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Welfare for War Veterans: How the Dutch Empire Provided for European Mercenary Families, c. 1850 to 1914

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Abstract

The largest “multinational” employers (*avant la lettre*) were European India companies and colonial armies. Between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, they recruited millions of mercenaries and soldiers from all over Europe, mostly from lower social classes. Beginning in the nineteenth century, they offered certain welfare-state services to these men and their legitimate and illegitimate families in Europe and the colonies. To maintain these systems, colonial states depended on cooperation with local, regional, and national administrations throughout Europe. However, the economic and welfare-state dimensions of violent European expansion have hitherto hardly been studied. This article uses the example of the Dutch colonial army to show for the first time how much money flowed from the colonies to lower-class European families. It analyses the transimperial networks of the Dutch colonial bureaucracy, and shows why men, women, and children in Europe and Asia, from diverse social backgrounds and subjected to dissimilar racial regimes, were affected quite differently by this global military labour market.

Keywords: new military history; Dutch Empire; welfare history

In the nineteenth century, colonial states gradually transformed into welfare states, providing pensions and a certain degree of social security to their European employees. The reason for this is quite straightforward: nineteenth-century colonial expansion and warfare in Asia and Africa was extremely staff-intensive. In addition to vast numbers of non-European troops,¹ colonial armies relied on roughly 6 million European soldiers to

¹ Michelle R. Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa*, New African Histories (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014); Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa, 1857–1960*, Social History of Africa (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1991); Jaap de Moor, “The Recruitment of Indonesian Soldiers for the Dutch Colonial Army, c. 1700–1950,” in *Guardians of Empire: The Armed Forces of the Colonial Powers, c. 1700–1964*, ed. David Killingray and David Omissi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 53–69; Henri Eckert, “Double-Edged Swords of Conquest in Indochina: Tirailleurs Tonkinois, Chasseurs Annamites and Militias, 1883–1895,” in *Colonial Armies in Southeast Asia*, ed. Tobias Rettig and Karl Hack (London: Routledge, 2005), 119–45; Tymotheny H. Parsons, “African Participation in the British Empire,” in *Black Experience and the Empire*, ed. Philip David Morgan and Sean Hawkins, Oxford

expand empires across Africa and Asia in the nineteenth century. The largest employers of these men were the British, French, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, and Russian Empires.² Many of these men were mercenaries, as we will call them, drawing on current literature.³ They came from all over Europe, in particular from those regions that had not built overseas empires of their own, such as the German princely states, Belgium, or Switzerland. To recruit and maintain these men, out of which—even towards the end of the nineteenth century with improved medical treatments against tropical illnesses—only a little more than 50 percent survived, European colonial states needed to offer them more than just food, shelter, and a modest pay. As national governments began to care for the soldiers in their national armies,⁴ colonial governments started to provide basic services for invalid and wounded fighters in colonial armies, or for veterans struggling to find a job after they returned to Europe. For relatives left behind in Europe, colonial states needed to provide information on the fate of brothers, fathers, and sons missing in action, transfer bequests of fallen fighters to their heirs, and sometimes even provide pensions for surviving widows or children. Colonial states, in other words, were among the largest international employers and welfare providers in the nineteenth century. Thus they connected the microeconomies of low-income families from large parts of Europe to the fate of colonised societies in Africa and Asia, affecting the lives of numerous men and women, albeit in vastly unequal ways, in spaces that reached far across the political boundaries of their empires. Surprisingly, to date neither imperial nor social and economic historians have shown much interest in these entangled histories. We believe that a thorough exploration of this neglected history has the potential to alter extant historiographies of imperial Europe and open up new methodological avenues for future research. By combining global and imperial history with social history, this research perspective sheds light on how imperial expansion simultaneously connected and hierarchised the fates of underprivileged Europeans from lower social classes and racialised subjects in the colonies.

History of the British Empire, Companion Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 257–85. For the social and ethnic backgrounds of the East India Company troops and the British Indian Armies, see Heather Streets-Salter, *Martial Races: The Military, Race, and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914*, Studies in Imperialism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Kate Imy, “Faithful Fighters: Identity and Power in the British Indian Army” (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2020); David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860–1940*, Studies in Military and Strategic History (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

² Ulbe Bosma, “European Colonial Soldiers in the Nineteenth Century: Their Role in White Global Migration and Patterns of Colonial Settlement,” *Journal of Global History* 4:2 (July 2009), 317–36, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022809003179>. For case studies for the French Foreign Legion see Christian Koller, *Die Fremdenlegion* (Paderborn,; Ferdinand Schöningh, 2013); for Britain: Thomas Martin Devine, “Soldiers of Empire, 1750–1914,” in *Scotland and the British Empire*, ed. John M. MacKenzie, 176–95. The Oxford History of the British Empire, Companion Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Edward M. Spiers, *The Scottish Soldier and Empire, 1854–1902* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006); Alexander Bubb, “The Life of the Irish Soldier in India: Representations and Self-Representations, 1857–1922,” *Modern Asian Studies* 46:4 (2012): 769–813. We will discuss the Dutch case extensively in this paper.

³ We use the term “mercenaries” instead of “soldiers,” as suggested by other scholars, because the men we are looking at were in it primarily for the money and not out of a sense of national or imperial duty. Stephen Morillo, “Mercenaries, Mamluks, and Militia: Towards a Cross-Cultural Typology of Military Service,” in *Mercenaries and Paid Men: The Mercenary Identity in the Middle Ages*, ed. John France, History of Warfare, vol. 47 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 243–60; Nir Arieli, *From Byron to Bin Laden: A History of Foreign War Volunteers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018); Philipp Krauer, “Welcome to Hotel Helvetia! Friedrich Wüthrich’s Illicit Mercenary Trade Network for the Dutch East Indies, 1858–1890,” *BMGN—Low Countries Historical Review* 134:3 (26 September 2019), 122–47.

⁴ Herbert Obinger, Klaus Petersen, and Peter Starke, eds., *Warfare and Welfare: Military Conflict and Welfare State Development in Western Countries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198779599.001.0001>.

Our study intervenes in three disconnected historiographies in particular. Firstly, it shares recent demands among migration historians to reconsider the concept of migration in history. A narrow definition of the term has focused mostly on permanent migration, where families and individuals leave their places of birth to settle and start new lives somewhere else. This narrow focus remains blind, however, to vast numbers of migrants who did not intend to stay abroad, but rather hoped to return home. Mercenaries looking for social upward mobility and economic opportunities in a global military labour market constitute a prime example of such “life cycle migrants.”⁵ Our argument contributes, secondly, to military history. A number of case studies in recent years have focused on singular cases of mercenaries or groups in colonial services, rarely situating these cases, however, in the larger context of the global military labour market forged by competing empires’ continuous demands for fresh mercenaries. Moreover, many of these studies focus strongly on cultural aspects, namely how European mercenaries serving “foreign” imperial powers became crucial for building shared pan-European imperial cultures. Other currents of research grapple with developments of warfare, military strategy, and law. Few, if any, of the existing studies, however, have so far paid attention to key economic and welfare dimensions of colonial armies.⁶ Thirdly, our argument contributes to the global history of the welfare state. The scholarship in this subfield, though wide-ranging, still largely rests on a typology put forward by Danish sociologist Gøsta Esping-Andersen in 1990, which distinguished between conservative, liberal, and social-democratic welfare states. This model and the empirical research it inspired concentrates exclusively on Western nation states, which is why neither the imperial dimension of Western welfare histories nor the colonial state as an additional historical provider of early nineteenth-century welfare services have received much scrutiny so far.⁷ The subfield of studies on the “warfare–welfare nexus,” which studies the influence of wars on European welfarism, has so far mostly neglected colonial wars and armies.⁸ The role of non-European soldiers in other colonial armies and prior to the twentieth century constitutes large research desiderate, which we will return to in the conclusions.

