

# The Indian Military Academy

## The Academy that never was (1900-1940)

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### Abstract

*From 1890 onwards the Dutch East Indies were without its own institution for officer education. Officers for the East Indian Army were educated in the Netherlands. For half a century officers of the East Indian Army tried to bring about its restoration with the help of Indo-European and East Indian politicians. The Dutch political and military leadership successfully opposed this ambition, arguing that the Dutch East Indies had too little potential to sustain an officer education of sufficient quality of its own. Besides, the idea of an East Indian Army that was too independent was unwelcome in the Netherlands.*

### Introduction

In 1911 the Royal Military College, the first military academy in Australia, was established, India followed suit in 1922 (Prince of Wales Royal Indian Military College Dehra Dun) and in 1936 the Philippines got their own officer training institute (Philippine Military Academy).<sup>1</sup> The three countries had in common that they were not independent at the time they received their officer training institute. The Dutch East Indies, the largest colonial state in the area after British India, never had such an institute, although it had its own army and in spite of serious efforts of European expatriates and the indigenous community to establish one. What is the history of ‘the academy that never was’?

The Dutch East Indies had had its own army since 1836. It was a regular army, founded on long-term voluntary contracts, whose principal task it was to uphold internal law and order in the vast archipelago. In this capacity, it generally carried out small-scale guerrilla-type operations until 1910, as the only representation of the Dutch authority from Atjeh to New Guinea in many areas. The Royal Navy was the most obvious defence against external threats, although the army had to take into account the contingency of amphibious landings from an external enemy.

The personnel of the East Indian Army was to a large extent indigenous: Javan, Ambonese, Menadonese (of Celebes), and Timorese. The European soldiers came from various countries until 1900, in particular Germany, but after the turn of the century, only Dutch volunteers were recruited. (Bossenbroek, 1992)

Finding sufficient numbers of personnel was a chronic problem, as the East Indian Army was almost continually in action somewhere, stretched over an extremely vast

area and not enjoying a good reputation.

The officers were educated in the Netherlands. In 1840 the first RNLMA-trained (Koninklijke Militaire Academie – Royal Netherlands Military Academy) lieutenants for the Indian Army left for the East Indies. Other sources for the recruitment of officers were the NCO corps and the so-called courses, amalgamated in 1890 into the two-year Hoofdcursus (Principal Course) at Kampen. They educated Infantry and Military Administration officers for the East Indian Army (Koninklijk Nederlandsch-Indisch Leger –KNIL), whose educational backgrounds did not qualify them for the RNLMA. The most famous East Indian Army officer to be educated in this way was J.B. van Heutsz.

In the East Indies itself the choice of officer education was very limited indeed. From 1818-1826 there was an institute in Semarang that educated recruits not only for the Army, but also for the Navy and the Department of Public Works. It produced 63 army officers of all arms and services and the Military Military Administration. Later it became possible to be educated as an officer at the various arms and services schools, such as the Artillery School at Weltevreden, although it must be said that only small numbers and the lower officer ranks were concerned.

The principal education in Java was the Military School at Meester Cornelis - a suburb of Batavia - established in 1852 to produce more lieutenants coming from the NCO ranks. Until 1860 Dutch nationality was not a requirement and approximately 10% of the students were of German descent. During the years it existed, the course duration was changed from two (1860) to three years (1872), and back again to two (1883). It was intended for the Infantry, Artillery, and for a short while also for the Cavalry and the Military Military Administration. The reduction in course duration may be related to the establishment of preparatory education by the arms and services themselves in the 1870s.(Schuitemaker, 1986: 175-179).

In 1890 a new legislative regulation for military education resulted in a concentration of the officer education at two institutes in the Netherlands, viz. the Hoofdcursus at Kampen and the RNLMA at Breda. As a result, the last students were admitted to the officer education at Meester Cornelis in 1893, and two years later the last officer exam in the Dutch East Indies took place, bringing the total of officers educated there up to 1,116. Henceforth, the School only prepared students for the entry exam for the Hoofdcursus at Kampen. As entry to the RNLMA and the Hoofdcursus was restricted to small numbers of students born in the East Indies, the opportunities to build up an officer career from there were very limited indeed. One of the reasons for this was the very scarce h.b.s.-education (public general secondary education) available in the archipelago, which meant that only very few would attain the level to do the entry exam.

