
- Scientific research in colonised territories
- The trade in objects from a colonial context
- Royal Cabinet of Curiosities
- Wereldmuseum Amsterdam
- Wereldmuseum Leiden
- Wereldmuseum Leiden
- Museum Bronbeek
- Rijksmuseum Amsterdam
- Hoofdcursus Kampen
- Volkenkundig Museum Justinus van Nassau

Primary sources

Almanac:

> *Regeeringsalmanak voor Nederlandsch-Indië Editions from 1865 to 1942 can be found on Delpher by selecting the title 'Regeringsalmanak Nederlandsch-Indië' in the periodicals section. Editions from 1865 to 1912 are available through the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin by searching PPN718684745.*
>
> https://www.delpher.nl/

Image collection:

> *Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie The image library of the Netherlands Institute for Military History contains historical image material.*
>
> https://nimh-beeldbank.defensie.nl/

Museum:

> *Museum Bronbeek Museum Bronbeek is a knowledge centre of the Netherlands' colonial and military past. The emphasis is on the Dutch East Indies but material from other colonies is also available. You can contact loket.bronbeek@mindef.nl to*

request information about a particular soldier, event or object.

https://www.defensie.nl/onderwerpen/bronbeek

Web portal:

Nederlands Militair Erfgoed Nederlands Militair Erfgoed is a portal containing military sources from various collections in the Netherlands, including visual materials, periodicals and books. Of particular interest for provenance research are the officer's books and historical periodicals.

https://nlme.nl/

Secondary sources

Article:

Witkam, Jan Just. 'Teuku Panglima Polem's Purse'. Journal of Islamic Manuscripts 10, nr. 1 (15 april 2019): 84-104. Article about Teuku Panglima Polem, an Aceh leader during the colonial war fought by the Netherlands in Aceh.

https://doi.org/10.1163/1878464X-01001006

Book:

Keurs, Pieter ter, ed. Colonial Collecting Revisited. Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2007. Book published following a conference at the Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam, in 2006. The book focuses on collecting objects in the former Dutch East Indies, with attention also being given to military personnel.

https://search.worldcat.org/title/907175634

Research aid:

Militairen en Marinepersoneel Research aid from the National Archives on Dutch army and naval personnel. Tip: the information in the service registers is sometimes continued on another page. In that case, a note is placed at the bottom of the page: "zie verder" [see further] with the relevant page number.

https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/zoekhulpen/militairen-en-marinepersoneel

---

Relevant Data

TO BE FILLED

first edited by Wiebe Reints as original_author on 2024-04-17
last edited by Abacus as translator on 2025-03-12 (applies to section: Main-text; Sources)