Our case study is the Dutch Empire in Southeast Asia. This particular imperial formation benefits strongly from recent ground-breaking work from early modern historians like Francisca Hoyer, Felicia Gottmann, and others who have highlighted how the Dutch East India Company, along with the British and some other smaller East India

⁵ Jelle van Lottum and Leo Lucassen, “Six Cross-Sections of the Dutch Maritime Labour Market: A Preliminary Reconstruction and Its Implications (1610–1815),” in *Maritime Labour: Contributions to the History of Work at Sea, 1500–2000*, ed. Richard Gorski (Amsterdam: Askant, 2007), 13–42; Jan Lucassen, *Globalising Migration History: The Eurasian Experience (16th–21st Centuries)*, vol. 3, *Studies in Global Social History* 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Ulbe Bosma and Thomas Kolnberger, “Military Migrants: Luxembourgers in the Colonial Army of the Dutch East Indies,” *Itinerario* 41:3 (13 December 2017), 555–80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115317000687>; Bosma, “European Colonial Soldiers”; J. Lucassen, “The Other Proletarians: Seasonal Laborers, Mercenaries and Miners,” *International Review of Social History* 39 (1994), 171–94.

⁶ Alan Axelrod, *Mercenaries: A Guide to Private Armies and Private Military Companies*, Sage Reference (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014); Rodney Atwood, *The Hessians: Mercenaries from Hessen-Kassel in the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); John Laband, “From Mercenaries to Military Settlers: The British German Legion, 1854–1861,” in *Soldiers and Settlers in Africa, 1850–1918*, ed. Stephen M. Miller, vol. 56, *History of Warfare* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 85–122; Chen Tzoref-Ashkenazi, *German Soldiers in Colonial India* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014).

⁷ Beate Althammer, Lutz Raphael, and Tamara Stazic-Wendt, *Rescuing the Vulnerable: Poverty, Welfare and Social Ties in Modern Europe*, vol. 27, *International Studies in Social History* (New York: Berghahn, 2016).

⁸ Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century*, Politics, History, and Culture (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Carina Schmitt, “The Warfare–Welfare Nexus in French African Colonies in the Course of the First and Second World War,” *Historical Social Research* 45:2 (2020), 281, <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.45.2020.2.217-38>.

companies, became the main gateways for hundreds of thousands of Europeans from regions such as the Holy Roman Empire that had not established any overseas colonial outposts of their own yet, to travel and pursue careers in non-European arenas.⁹ Our own research in many ways provides the sequel to their findings, outlining how the structures of a transimperial military labour market that were created in the early modern period continued well into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As will become clear, the Dutch Empire's influence continued to reach far into the continental European heartland and thereby forged continuous but hitherto little-examined connections between nineteenth-century imperial Europe and colonial Indonesia. We will first explain how the Dutch colonial state organised and categorised multiple forms of compensation for its European fighters. We will offer empirically grounded estimates of how much money flowed in this way from colonial Indonesia into vast parts of continental Europe between approximately 1850 and 1914. Next, we will elaborate on how the constant flow of this money necessitated a ceaseless collaboration between municipal, provincial, national, and colonial state agencies and private entrepreneurs across imperial Europe and colonial Southeast Asia. Finally, we will discuss how this money affected the lives of individuals and families both in Europe and in the Dutch East Indies.

Payments, Pensions, Gratifications, Inheritances – the Quantitative Dimension of Imperial Money Flows

When the British handed back the Southeast Asian colonies to the Netherlands after the reordering of Europe in 1815, the Dutch king established a new government-funded colonial army, which eventually would become known as the Royal Dutch Indian Army, mostly referred to with its Dutch acronym KNIL (for *Koninklijk Nederlands Indisch Leger*).¹⁰ Inheriting this vast empire that had been forged from the seventeenth century onwards by the Dutch East India Company, the newly established Dutch Kingdom found itself in an odd position: it was simultaneously a giant and a dwarf, as Dutch historian H. L. Wesseling famously phrased it.¹¹ Given that the Dutch Empire with its far-flung island colonies in Southeast Asia and some plantation colonies in the Caribbean grew into Europe's second-largest empire behind the British in the later nineteenth century, the Netherlands were indeed a giant among empires. In the arena of nineteenth-century European *realpolitik*, however, the small, politically neutral country tucked away in the marshlands of the North Sea remained a dwarf. After losing its southern territories to the newly established nation of Belgium in 1830, it shrank even further.

Running a gigantic empire with dwarflike resources remained a constant struggle for the Netherlands. Among many other things, it required the Dutch to supply the KNIL with enough soldiers and mercenaries to conquer and defend a vast island empire in the Southeast Asian archipelago, which grew almost as large as Europe in its extension. The demand for servicemen fluctuated considerably during the nineteenth century, reaching high peaks during violent wars such as those on Java (1820–5), Banjarmasin in Borneo (1859–63), Bone in Celebes (1859–60), and Aceh in Sumatra

⁹ Felicia Gottmann and Philip Stern, "Introduction: Crossing Companies," *Journal of World History* 31:3 (2020), 477–88, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2020.0028>; Francisca Hoyer, *Relations of Absence: Germans in the East Indies and Their Families c. 1750–1820* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2020); Catia Antunes and Amelia Polonia, eds., *Beyond Empires: Global, Self-Organizing, Cross-Imperial Networks, 1500–1800* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

¹⁰ Martin Bossenbroek, *Van Holland naar Indië: het transport van koloniale troepen voor het Oost-Indische leger 1815–1909* (Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 1986).

¹¹ H. L. Wesseling, "The Giant That Was a Dwarf, or the Strange History of Dutch Imperialism," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 16:3 (1988), 58–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086538808582768>.

(1873–1904).¹² Demand dropped in times of relative tranquillity, but never dried up completely. Most rank-and-file fighters were recruited from colonised or allied Southeast Asian regions, or from former Dutch African colonies.¹³ Additionally, until 1909 the KNIL employed roughly 150,000 European soldiers, 40 percent of whom (ca. 70,000 men) were non-Dutch foreigners. In order to recruit, accommodate, and equip these men as well as provide for them after their duty ended, the KNIL built a rather impressive bureaucracy designed to keep track of the identities and whereabouts of all soldiers and veterans and to organise their transport from Europe to Asia and back. Additionally, the KNIL needed to formalise and regulate claims from veterans and manage requests from relatives who demanded compensation or information about lost brothers, husbands, or fathers in the Dutch East Indies. State governments across Europe often supported such claims, some as early as the eighteenth century, as Francisca Hoyer has shown.¹⁴ Claiming pensions or rents for impoverished subjects relieved their own welfare budgets. As will be demonstrated below, this incentive continued well into the nineteenth century and forced the Dutch colonial state to develop a complex system of welfare entitlements and compensations for its imperial troops and their relatives. This system changed considerably over time.¹⁵ In principle, however, it rested on four pillars.

1) Signature Premiums

Signature premiums were paid to men who agreed to enlist as “volunteers.” These premiums ranged from 8 guilders in the early days and during times of low demand up to 300 guilders towards the end of the nineteenth century during times of high demand.¹⁶ In comparison, a Swiss bricklayer in the 1870s made the equivalent of 2 guilders per day.¹⁷ These signature premiums, however, had little long-term impact on mercenaries’ lives. They spent most of the premium in the small town of Harderdwijk, where the colonial army’s central recruiting depot was located, filling the pockets of inn- and bar-keepers, brothel owners, and tricksters while waiting to be shipped to the Indies. “Everything is terribly expensive,” one mercenary wrote to his parents in Switzerland in 1857: “The whole town lives off soldiers. When one of them enters a shop, prices suddenly rise by 100 percent.”¹⁸

2) A Salary

If the soldier or mercenary did not run off with his premium, which happened only in exceptional cases, he was entitled to a salary. Salaries for rank-and-file soldiers were meagre; as one journalist in Batavia summarised in 1860: “The soldier is poor and remains

¹² Martin Bossenbroek, *Volk voor Indië. De werving van Europese militairen voor de Nederlandse koloniale dienst 1814–1909* (Amsterdam: Van Soeren, 1992), 360–1.