In order to keep recruitment up to the mark, however, the 1890 Act made provision

for the establishment of a Cadets' School. From 1893 onwards the 4th and 5th forms of the h.b.s. could be followed in a military boarding school in the Netherlands. After these two years at Alkmaar, these cadets could be admitted to the RNLMA at Breda. Thus, many officers began their East Indian Army career at Alkmaar. The attraction of this option was increased by the absence of an education fee. In fact, until 1933 the training for the East Indian Army was to remain free of charge, whereas the RNLMA education for the Royal Netherlands Army cost at least 400 guilders a year.

Shortly after the transfer of all officer training to the Netherlands, the East Indies began to make a bid for restoring an officer training of its own. It is possible to distinguish three periods when this call was stronger than at other times. The first came around the turn of the century and the other two were related to both World Wars.

### **Turn of the century**

Around 1900 there were great changes in and related to the Dutch East Indies. The Japanese expansion and the arrival of the Americans in the Philippines created a more volatile international security situation. Besides, the British-Japanese defensive alliance allowed the British, traditionally the protectors of the Dutch colony, to concentrate more on Europe, where the German navy had embarked on a large scale expansion programme. So it was not unthinkable that the Netherlands would have to make a greater effort to defend the East Indies than before.

In the archipelago itself, the first decade of the century saw the violent completion of the subjection of all the outlying districts. This coincided with the proclamation of the so-called ethical policy, an attempt to bring education, infrastructure and health care at a higher level in order to enable the indigenous population to profit from the benefits of western civilization. Did this also entail the introduction of conscription? It would certainly end the recruitment problem. But was conscription only to be for European inhabitants or could it also function as a way of involving the indigenous population more in the state on a basis of equality? (Teitler, 1979) For the time being the discussion did not yield any concrete results, as was the case with the idea to merge the East Indian and Royal Netherlands Army officer corps.<sup>2</sup>

From the turn of the century officers of the East Indian Army showed themselves to be critical in the military press of the decision to transfer the officer training to the Netherlands. They argued – with some justification – that the education at Kampen and Breda was far too Dutch in character, and that the quality of the military teachers with regard to the Indian subjects was not up to the mark. In their view this was caused by the fact that teachers often owed their appointments to the fortunate coincidence of their being on leave in the Netherlands when a vacancy occurred. Besides, the level of

Claas Spat, Malay teacher at the RMA in Breda 1897-1925, he opposed the founding of an Indian Military Academy



Malay acquired in the Netherlands was inadequate, and Javanese was not even on the curriculum there.<sup>3</sup>

Outside the military the Indische Bond (Indian Alliance), a lobby group of Indo-Europeans, pressured for the restoration of the East Indian officer education. In 1901 they requested the Governor-General to pledge himself to re-establish an officer education in Java. He refused, pointing out that the East Indies could boast neither the experience nor the capacity, and that it would be detrimental to the uniformity of the Dutch officer training. Moreover, he feared there would be too little interest.<sup>4</sup> As long as the h.b.s.-education was a requirement, the Governor-General was right. In the Netherlands 1,440 h.b.s.-pupils a year passed their final exams, whereas there were only 34 in the East Indies, with only Batavia, Semarang and Soerabaja possessing a h.b.s..

On 4 July 1902 the Indische Krijgskundige Vereniging (Indian Military Society) devoted a conference to the topic. The officers attending concluded that the present road from archipelago to officer rank was too far, in a literal and figurative sense. Few parents were inclined to send their children off to Alkmaar or Breda at a young age to let them study there for years, and the slight opportunities for attending h.b.s. in the East Indies, concentrated in Java at that, did not make things easier. Per year three to six h.b.s.-pupils chose to sit the RNLMA entry exam. In the eyes of the officers, therefore, the problem was more of a practical nature than a principled anti-military attitude. Besides, if there were an education in the East Indies that catered for the specific East Indian circumstances, the pupils would be sure to come. More attention for promotion prospects for NCOs and a limited lowering of the entrance requirements, for instance, three years of h.b.s.-education, would create more interest. In this way an attractive alternative for a career in Internal Administration would be created.