¹³ Ineke van Kessel, *Zwarte Hollanders. Afrikaanse Soldaten in Nederlands-Indië* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2005), <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/4758/asc-1241494-017.pdf?sequence=1>; Jaap de Moor, “Contrasting Communities: Asian Soldiers of the Dutch and British Colonial Armies in the Nineteenth Century,” *Itinerario* 11:1 (1987), 35–60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115300009372>.

¹⁴ Hoyer, *Relations of Absence*, 227–76.

¹⁵ The individual regulations and provisions on pension payments have not yet been sufficiently researched. A rough outline is provided by Philipp Krauer, “Colonial Mercenaries: Swiss Military Labour and the Dutch East Indies, c. 1848–1914” (PhD diss., ETH Zürich, 2022), 104–36.

¹⁶ The signature premiums were usually paid out at the signing of the contract in the barracks at Harderdwijk, which eventually led to some mercenaries deserting again after receiving the premiums. For an in-depth analysis on the signature premiums, see Krauer, “Colonial Mercenaries,” 105–9.

¹⁷ Historische Statistik der Schweiz Online (HSSO), 2012, “Industrial Wages by Branches, Occupations, and Regions, 1820–1875,” Table G.3b, <https://hssso.ch/2012/g/3b>.

¹⁸ Letter published in *Der Bund* [Bern], 13 December 1857.

poor. [...] The hope of prosperity is closed to him.”¹⁹ Indeed, salaries were only one guilder a week in the beginning and never rose above 1.65 guilders throughout the century. From this, certain amounts were deducted for food and clothing. Soldiers and mercenaries could improve their skimpy income through taking on additional responsibilities, as barbers, for example. They could also benefit from bribes if they controlled valuable items like food supplies.²⁰ In general, however, the soldiers’ fate was a poor one, as repeated comments by middle- and upper-class European travellers, scientists, merchants, or consuls illustrate; they spoke disparagingly about their socially and supposedly also morally depraved compatriots, or advised their governments to prevent their citizens from getting lured into the KNIL.²¹

3) Inheritances

These first two categories of enumeration allow insight primarily into local economies surrounding the mercenaries. The remaining two categories, in contrast, allow us to understand how money circulated and connected multiple microeconomies in Europe and Asia. After soldiers or mercenaries died, their inheritances had to be transferred to their heirs in Europe. Given the paltry salaries for the rank and file together with the fact that most of them spent their signature premiums in the Netherlands before even setting foot on a ship to the Indies, these bequests were modest in the vast majority of cases. Examining the data from 1,490 Swiss mercenaries who served and died in the Dutch East Indies between 1848 and 1914 (see Table 1), we found that two-thirds (1,011 individuals) left less than 5 guilders behind. Some 298 mercenaries (ca. 20%) left sums between 5 and 20 guilders. Another 10 percent (ca. 175) left behind medium to large amounts ranging from 20 to 250 guilders. In some exceptional cases, the soldiers left behind large sums of up to over 1,000 guilders.

These large sums were typically from men who had served for several decades and had climbed to elevated officer positions. In total, the sum of inheritances left behind by the group of Swiss mercenaries in the KNIL for whom we were able to compile data from multiple Swiss and Dutch archives is 32,325 guilders. We know that in addition to the 1,490 deceased mercenaries for whom we were able to trace inheritances in the archives, another five hundred Swiss fighters died in Dutch service. We do not know, however, if they left any money behind, and if so, how much. Hence, the sum of roughly 32,000 guilders represents a minimum figure for the period from 1848 to 1914, during which roughly 5,700 Swiss mercenaries served in the KNIL.²²

As Francisca Hoyer’s work has recently revealed, both the British and the Dutch East India Companies regularly transferred inheritances from deceased employees in the Indies into the German princely states.²³ These transfers, however, seem to have occurred

¹⁹ *Bataviaasch Handelsblad*, 29 August 1860.

²⁰ Philipp Krauer, “Swiss Mercenaries in Dutch Services: A History of Complicity and Colonialism in Southeast Asia, 1848–1914” (PhD diss., ETH Zürich, 2021).

²¹ Heinrich Gagern and Friedrich Baldwin Gagern, *Das Leben des Generals Friedrich von Gagern* (Leipzig: C.F. Winter, 1856), 424; Emil Carthaus, *Aus dem Reich von Insulinde: Sumatra und der malaiische Archipel* (Leipzig: W. Friedrich, 1891), 168–70; Elias Haffter, *Briefe aus dem Fernen Osten*, 3. Aufl. (Frauenfeld: Huber, 1888); Heinrich Breitenstein, *21 Jahre in Indien. Aus dem Tagebuch eines Militärarztes. Dritter Theil: Sumatra* (Leipzig: Th. Grieben, 1902), 25; Andreas Zangger, “Patriotic Bonds and the Danger of Estrangement: Swiss Networks in Colonial South-East Asia, 1850–1930,” in *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from Its Margins*, ed. Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 104.

²² This data was compiled from KNIL registers in the Dutch national archives, registers in the Swiss Federal Archives, and from the files of Dutch consuls in Switzerland and Swiss consuls in the Dutch Indies. The correspondence concerning the fatalities can be found here: Swiss Federal Archives, Bern [hereafter BAR], BAR E2#1000/44#1100*- BAR E2#1000/44#1109*; and National Archives, The Hague [hereafter NL-HaNA], NL-HaNA, Consulaat Bern, 2.05.14.05, inv. nr. 34 & 35. See also Krauer, “Colonial Mercenaries,” 126–35.

²³ Hoyer, *Relations of Absence*, 247–61.

Table 1. Bequests in guilders left by 1,490 Swiss men in Dutch services, 1848–1914.

Sum	Number of men	Percentage
0–5	1,011	67.8%
5.1–10	148	9.9%
10.1–20	141	9.5%
20.1–30	47	3.2%
30.1–50	44	3.0%
50.1–100	45	3.0%
100–249	39	2.6%
250–500	7	0.5%
500–1,000	6	0.4%
1,000+	2	0.1%
Total	1,490	100%

only upon requests from relatives that were supported by their monarchs, who would instruct their consuls and ambassadors in Amsterdam to inquire. This seems to have remained the case until around the 1850s, when, as we shall see, various European powers established their own consulates in Java and thereby acquired easier access to information on their deceased citizens or subjects and their bequests. Accordingly, the number of inheritances transferred from the Indies to Europe prior to the mid-nineteenth century left only very fragmentary traces in the archives and are therefore difficult to calculate. If we restrict ourselves to the second half of the nineteenth century and assume that other foreign mercenary populations left, on average, similar amounts behind as the Swiss, we can roughly estimate how much inheritance money from the Dutch Indies was transferred to other German-speaking regions in Europe, as well as to France, Belgium, and additional countries. Based on Bossenbroek's estimates (see [Table 2](#)),²⁴ the non-Swiss Germanophone mercenary population in the KNIL between 1844 and 1909 consisted of roughly 12,400 men, which corresponds roughly to an estimate of 69,600 guilders worth of legacies. Belgium provided roughly 14,000 men, which amounts to an estimated 78,600 guilders left behind by fallen mercenaries; France: 3,800 men, 21,300 guilders; additional countries: 3,700 men, 20,800 guilders. Adding all these estimates to our calculations for the Swiss population, we arrive at an estimated grand total of 222,300 guilders that non-Dutch European mercenaries left between 1848 and 1914. As we will presently see, there is good reason to believe that not the entire sum, but most of it, was transferred to relatives in Europe.

4) Pensions

The fourth category of compensation is also important. It consists of pensions and temporary or indefinite benefits for injuries, honours, or sickness caused by active service. Soldiers were entitled to life-long annual pension payments if they had served for a certain number of years and were then discharged honourably. Until 1877, they had to serve for at least twenty years. Thereafter, requirements were relaxed in reaction to skyrocketing demands for mercenaries during the war against Aceh, and fighters were entitled to

²⁴ Bossenbroek, *Volk voor Indië*, 278.

Table 2. Estimated sum of bequests for all mercenaries, 1848–1914.

Nationalities	Number of mercenaries	(Estimated) sum of bequests
Swiss	5,700	32,000
Germans	12,400	69,600
Belgians	14,000	78,600
French	3,800	21,300
Others	3,700	20,800
Total	39,600	222,300

pensions after twelve years of duty. The rank and file were paid between around 72 guilders annually in the early nineteenth century and 320 guilders towards the end of the century. Sergeants' pensions increased from 180 to 420 guilders during the course of the century.²⁵ Higher-ranking officers such as captains or majors were entitled to sums of more than 1,000 guilders yearly.

Examining the data from our Swiss sample, we found, unsurprisingly, that the vast majority of pensions were paid in the last third of the nineteenth century, when entitlement requirements dropped from twenty to twelve years of active and honourable duty.²⁶

In total, out of some 5,700 Swiss mercenaries in Dutch service, at least 799 received pensions, often including additional benefits. Most payments ranged from 100 to 400 guilders a year.²⁷ In some exceptional cases, which we shall return to below, annual pension and benefit payments rose up to 1,400 guilders. In total, we found that the Dutch colonial state transferred about 1.5 million guilders to Swiss mercenaries between 1848 and 1909. Along with the Swiss, approximately 31,850 mercenaries from other European territories joined the KNIL during the same period.²⁸ Assuming that they received, on average, similar amounts of pension payments, we can extrapolate the results from Switzerland to these territories and estimate that in the course of the second half of the nineteenth century, the Dutch colonial state transferred between 8 and 9 million guilders to non-Dutch European KNIL-members across Europe.

In summary, then, if we add our estimates of inheritances, pensions, and benefit payments together, we find that the Dutch colonial government in the second half of the nineteenth century transferred up to 1,432,000 guilders to Swiss veterans and their heirs in Europe. Adding up all estimates for the entire non-Dutch European mercenary

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 353–6.

²⁶ For the period from 1864 to 1868, see NL-HaNA, Consulaat Bern, 2.05.14.05, inv. nr. 91; from January 1891 to March 1904, see NL-HaNA, Consulaat Genève Zwitserland, 2.05.14.12, inv. nr. 155–7. For the pensions in Thurgau from 1884 to 1914, see State Archives of the Canton of Thurgau, Frauenfeld, StATG 4'488'3; on the war commissioner of Basel, see State Archives of the Canton of Basel-City, Basel, StABS, Fremde Staaten Niederlande C 4; the national archives, see NL-HaNA, Consulaat Bern, 2.05.14.05; NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Stamboek Militairen KNIL Oost- en West-Indië, 2.10.50, inv. nr. 617–759; BAR E2#1000/44#1110*-1117*; on the state archives, see: State Archives of the Canton of Appenzell Ausserrhoden, Herisau, StAAR Ca.C12–45–11–03; State Archives of the Canton of Basel-Country, Liestal, StABL Niederlande NA 2049; State Archives of the Canton of Lucerne, Lucerne, StALU AKT 23/69 C & 70 A; State Archives of the Canton of Solothurn, Solothurn [hereafter StASO], StASO BG 29; State Archives of the Canton of Zug, Zug, StAZG CC VII. A Ausländisches, Schweizer in ausländischen Diensten; State Archives of the Canton of Zurich, Zurich, StAZH QI 139.3.

²⁷ In 1895, e.g., of 308 pensions paid out, only 8 were above 400. See NL-HaNA, Consulaat Genève, 2.05.14.12, inv. nr. 155 & 156.

²⁸ This estimate is based on Bossenbroek, *Volk voor Indië*, 123, 132, 161, 184, and 225.

population, we arrive at a minimum sum of 10 million guilders transferred from the Dutch East Indies to veterans and their heirs residing in European regions stretching from France in the west to present-day Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary in the east, and from Norway in the north to southern Switzerland.

This leads us to the next question: how did the Dutch manage to review these countless demands for inheritances, pensions, and benefits from all over Europe, and how did they transfer the money to those they deemed to be entitled?

From Southeast Borneo to Southeastern Switzerland – How Did It Get from “There” to “Here”?

The circulation of documents and payments between colonial Indonesia, the Netherlands, and multiple regions across Europe was managed by a peculiar form of transimperial private-public partnership that evolved over time. This joint venture built primarily on a vast network of Dutch ambassadors and consuls in various European polities. They played a crucial role in recruiting European men into the KNIL, as Martin Bossenbroek has shown in his landmark study.²⁹ As our research reveals, the same consuls and ambassadors also served as intermediaries between Dutch authorities and the heirs of deceased European mercenaries, and for veterans returning from the Indies. Many of them filed their requests for information or pensions through Dutch consuls in evolving nineteenth-century polities including the Kingdoms of Hannover, Prussia, Württemberg, and Bavaria; the Duchies of Braunschweig and Baden, the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg, the county of Hessen-Kassel, and the Swiss Federation.³⁰

The Dutch consuls and ambassadors interacted continuously with a variety of government agencies and private actors in their respective countries of residence. From the early nineteenth century until around 1850, former or acting military officers in Dutch service operated as intermediaries for young men from their countries of origin eager to join the KNIL and for returning veterans. These intermediaries had either served in the official Swiss regiments stationed in the Netherlands until 1829 or were members of German aristocratic military families who had continued to serve European monarchs in the early nineteenth century. These men provided contacts to Dutch officials or advice on how to approach Dutch authorities.³¹ In the case of Switzerland, we learn from veterans' diaries and correspondence how Swiss mercenary recruiters, who were employed by the Dutch until 1829, took on positions as Dutch consuls later on and advised returning veterans on how and where to get proper medical certificates and letters of

²⁹ Ibid., 182–9; Martin Bossenbroek, “Dickköpfe und Leichtfüsse. Deutsche im niederländischen Kolonialdienst des 19. Jahrhunderts,” in *Deutsche im Ausland-Fremde in Deutschland: Migration in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Klaus J. Bade (München: Beck, 1992), 249–54.

³⁰ The files for the Kingdom of Hannover, the Duchy of Braunschweig, and the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg are kept in the state archives of Lower Saxony. See e.g., Niedersächsisches Landesarchiv Abteilung Oldenburg, Oldenburg [hereafter NLA OL], NLA OL Best. 70 Nr. 3763–1 (Oldenburg); NLA OL Best. 31 -15–31 Nr. 25; Niedersächsisches Landesarchiv Abteilung Wolfenbüttel, Wolfenbüttel [hereafter NLA WO], NLA WO 26 Neu 1 Nr. 786; the files from the Kingdom of Württemberg and Duchy of Baden are managed through the Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg, see, e.g., files in Staatsarchiv Ludwigsburg PL 18 R 761, Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart E40/18 Bü 444; E 50/15 Bü 3; GU 108 Bü 43; Kingdom of Bavaria: Staatliche Archive Bayerns, Munich, BayHStA, Gesandtschaft Haag, 2666; County of Hessen: Hessisches Staatsarchiv Marburg, Marburg, HStAM Bestand 9 a Nr. 2537; HStAD Bestand G 21 A Nr. 574/23. For Switzerland see the holdings in BAR E2#1000/44#1113.