There were also counter arguments: the high cost, the small number of Europeans in the East Indies, the difficulty of finding good teachers - these were reasons enough for the failure of such an experiment, according to the opponents. Claas Spat, the RNLMA lecturer of Malay, was among them. He pointed out that few Indian parents aspired to a military career for their sons, and that the Indian climate, in a literal as well as figurative sense, was unsuitable for studying.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from an education of its own the Indische Bond aimed at a broadening of opportunities in the Netherlands. Indian-born candidates for the RNLMA, and there

was only room for six, could only opt for the Infantry. The authorities in the Netherlands, however, pointed out that the regulations allowed an aspirant officer, once accepted to the RNLMA, to change his arm or service.<sup>6</sup>

The discussion at the turn of the century slowly petered out, except in one respect: the opening of the officer training to the indigenous candidates, whose exclusion was no longer defensible within the framework of the ethical policy. From approximately 1900 onwards there had been constant pressure from Parliament and the media to broaden the opportunities, but, obviously, there were also clear warnings against giving command functions to indigenous officers in the army. After much debate in 1907 the Military School at Meester Cornelis opened its gate for an officer education for candidates of the indigenous nobility. Their contracts were, however, decidedly less attractive than for officers of Dutch descent, as far as pay, retirement and career prospects were concerned. Nevertheless, it was a way for the Dutch government to commit the traditional elite to the colonial rule. Until its demise in 1914 this education produced 13 officers. (Bouwman, 1995: 17-32; 41 ff)

In 1910 the Minister of War installed a State Committee to conduct a thorough investigation of the military education and to propose plans for a more economical and effective organization. Several of its members were officers of the East Indian Army. In 1913 it concluded that the education should remain concentrated in the Netherlands. Officers of the East Indian Army should be acquainted with the Dutch and European circumstances; after all, in case of an emergency, they should also be able to serve in the Dutch armed forces in the Netherlands.<sup>7</sup> An East Indian education seemed further away than ever, until World War I changed all that.

### **World War I and after**

Just like the mother country the archipelago had to press home its neutrality by use of force of arms between 1914-1918. World War I led to the realization in the East Indies that in case of an emergency the country had to rely on itself. The debate on the introduction of conscription, with or without an indigenous element, and the training of reserve officers flared up again. The larger the armed forces in the East Indies were going to be, the more the demand for officers would grow.<sup>8</sup> Although in 1917-18 the institution of some form of conscription came very close, the political leadership backed away from it. The whole discussion gave a new lease of life to the question of an East Indian officer training, this time in more advantageous circumstances than around 1900.

Two decades of ethical policy and economic development in the archipelago had led to a greater Indian self-confidence among the (Indo-) European population and nation-

alistic aspirations among the indigenous elite. The institution of an Indian officer training fitted both sentiments perfectly.

Not only had the East Indies had an embryonic parliament (Volksraad – People's Council) since 1918, civil higher education, too, had developed. (Kielstra, 1902) In 1920 a Technical University was established in Bandung (Giebels, 1999: 66), institutes of Legal and Medical Higher Education followed in Batavia in 1924 and 1927, respectively. A committee of professors even advised the establishment of an Indian University.<sup>9</sup> Since 1915 Bandung had had a h.b.s. and the number of h.b.s.-graduates lay between 35 and 93 per year in the period of 1913-1919, and it was still growing. Would an Indian Military Academy not be the next logical step? The RNLMA and Hoofdcursus were partly funded with Indian money, which, no doubt, could be transferred to the East Indies.

In 1916 at last the possibility arose for indigenous aspirant officers to be educated in the Netherlands, albeit in very modest numbers. A total of 27 indigenous cadets studied at the RNLMA between 1919 and 1939, and five were admitted to the Hoofdcursus between 1916 and 1925. From the perspective of an indigenous elite that was aspiring for a speedy emancipation, these numbers were disappointing.