³¹ Karl Heinzen, *Reise Eines Teutschen Romantikers Nach Batavia* (Mannheim: Friedrich Wassermann, 1845), 9; Gagern and Gagern, *Das leben des Generals Friedrich von Gagern*, 423–4; Hermanus Amersfoort, *Koning En Kanton. De Nederlandse Staat En Het Einde van de Zwitserse Krijgsdienst Hier Te Lande 1814–1829* (Den Haag: Sectie Militaire Geschiedenis Landmachtstaf, 1988).

recommendation to apply for permission to draw their pensions in Switzerland.³² In the context of increasing numbers of mercenaries joining the KNIL in the 1870s, the Dutch appointed law firms and trust companies to oversee the influx of pension requests. Mercenary veterans too filed their requests more and more often not through old military hands, but rather through banking and trading firms such as Crivelli & Co., or in the Swiss case, Marquard & Co.³³

In addition to Dutch and non-Dutch diplomats in Europe, former military officers in Dutch services, private firms, local and regional government authorities, along with medical doctors, played an important role. Physicians issued certificates that documented why a given veteran's injuries disabled him from earning his own living, while municipal authorities forwarded the applications to the next higher government authorities, who would file the requests for benefits or rents with the Dutch colonial government.³⁴

Widening the scope beyond Europe, two additional groups of actors who shaped the evolution of this transimperial information and financial compensation network become visible. These were, firstly, European scientists in Dutch services. The Dutch depended on non-Dutch European auxiliaries not only for military conquest of the archipelago, but also for medical expertise and scientific exploration. Hence many of the naturalists and medical personnel in the empire who spoke French, German, Polish, Serbian and other languages came from many different countries in Europe.³⁵ We know from one of the Swiss members deployed by Dutch King Willem I to explore natural resources in his empire that these "foreigners" were often asked by families in their countries of origin to inquire into the fate and whereabouts of fellow countrymen who went missing in the KNIL.³⁶

Secondly, European merchants and consuls played a central role. In 1856, the Kingdom of Saxony and the Duchy of Baden established consulates in Java. The county of Hessen followed in 1860, and Switzerland and the Kingdom of Württemberg in 1863. The Habsburg Empire opened its consulate in 1880, Hamburg in 1884. The neighbouring colonial power of France, with its own colonies in Southeast Asia, had a consul in Batavia from the early modern period.³⁷

These European consuls' prime task in the Dutch Indies was to manage trade relations between their sovereigns and the Dutch Empire. A task at least equally important at times was to inquire into the fate and whereabouts of European mercenaries in KNIL whose relatives in Europe hadn't heard from them. Consuls regularly compiled so-called death lists of their compatriots for their governments. The consuls would compile these lists

³² Louis Wyrsh's diary in the state archives of the Canton of Nidwalden, entries 7 and 15 December 1832, State Archives of the Canton of Nidwalden, Stans [hereafter StaNW], StaNW P 29–3.

³³ On the banking house Marquard & Cie as a prime address for colonial pensioners living in Switzerland, see Letter from Consul General Suter-Vermeulen to the Swiss Federal Chancellery, Bern, 1 March 1874, BAR E2#1000/44#1100*. On Crivelli & Co. from Lucerne, Switzerland, see the notification from the State Chancellery of the Canton of Lucerne to the Swiss Federal Chancellery, 11 April 1874, in Joseph Melchior Ehrenbolger's record, BAR E2#1000/44#1111*.

³⁴ Louis Wyrsh's diary in the State Archives of the Canton of Nidwalden, entry 30 March 1833, StaNW P 29–3.

³⁵ Monique Ligtenberg, "Contagious Connections: Medicine, Race, and Commerce between Sumatra, New Guinea, and Frankfurt, 1879–1904," *Comparativ*, 31:5–6 (2022), 555–571; Andreas Weber, "Collecting Colonial Nature: European Naturalists and the Netherlands Indies in the Early Nineteenth Century," *BMGN–Low Countries Historical Review* 134:3 (26 September 2019), 72–95.

³⁶ Friedrich Horner, ed., "Briefe und Tagebuchskizzen des Dr. med. Ludwig Horner (1811–1838) aus Niederländisch Indien," Zürich 1926: 19–20.

³⁷ Correspondence on the accreditation of German consuls, see NL-HaNA 2.05.10.04, Gezantschap Duitse Bond, folders 6 and 34; on the importance of consulates for European small states, see Aryo Makko, *European Small States and the Role of Consuls in the Age of Empire* (Leiden: Brill Nijhoff, 2019), <https://brill.com/view/title/56144>.

by browsing through regularly published reports on KNIL casualties in Dutch colonial newspapers.³⁸

Generally speaking, this system grew out of the network of specialised individuals that Francisca Hoyer describes in her study about the eighteenth century.³⁹ Some veterans and heirs would turn to their rulers demanding that they advocate for their claims with Dutch authorities. Others would use private contacts with fellow mercenaries in the regular Swiss legions in the Netherlands, or to local innkeepers or individual merchants who specialised in managing mercenary claims. With the increasing importance of banks and law firms, the centralisation of benefits claims, and the establishment of consulates in quick succession from the 1850s onwards, the system became more institutionalised in the second half of the century, with more direct involvement from central states.

To be sure, it would be misleading to assume that this system enabling the constant transfer of inheritances and pensions, doctors' certificates, and benefits claims between continental Europe and colonial Indonesia always ran smoothly. But it worked, and thereby affected not only the lives of individuals and their families, but also various bureaucracies on multiple levels between Europe and Asia. However, not all participants in this system benefitted equally, as the next section will show.

What Difference Did It Make – and for Whom?

In comparison to the revenues derived from the global colonial trade, an estimated 10 million guilders of inheritance and pension payments might seem rather negligible.⁴⁰ If we change the scale from a macro to a micro perspective, however, it becomes apparent that these payments had a significant, albeit unequal, impact on the lives of individual mercenaries and both their legitimate and illegitimate family members. This is most obvious in the case of those mercenaries who had managed to make a career in the KNIL and thus received a correspondingly substantial pension. The best-known cases so far are of two Swiss men from old Catholic mercenary dynasties. Louis Wyrsh (1793–1858) had served from 1816 to 1832 in Java and southeast Borneo and risen to the rank of captain. After his return to Switzerland, he was knighted and received a medal of honour from the Dutch king for bravery and wounds he acquired during a battle in Borneo. This increased his yearly pension to 1,580 guilders, which enabled him to pursue an impressive career in Switzerland. He became a military commander during the short Swiss civil war in 1847 and remained the leader of his canton's government until his death in 1858. In 1848 he was elected to the commission that drafted the new republican constitution for the Swiss Federal State. The Dutch imperial welfare state, in other words, financed the career of one of modern Switzerland's "founding fathers." It is important, however, to mention a typical flipside of such "success stories": Like many European soldiers in Dutch colonial services, Wyrsh had lived with a native concubine in the Indies and fathered three children with her. He brought two of his children back to Switzerland. Their mother and youngest sibling remained in Borneo and hence did not benefit from Wyrsh's wealth and fame in Switzerland.⁴¹ The other remarkable case is former Swiss KNIL major Franz Josef Michael Letter (1800–1880). He drew an annual pension of 1,400 guilders

³⁸ For the lists compiled by Swiss consuls, see BAR E2#1000/44#1104*.

³⁹ Hoyer, *Relations of Absence*, 227–67.

⁴⁰ For example, the value of goods exported from the Dutch East Indies in 1870 amounted to more than 107 million guilders. See J. S. Furnivall, *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 171.

⁴¹ Bernhard C. Schär, "Switzerland, Borneo and the Dutch Indies: Towards a New Imperial History of Europe, c. 1770–1850," *Past & Present*, 8 February 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtab045>.

after returning to Switzerland in 1847.⁴² His pension paradoxically both boosted and prevented a political career in his post-military life. On the one hand, and similar to Wyrsch, the regular substantial payments allowed him to take on leading political offices in his canton, as these were poorly paid and their occupation thus required a certain amount of wealth.⁴³ On the other hand, in contrast to local regulations, it was forbidden at the national level to receive a pension from a foreign power while holding a national political office. Because Letter did not want to forego his pension, he refused to be elected to both the National Council (lower house) and the Council of States (upper house) of the Swiss Confederation. To make matters even more complicated, Letter also had to obtain permission from the Dutch authorities to hold political office if he did not want to lose his pension payment. As a result, Letter had to carefully navigate between local, national, and Dutch regulations and interests in order to advance his political career.⁴⁴

Dutch pensions not only financed exceptional careers in Europe, but could also enable remarkable wealth accumulation in the Indies among those who stayed on after their tour of duty ended. An example of this is Swiss veteran Heinrich Wieland. After twenty years of military labour (three of them in the Swiss regiments in Naples), he was honourably discharged in 1876. He used his savings and pension to run a government guest house (*pasanggrahan*) in the mild highlands of Central Java. Introducing new European vegetables as agricultural crops turned him and his family into influential figures in the region for several generations.⁴⁵

Obviously, Wyrsch, Letter, and Wieland were exceptional cases. The proportion of non-Dutch officers in the KNIL, as Gerke Teitler has pointed out, was only 8 percent in 1861, halved to 4 percent by 1871, and fell further in the following decades, oscillating between 1 and 3 percent.⁴⁶ But even if their numbers were small, there are bound to be other cases of Dutch colonial army veterans pursuing influential political careers in German, French, Belgian, and other European polities. To the best of our knowledge, however, they are still waiting for historians to reconstruct how they co-created modern Europe through their transimperial careers.⁴⁷

Overall, the Dutch colonial army welfare system was tailored more towards men and their families with non-aristocratic and non-bourgeois backgrounds. It offered only

⁴² NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Stamboeken Militairen KNIL Oost- en West-Indië, 2.10.50, inv. nr. 4, 1022.

⁴³ From 1853 to 1867, Letter was a colonel in the general staff of Switzerland and from 1859 to 1871 he served as state councillor of the canton of Zug; Michiel van Gulpen, *Vom «Kolonialsöldner» zum «obersten Magistrat». Die transnationale Karriere des Michael Letter von Zug im Kontext der kolonialen Verstrickungen der Schweiz im 19. Jahrhundert* (Master's thesis, University of Zurich, Zurich 2020); and Peter Müller-Grieshaber, "Letter, Franz Josef Michael," HLS-DHS-DSS.CH, accessed 6 November 2018, <http://www.hls-dhs-dss.ch/textes/d/D5768.php>.

⁴⁴ See van Gulpen, *Vom «Kolonialsöldner» zum «obersten Magistrat»*, 67–74.

⁴⁵ Joost Coté and Hugh O'Neill, *The Life and Work of Thomas Karsten* (Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura, 2017), 39–40; see also his "stamboek" entry: NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Stamboeken Militairen KNIL Oost- en West-Indië, 2.10.50, 139, Folio 10276.

⁴⁶ See Gerke Teitler, "The Mixed Company: Fighting Power and Ethnic Relations in the Dutch Colonial Army, 1890–1920," in *Colonial Armies in Southeast Asia*, ed. Karl Hack (London: Routledge, 2006), 148. A few non-Dutch mercenaries, however, did become naturalised and were therefore included in the statistics under Dutch. For another example of a stellar career as both KNIL officer and Swiss politician, see Bernhard C. Schär, "Löchrige Quellen und lückenhafte Erzählungen. Wie Ibu Silla aus Borneo die Gründung des Bundeestaates trotzdem mitprägte," in *Ausgeschlossen einflussreich Handlungsspielräume an den Rändern etablierter Machtstrukturen*, ed. Lisia Bürgi and Eva Keller (Basel: Schwabe Verlagsgruppe AG Schwabe Verlag, 2020), 121–43.

⁴⁷ Our notion of transimperial careering is loosely inspired by Lambert and Lester's idea of imperial careering, suggesting, however, analytically looking beyond particular national empires. David Lambert and Alan Lester, eds., *Colonial Lives across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

humble compensations that no one could live off.⁴⁸ However, as a glance at the archives reveals, even such small amounts could significantly alleviate the precarious living conditions of ex-mercenaries from the lower echelons of European societies. Johann Joseph Eng, for example, worked in a Swiss shoe factory after his return to Switzerland in 1873.⁴⁹ In that year, the factory owner personally approached the Dutch ambassador in Bern so that Eng could obtain his pension. In all likelihood, Eng received 140 guilders annually (approximately 290 Swiss francs) for the ensuing thirty years.⁵⁰ For a factory worker who earned on average between 3 and 5 francs a day in the 1870s, this was a substantial supplement.⁵¹ Emil von Arx provides another example of the impact of regular colonial payments. After less than two years in the KNIL, he was dismissed in 1871 because—according to his own statements—he had unintentionally shot himself in the left hand while guarding a prison. Whether this was an accident or rather an act of wilful self-mutilation to enforce his dismissal from service remains unknown.⁵² In any case, von Arx was released and returned to his hometown in Switzerland, where he helped as best as he could in his parents' bakery. His mutilated hand, however, severely handicapped him and he was unable to perform any heavy work. Since his parents were themselves impoverished, the local administration turned to the Swiss Federal Council requesting that they should seek a pension for von Arx from the Dutch government. As a result, von Arx received an annual gratification of 100 guilders at least until 1905.⁵³

In addition to impoverished returnees, numerous soldiers who remained in the Dutch East Indies after the end of their service also lived in poor conditions. According to the report of a committee appointed to inquire into poverty in Batavia in 1872, KNIL veterans constituted the bulk of the pool of “poor Europeans.” As Ulbe Bosma and Remco Raben have pointed out, this constellation was not limited to Batavia, but applied to all of Java.⁵⁴ This group probably also included numerous non-Dutch ex-mercenaries since they were allowed to settle without restrictions in the Dutch East Indies from 1871 onwards.⁵⁵ In these cases, too, a pension or gratification of at least 100 guilders could provide significant financial relief.

Even though pensions and allowances enabled veterans to lead a more independent life in either the colonies or Europe, they also had a disciplinary effect. Applicants for

⁴⁸ By comparison, the average wage of a Swiss industrial worker around 1870 was 3.5 Swiss francs (1.75 guilders) per day. Historische Statistik der Schweiz Online (HSSO), 2012, Table G.3b, <https://hssso.ch/2012/g/3b>.

⁴⁹ Letter from C. F. Bally to the Dutch Consul General, 5 January 1873, see NL-HaNA, Consulaat Bern, 2.05.14.05, inv. nr. 60.

⁵⁰ This assumption is based on the sources proving that Eng received his pension regularly between 1891 and 1904. NL-HaNA, Consulaat Geneve, 2.05.14.12.155 and NL-HaNA, Consulaat Geneve, 2.05.14.12.156.

⁵¹ On the wages of working-class people, see Gruner's seminal study: Erich Gruner, *Die Arbeiter in der Schweiz im 19. Jahrhundert soziale Lage, Organisation Verhältnis zu Arbeitgeber und Staat* (Berlin: Francke, 1968), 125.

⁵² Inflicting injuries on oneself was already a common method to get discharged from military service in Napoleon's armies. See Karl J. Mayer, *Napoleons Soldaten: Alltag in der Grande Armée*, Lizenzausg Geschichte erzählt (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2008), 103–4.