Whether, in the light of these developments, the establishment of an Indian Military Academy was a logical step, was a matter for debate in military circles as well as in the Volksraad. In 1919 Captain F. Kroon saw a rosy future for a completely Indian education. In his view the old objections of little enthusiasm and lower educational level among the Indian youths did not apply anymore. Besides, he wanted a strictly disciplined military education, which the RNLMA, where after World War I the cadets were given more freedom, simply did not offer. This Indian criticism of the Breda education would not die throughout the interbellum. The regular East Indian Army needed officers who had been trained and educated in a strict and disciplined regime, with a strongly developed sense of *esprit de corps* and with a sound knowledge of the Indian military practice. As for the academic level, Kroon did not wish to make any concessions; a military academy had to build on a 5-year h.b.s.. Small wonder he was upset by stories emanating from the Volksraad and his own colleagues<sup>10</sup>, who pleaded for lower entrance requirements in order to recruit enough candidates.<sup>11</sup> In the Volksraad Lieutenant-Colonel J.V.L. Oppermann advocated the establishment of an Indian Military Academy (IMA).<sup>12</sup>

Emblem of the Cadettenschool in Alkmaar. From 1893 until 1923 hundreds of boys from the East Indies received their last two years of hbs-education here before entering the RNLMA at Breda





After the idea of conscription for the indigenous population had been rejected, the leadership of the Indian Army and the politicians in the Netherlands had no further intention of seriously considering the establishment of an IMA. Appeals from the Volksraad, by mouth of Colonel H.C. Kerckamp and Under-Lieutenant (ret.) S.J. Aay<sup>13</sup>, were rejected by the Army Commander with the remark that as long as the government was considering a comprehensive review of military education, any discussion on the subject would be pointless. Moreover, funds for such an expensive plan were lacking anyway. In the meeting of 10 July 1922 Aay stated:

It is high time to transfer the education to the East Indies, and to stop wasting our Indian money on keeping alive the all but bankrupt institutes in the Netherlands.

With these words he referred to the downscaling of officer training in the Netherlands after World War I and the heated discussion that arose there in 1921 on how the officer training could be made attractive in times of budget cuts, fewer promotion prospects in the army and a poor reputation of the military profession in general. One of the solutions was an amalgamation of the education of professional and reserve officers. This was an anathema in Indian eyes, as it would strengthen the Dutch character of the education, with its lax discipline and little attention for the tough military practice even more. Its attractiveness for the East Indies would decrease even further if the Dutch officer training should seek refuge in a transformation into an academic institution and doing away with the boarding school system, as was proposed by many RNLMA lecturers in 1921. As it was, the Indian circumstances demanded a training based on the development of discipline, order, military skills, comradeship and knowledge of the archipelago.<sup>14</sup>

Again it was Captain Kroon who took the initiative in the discussion. In 1921 he urged that the East Indian interests be taken seriously, and if they could only be served by establishing an IMA, that should be the target.<sup>15</sup> The government proposals for a rigorous restructuring of the military education and in the process do away with the Cadets' School and the Hoofdcursus, two important institutions for the East Indies, all the more called for an Indian contribution to the discussion. Two committees of Indian officers tackled the problem in the final months of 1921, one in The Hague and one in Bandung. Both found that the establishment of an education in the Dutch East Indies should be the objective, although they realized this would be asking too much at short notice. For now, the education for the Indian Army at the RNLMA should get a more recognizably Indian nature. Both the Cadets' School and Meester Cornelis had to prepare candidates for the RNLMA.<sup>16</sup> But these institutes stood under pressure, and in 1923 the Cadets' School disappeared, the Hoofdcursus followed in 1928 and the

Military School at Meester Cornelis in 1929. The only way to become an officer was through the h.b.s. and RNLMA.

In 1921 the Indian Army Commander Dijkstra came up with a remarkable suggestion to reduce the shortage of lieutenants: the establishment of an Indian education for candidates who had three years of h.b.s. or mulo under their belts. When this plan was rejected by the Minister of Colonies, Dijkstra replied:

At one time or other it must come to the establishment of an indigenous militia and although ample use will and must be made of reserve officers, a core of indigenous professional officers will have to be formed, which cannot be supplied by the Netherlands, whereas, moreover, it is only logical that the East Indies offers its sons for this in the first place.