⁵³ On von Arx, see his files in NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Stamboeken Militairen KNIL Oost- en West-Indië, 2.10.50, inv. nr. 164, Folio 15005; StASO BG 29; and BAR E#1000/44/1110*.

⁵⁴ On pauperism among Europeans in the Dutch East Indies, see Ulbe Bosma and Remco Raben, *Being “Dutch” in the Indies: A History of Creolisation and Empire, 1500–1920*, trans. Wendie Shaffer, vol. 116, Ohio University Research in International Studies, Southeast Asia Series (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 228–44.

⁵⁵ Before 1871, residence permits for non-Dutch Europeans were linked to strict criteria; see Ulbe Bosma, “Sailing through Suez from the South: The Emergence of an Indies-Dutch Migration Circuit, 1815–1940,” *International Migration Review* 41:2 (2007), 517, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2007.00077.x>. Between 1835 and 1870, a mere 250 non-Dutch ex-military personnel applied to remain in the Dutch East Indies. See the database “Toelatingsbesluiten van de gouverneur-generaal (in Rade) 1819–1875,” 31 July 2020, <http://www.iisg.nl/migration/europese-immigratie.php>.

gratifications had to submit a certificate of good repute to obtain some monies. Moreover, the veterans forfeited their pensions during the period of a prison sentence.⁵⁶

The colonial cash flows influenced not only the lives of mercenaries, but also their relatives and families. How direly some of the latter needed the mercenaries' money can be seen from the fact that even the smallest sums were demanded. Johannes and Maria Ritschard, for example, demanded the payment of 6 guilders belonging to their son, who died in Sumatra in 1890, since they were—as the local police stated—“impecunious and old.”⁵⁷ Jules Vuilleumier, to give another example, asked the government of the Canton of Neuchâtel to initiate the procurement of 2.81 guilder belonging to his brother who had passed away in Samarang (current day Semarang).⁵⁸ Apart from 6.53 guilders, mercenary Karl Schmid also left behind six siblings and “a destitute mother who will be grateful for the sending of the bequest,” as the state chancellery of the Canton of Zurich wrote in 1881.⁵⁹

Moreover, especially when the bereaved relatives were firmly dependent on the welfare support of their municipality, local authorities insisted on the acquisition of the inheritance. The case of bricklayer Caspar Odermatt provides a vivid example: Without informing anyone, he disappeared in 1858, leaving behind his wife and two children in Stans, Canton of Nidwalden, to join the KNIL. What we may assume, however, is that Odermatt concealed his civilian status when he was recruited, as married men were only eligible for enlistment with the written consent of their spouses.⁶⁰ On 19 February 1860 he died on Java, and it took eight years for the news of his death to reach his relatives. His estate of 3.33 guilders, however, did not flow straight to the widow and her children. The poor-relief administration of Stans, which mediated for the family in this matter, claimed the right to pocket the money itself, since they had financially supported the widow and her children in the meantime.⁶¹

Finally, reflecting on payments to bereaved families brings us to an additional point: Swiss and European societies more generally were structured not only by marked social inequalities that incited impoverished men to risk their lives in pursuit of income and manly prestige in colonial services. These societies were also structured by gender inequalities that severely restricted women's rights to decide their own fate if their husbands ran off to the colonies and died there. They remained subjected to their husbands, or fathers, and also faced welfare regulations that disadvantaged them.

For instance, in 1900, the welfare office of Rüslikon, Canton of Zurich, Switzerland, approached the Dutch government asking whether Elisabeth Schwarzenbach-Staubli, the widow of the former colonial mercenary Jakob Gottlieb Schwarzenbach, could continue to receive his annual pension of 760 Swiss francs. Despite her precarious situation, the Dutch government's answer was negative. A widow's pension was only granted if the husband died during his service. Consequently, Mrs. Schwarzenbach not only lost her husband, but also her modest income.⁶² Likewise, the widow of Johann Ulrich Studach (she is

⁵⁶ See, e.g., the case of Bernhard Koller described in a letter from the Dutch Consul General to the Mayor of Elay, 9 October 1872, NL-HaNA, Consulaat Bern, 2.05.14.05, inv. nr. 89; Letter from the Dutch Consul General to the Mayor of Elay, 21 May 1867, NL-HaNA, Consulaat Bern, 2.05.14.05, inv. nr. 89; see also the dossier on Schärer, in NL-HaNA, Consulaat Bern, 2.05.14.05, inv. nr. 91.

⁵⁷ “*vermögenslos und alt*,” letter from the Directorate of Police of the Canton of Bern to the Swiss Federal Chancellery, 7 July 1891, BAR E2#1000/44#1109*.

⁵⁸ Letter from the State Chancellery of the Canton of Neuchâtel to the Swiss Federal Chancellery, 7 March 1881, BAR E2#1000/44#1117*.

⁵⁹ “*eine dürftige Mutter, welche für die Einsendung des Nachlass dankbar sein wird*,” letter from the State Chancellery of the Canton of Zurich to the Swiss Federal Chancellery, 28 June 1882, BAR E2#1000/44#1115*.

⁶⁰ For the conditions of admission, see BAR E2#1000/44#2349*.

⁶¹ See the files on Odermatt in BAR E2#1000/44#1115* and NL-HaNA, Consulaat Bern, 2.05.14.05, inv. nr. 34.

⁶² NL-HaNA, Gezantschap Zwitterland tot 1916, 2.05.10.21, inv. nr. 108.

not mentioned by name) requested at least half of the gratification that her late husband would have been entitled to for the current year. As she lived in poor circumstances, “which [. . .] was mainly caused by the prolonged illness of her husband,” both the cantonal and federal governments supported her—but to no avail. The Dutch authorities rejected her request.⁶³

Not only Dutch, but also Swiss laws disadvantaged women’s rights to inheritance. This was especially the case for married sisters and mothers of deceased mercenaries. If they wanted to raise any claims, they needed their husbands to act as legal guardians, as the following case shows: In 1869, the mercenary Johann Bollinger passed away in Samarang. One year later, his brother and sister, who lived in Switzerland, were identified as his legitimate heirs. However, it took another three years before his estate was transferred. According to the Dutch consul general in Berne, the payment was delayed “because a married woman is listed as a co-heiress and therefore the co-signature of her husband is indispensable.”⁶⁴ Only after the responsible Swiss official had obtained the necessary signature of her husband could the transaction finally be settled.⁶⁵

Clearly then, the Dutch demand for colonial mercenaries, as well as the system of welfare payments, entailed unequal risks and offered unequal opportunities for men and women from the European lower classes. To get a fuller understanding of how this colonial army welfare system affected men and women, its class and gender-specific hierarchies must be analysed in light of its racial dimensions. These become visible if we turn to the fate of so-called *nyais*: colonised women, primarily of Javanese, Chinese, or Indo-European descent, who until the 1860s mostly were slaves and served as “housekeepers” and concubines for European men in the Dutch Indies. These women usually found themselves empty handed when the mercenaries who had provided for them passed away. Only if they had been officially married were the *nyai* eligible to inherit. However, this was rarely the case, for two major reasons. First, the lower ranks were only allowed to marry with a special permit from the Dutch East Indies’ government, and they had trouble covering the high costs to process the legal recognition of their relationship. On the other hand, it seems that a number of soldiers also refrained from marrying so that the *nyais* could not raise any legal claims against them.⁶⁶ As long as they were not married, a soldier could expel “his” *nyai* and their children from the barracks at any time, and he had no financial obligations once he returned to Europe without them at the end of his service.⁶⁷ What further consequences this could have for a *nyai* is shown by the case of the deceased mercenary Friedrich Schärer. While his legally recognised minor daughter, who was living in the Dutch East Indies, obtained half of 205.68 guilders, her mother is not mentioned at all in the probate proceedings. Either she had already passed

⁶³ “welche [. . .] vorzüglich durch die längere Krankheit ihres Mannes herbeigeführt wurde,” letter from the State Chancellery of the canton of St. Gallen to the Federal Chancellery, 19 March 1887, BAR E#1000/44/1117*.

⁶⁴ “weil da eine verheiratete Frau als Miterbin figurirt und daher die Mitunterzeichnung ihres Ehemannes unumgänglich ist,” [emphasis by S.V.], letter from the Dutch Consul General Suter-Vermeulen to Gottfried Keller, 30 April 1873, NL-HaNA, Consulaat Bern, 2.05.14.05, inv. nr. 34.

⁶⁵ On Bollinger’s inheritance, check the corresponding files in NL-HaNA, Consulaat Bern, 2.05.14.05, inv. nr. 34, BAR E2#1000/44#1103*, and BAR E2#1000/44#1110*. The official in charge was the renowned writer Gottfried Keller, famous for his novels such as *Der grüne Heinrich*. He had advanced the amount from his own purse, since he mistakenly assumed that the transaction would be settled quickly.

⁶⁶ This was the case of Louis Wyrsh’s *nyai*, most likely named Silla. Wyrsh brought two of their children back to Switzerland and left Silla in Borneo; see Schär, “Switzerland, Borneo and the Dutch Indies.”

⁶⁷ See Hanneke Ming, “Barracks-Concubinage in the Indies, 1887–1920,” *Indonesia* 35:35 (1983), 65–94, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3350866>; and Liesbeth Hesselink, “Prostitution: A Necessary Evil, Particularly in the Colonies: Views on Prostitution in the Netherlands Indies,” in *Indonesian Women in Focus*, ed. Elsbeth Locher-Scholten and Anke Niehof (Netherlands: Foris, 1987), 205–24; Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, repr. with a new preface (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 48.

away before Schärer or she was—as appears more likely—not married to him. Anyhow, the other half of the inheritance instead was sent to Schärer’s mother, who dwelt in the canton of Bern in Switzerland.⁶⁸

In contrast, Johanna Engelina Heim had a better lot. In 1862, she married ordinary colonial mercenary Heinrich Furrer in Soerakarta (Surakarta), with whom she had conceived a son out of wedlock two years earlier.⁶⁹ Presumably, Heim was a *nyai*, as European women from the colonial upper class did not usually consort with rank-and-file soldiers.⁷⁰ Her marriage to Furrer, however, endowed her with additional rights, so that she and her child were entitled to receive half of the inheritance, 109 guilders. The Dutch authorities held the other half back until eligible relatives in Switzerland could be found. Whether they could identify anyone is not documented further. If not, the two heirs would ultimately have been awarded the entire inheritance according to the law of the Dutch East Indies.⁷¹ This was precisely the fate of Ms. Doro Sadia Ronoprodjo. She was the *nyai* or wife of Belgian captain C.H.A.F. Catenius, who passed away in 1880. He had sent two of their daughters to be educated and live with his relatives in Belgium. After he died, the Dutch colonial authorities instructed the Dutch ambassador in Antwerp to inquire into the whereabouts of Catenius’s daughters. Once he had found them, they received their fathers’ full inheritance of 376, 29 guilders. Their illiterate mother in far-away Surakarta was made to consent to this transfer of money. She signed with an “x”.⁷²

The fate of *nyais* and concubines in general is the most poorly documented in the archives, since European men usually tried to keep their existence secret.⁷³

Conclusion

Examining nineteenth-century European colonial states as multinational employers and early welfare providers opens up several exciting new avenues for future research.

Firstly, by following the transimperial career trajectories of several million soldiers and mercenaries who fought to expand European rule in Africa and Asia allows us to step out of narrowly conceived national and Anglo-centric frameworks in imperial studies and global history. Studying the remarkable cross-border interplay between multiple local, regional, national, and colonial bureaucracies, along with private service providers including banks, law firms, and medical doctors, gives us new insights into how vast regions within and without Europe structurally integrated into an interconnected world that was heavily shaped, but not determined, by national empires.

Secondly, zooming in on the lives of these men and their legitimate and illegitimate family members allows us to combine social and economic history with intersectional approaches within the framework of global history. Hence, studying the fate of these men and the people around them reveals how the lower strata of European societies played an active yet unequal role in violent imperial expansion. While imperial military labour markets held opportunities for sub-bourgeois men striving for social mobility and

⁶⁸ On probate proceedings, see letter from the Swiss Consul in Rotterdam to Swiss Federal Chancellery, 30 July 1890, BAR E2#1000/44#1109*.

⁶⁹ For the wedding, see *Samarangsch Advertentie-Blad*, 19 December 1862.

⁷⁰ For a profound analysis of the concubinage in the KNIL in general, see Ming, “Barracks-Concubinage in the Indies,” 66; and Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, 48.

⁷¹ On the inheritance as well the legally recognised child, see BAR E2#1000/44#1107*.

⁷² Pension Meijssies Catenius, NL-HaNA, Nederlands embassy in België (en Luxemburg), 2.05.43, 225: folders 5 & 8.

⁷³ Durba Ghosh, “Making and Un-Making Loyal Subjects: Pensioning Widows and Educating Orphans in Early Colonial India,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 31:1 (1 January 2003), 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/714002216>; Eric L. Jones, *Wives, Slaves, and Concubines: A History of the Female Underclass in Dutch Asia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010).

strong masculine identities, they also held considerable risks: half of the European mercenaries in the KNIL died. Most others received only modest compensations for their services, which secured immense profits for upper-class actors involved in the Dutch Empire. Moreover, European mothers, sisters, or wives could, under certain circumstances, certainly benefit from Dutch imperial welfare services, but not to the same degree as men. Women were subjected to patriarchal laws and regulations, including those that prevented them from receiving or administering estates from their deceased sons in Dutch services. However, European women had more rights within this system than colonised and often enslaved women in the Dutch Indies who served European mercenaries as concubines (*nyai*) and quite often had out of wedlock children with them. They had no claims to estates or pensions from the soldiers with whom they lived.

This article focuses on European soldiers exclusively. We know, however, that most soldiers in colonial armies were recruited from among colonised societies. How and to what extent they and their relatives managed to demand welfare payments from colonial governments similar to those of their white European counterparts is an open question. Insights from British and French colonial armies seem to indicate that only in the context of World Wars I and II, when European nations depended on colonised soldiers to protect their metropolises, did colonised soldiers gain enough bargaining power to demand equal treatment.⁷⁴ Yet, given that the Dutch colonial army relied heavily on Southeast Asian soldiers throughout all of the nineteenth-century wars, the question of the agency of these fighters constitutes a pressing desiderate for future research.⁷⁵

In sum, then, studying European empires as multinational employers and (modest) welfare providers in a transimperial framework allows us to study the global connections and inequalities that unfolded in vast spaces including the European hinterland and Southeast Asia. It becomes apparent how European working-class men and women as well as colonised and often enslaved men and women in Asia share a connected history. This history opened up and closed off vastly different opportunities for them, thereby affecting disparate groups such as impoverished mothers in rural Europe and exploited concubines in the Dutch Indies in ways that are both part of an overarching history and simultaneously have vastly unequal effects to this day.

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⁷⁴ Lekh Nath Paudel, "Remittances and the Reconfiguration of Rural Finance in Nepal (1900–1960)," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 54:4 (1 June 2022), 822–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X221092777>; Mann, *Native Sons*, 123–5, 133–4, 137, 184–7; Schmitt, "The Warfare–Welfare Nexus in French African Colonies in the Course of the First and Second World War."

⁷⁵ No mention of this in the otherwise magnificent new authoritative book by Petra Groen et al., *Krijgsgeweld en kolonie: Opkomst en ondergang van Nederland als koloniale mogendheid, 1816–2010*, 1st ed. (Amsterdam: Boom, 2021).

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