In the same missive Dijkstra pointed out that the level of secondary education in the East Indies had improved and that Java, with its cool mountainous climate, could provide suitable locations for an IMA, in Tjimahi or Bandung, for instance. Finally, he argued that an education in the Netherlands did not automatically lead to a tendency to 'think Dutch'; after all, did not Indian nationalism stay alive among the Indian students at the Dutch universities?<sup>17</sup>

In 1922 Dijkstra reviewed his opinion, when he argued that there would be cheaper ways of getting the required number of lieutenants, for instance by educating NCOs to Under-Lieutenants, or by reducing the number of lieutenant posts and by allowing officers of the Netherlands Army, detached to the East Indies, to transfer to the Indian Army.<sup>18</sup>

In the East Indies the discussion did not yield any concrete results, although it proved possible to give a more Indian ring to the officer training in the Netherlands. Thus, the RNLMA got an extra application year for engineer officers of the Indian army and an Indian course to enable officers to brush up their knowledge of the archipelago.

In the course of the twenties the ideal of an Indian Academy seemed to fade quickly, in particular as a result of limited financial means and a reduced demand for officers since 1923. Most energy was spent by the Indian officers on proposals for improvement of the Indian education at the RNLMA. Besides, the Indian Army Commander quite emphatically asserted his influence on the curriculum of the Indian education, by commenting on duration and content of the course. As long as the promised legislative reorganization of the military education had not been put into effect, there might still be some hope for an IMA. The crucial debate took place on 30 August and 3 September 1929 in the Volksraad. The proposal submitted by the government left little room for doubt: it was cheaper and more efficient to concentrate the education at Breda. Thus, all officers serving the Crown of Orange would get to know each other well, and be



acquainted with the Dutch circumstances, in which Indian officers should also be deployable. Besides, the Dutch government claimed, there was too little enthusiasm in the East Indies to justify an education there. There was little opposition against this view; only Volksraad member R.P. Soeroso devoted his speaking time to a plea for an Indian officer education, which in his opinion would enhance recruitment for the army. For him an IMA was an instrument in the emancipation of the indigenous population. The Volksraad agreed to the proposal of the government, but the process in The Hague was never fully completed. This, incidentally, did not change the actual situation: the only officer training was and remained at Breda.

During the thirties Soeroso and Soetardjo were the only members of the Volksraad to consistently plead for more indigenous cadets at the RNLMA as well as an Indian officer education in Java. The only political support they got from the Dutch parliament came from the communist MP R. Effendi. From 1935, however, the growing international tension caused positions to shift in India as well as in Breda.

## **Towards World War II**

From the mid-thirties there had been appeals from the East Indies for the appointment of a Head of Indian education at the RNLMA, to guard the interests of the Indian Army cadets. The intention was to form these cadets into a unit and to aim at a curriculum that would be as Indian as possible. After several years of struggle this approach proved to be a good alternative for an IMA, made even more viable by increasing numbers of cadets and growing financial means. In fact, from 1939 Breda offered its own Indian course. But also in the East Indies change was rapid.

In September 1936 a reserve officer education for the KNIL (Royal Netherlands Indian Army – the official name since 1933) was established in Bandung, called CORO (Corps Opleiding Reserve Officiëren – Reserve Officer Training Corps) since 1938. Initially, only the Infantry was educated here, but in 1938 the Military Administration and in 1940 the Artillery followed suit. The education, however, was exclusively intended for conscripts with a h.b.s. background, so indigenous candidates did not qualify. In July 1938 Soetardjo used the heightened interest and greater financial leeway for the armed forces to table a motion in the Volksraad:

Considering the fact that the question of the defence of this country in relation to the international political situation has increasingly shifted to the centre of the attention of the community, presses upon the government to establish an education for officers in the army in this country.

The motion triggered off a debate in which the indigenous members emphasized the participation of their community in the defence of the Dutch East Indies. Opponents of an Indian officer education pointed out the larger numbers now admitted at Breda and stressed the *Rijksverband* (Cohesion of the Realm). *Volksraad* member Sol was of the opinion that all officers should taste the joys of a cadet's life at Breda and that they should be educated in the idea of the *Rijkseenheid* (Unity of the Realm). He did not want to go beyond a reserve officer education in the East Indies. Other Dutch members dug up the old arguments of high cost and little enthusiasm. The one exception was Van Helsdingen who rejected the imperial idea and who thought that it would be consistent with the political development that the East Indies educate their own KNIL-officers.

KNIL commander M. Boerstra strongly advised against the motion. Apart from the traditional arguments, he declared that from a psychological perspective the government attached great value to the education being situated in the Netherlands. Besides, the aspirant officers would gain a broader view of the world from their Dutch experience. On top of that, an education of such high technical level simply could not be realized in the East Indies. He was also strongly opposed to a restoration of the education at Meester Cornelis.

Soeroso could not understand why the East Indies could have civil Higher Education, but not military. He refused to see why the feeling of *Rijksverband* depended on the location where one was educated. He argued that precisely from an Indian education great propaganda value for the army could be expected and he elaborated with a plea for the development of the young people of the East Indies and the armed strength of the indigenous population. Remarkably, the Indian argumentation triumphed in the end. The motion was carried with 26 to 25 votes. It was a symbolic victory, without any political consequence.



Banner of the RNLMA at Bandung, Java, 1940-1942. The year 1828 and the St. Andrew's crosses refer to the RNLMA at Breda.

In 1940 the situation changed drastically as a consequence of the German occupation of the Netherlands. CORO was opened up for non-Europeans and the RNLMA was re-established in Bandung in 1941, with a relatively great proportion of indigenous and Chinese cadets. The East Indies finally had its own officer education, until the Japanese invasion in March 1942 abruptly put an end to it.

## Conclusion

There has never been an Indian Military Academy. The political as well as the military leadership in The Hague continually argued that such an institution would be too costly and that the basis for sufficient quality and quantity of students and lecturers was too slight in the Dutch East Indies. These were rational arguments, but apparently there was also an emotional boundary, in spite of ethical policy and emancipation. Giving the KNIL its own education and handing officer functions to the indigenous population was a development that, in the eyes of the Dutch government, threatened rather than enhanced the Rijkseenheid. An administrative and intellectual Indo-European and indigenous elite was allowed to emerge, be it slowly and under close scrutiny, but a military elite clearly was a bridge too far; was it too dangerous for the maintenance of Dutch authority? A question all the more tantalizing if this situation is compared to that of the Indian Army in British India.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> British India had had its own *Army Staff College* in Deolali (near Bombay) since 1905. In 1907 it was re-located to Quetta (Baloetsjistan). In Begaum there was a *Senior Officers School*. The possibility to establish a staff school at Batavia was investigated in 1874. Nationaal Archief Den Haag (NA), Archief Generale Staf inv. Nr. 39.
- <sup>2</sup> *De Indische Gids* (1988), pp. 779-822; (1900), pp. 300-315, 597-623, and 1507-1514 and (1901), pp. 151-181.
- <sup>3</sup> *Indisch Militair Tijdschrift* (1898), pp. 150-155 and 593-618 and (1901), pp. 476-484 and *Indische Gids* (1898), p. 413.
- <sup>4</sup> *Militair Weekblad* 12 September 1901.
- <sup>5</sup> *Orgaan van de Indische Krijgskundige Vereeniging* (1902-1903), pp. 3-75 and *Orgaan van de Vereeniging ter Beoefening van de krijgswetenschap* (1904-1905), pp. 89-185.
- <sup>6</sup> NA, Archief Ministerie van Oorlog, inv. Nr. 4146.
- <sup>7</sup> *Verslag van de Staatscommissie voor de reorganisatie van het militair onderwijs*, Den Haag (1913), pp. 65-66 and 166.
- <sup>8</sup> *De Indische Gids* (1917), pp. 606-614.
- <sup>9</sup> *Preanger Bode* 6 and 7 July 1921.
- <sup>10</sup> Amongst others Lieutenant-General Van Rietschoten and Lieutenant-Colonel Swaab
- <sup>11</sup> *Orgaan van de Indische Krijgskundige Vereeniging* 1919 and 1920.
- <sup>12</sup> *Handelingen* 13 December 1920, p.593.
- <sup>13</sup> Trained at the pupils school at Nieuwersluis, left for the Dutch East Indies in 1894 and founder of the NCO association *Ons Aller Belang*.
- <sup>14</sup> *Preanger Bode* 7 and 8 January and 13 July 1921.
- <sup>15</sup> *Orgaan Nederlandsch-Indische Officiersvereeniging* 1921, pp. 675-685.
- <sup>16</sup> *Orgaan Nederlandsch-Indische Officiersvereeniging* 1924, pp. 164-166, 197-198, 264-266, 312-317 and 348.
- <sup>17</sup> Dijkstra to the Governor-General 8 November 1921, NA, Archief Indische Mailrapporten iv. Nr. 2440.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 23 May 1922.