CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Swiss Tools of Empire

This book tells the story of about 5,800 Swiss mercenaries who served in the Dutch colonial army between 1848 and 1914—the period when the Dutch Empire eventually established a vast colonial state within the far-flung Malay Archipelago.[1] These mercenaries did not build the colonial empire on their own, but they made an essential contribution to its violent expansion and maintenance. At times, every tenth European in the ranks of the *Koninklijk Nederlandsch-Indisch Leger* (Dutch colonial army; henceforth KNIL)[2] was Swiss. Considering this extensive commitment, the question arises as to why so many citizens of a small central European country engaged in establishing the Dutch colonial empire.

Drawing on Daniel Headrick's widely received *Tools of Empire*, Dutch historian Martin Bossenbroek emphasised in 1992 that the most crucial tools of nineteenth-century Dutch expansion were the "living tools", i.e. the colonial soldiers. However, recruiting these forces posed a significant challenge for a relatively small country with limited demographic resources like the Netherlands.[3] To fill their ranks with a sufficient number of soldiers, the KNIL, therefore, had to resort to two options. On the one hand, they raised non-European troops from their own colonies, mainly in the areas of present-day Indonesia, but partly also in West Africa.[4] However, racial prejudices, cultural differences and, not least, the fear of rebellion, as occurred in British India in 1857 when Indian soldiers of the English East India Company's army almost drove the British from the subcontinent, prompted them to pursue a second option at the same time. In addition to non-Europeans, they looked out for young men from other European countries who were willing to offer their military labour in exchange for money in what can be characterised as a transimperial military labour market. In other words: they recruited mercenaries.[5]

In doing so, the KNIL continued a strategy that had previously been followed by the Dutch government, the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, henceforth VOC) and most other charter companies. From the sixteenth century onwards, Dutch rulers had been employing Swiss mercenary regiments to fight wars in Europe, and the VOC recruited c. 700,000 employees from all over Europe, including Switzerland, to build, manage and expand their merchant empire.[6] Nonetheless, it was only at the beginning of the twentieth century when the military penetration of the archipelago largely came to an end, and the KNIL command changed its tactics from large combat units to small mobile columns consisting of Javanese and "Ambonese" soldiers led by European officers, that the

recruitment of European mercenaries became less important. In the previous hundred years, however, non-Dutch European "foreigners" made up roughly 40 per cent of the KNIL's European troops. In absolute numbers, this amounted to 70,000 mercenaries from the territories of present-day Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland who were recruited between 1816 and 1909.[7]

Whereas a few scholars have already scrutinised the role of Dutch and non-European ("indigenous") soldiers in the nineteenth-century KNIL,[8] this is the first large-scale study to shed light on the hitherto broadly neglected category of European "foreigners" by taking a sample of approximately 5,800 Swiss mercenaries as a case in point,[9] with the aim of examining mercenaries as agents of historical entanglements and to address a wide range of questions: How did the Swiss mercenaries support the Dutch authorities in maintaining and enforcing their colonial power? In what ways did they interact with the local population and their comrades? To what extent did they contribute to constructing transregional or transimperial networks and infrastructures, which allowed the Dutch to recruit men from large parts of Europe continuously or to provide veterans with pensions? Furthermore, how did these military careers shape modern Switzerland's economic, social and cultural history?

Although the spotlight on Swiss mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies excludes the vast majority of colonial mercenaries from other European countries and leaves out the West Indies as an equally important space in the history of Dutch colonialism, the focus on these "Swiss Tools of Empire" in the Malay Archipelago nevertheless serves particularly well for a more thorough investigation for several reasons.[10] To begin with, highlighting the role of colonial mercenaries takes us beyond the immediate confines of the Dutch colonial empire and helps shed light on its broader pan-European aspects. In recent years, such an approach, which takes empires as a starting point but consciously transcends their boundaries, has been labelled "transimperial", distinguishing it from transnational or translocational approaches that rely on the nation-state or other historical political entities. As pointed out by Bernhard C. Schär, such a transimperial approach helps us to recognise that the European hinterland served as "multi-imperial service and resource zones" for colonial powers since service providers such as bankers, politicians, lawyers, doctors, sailors, and merchants from other European countries significantly facilitated the expansion of the Dutch colonial empire.[11] The KNIL ultimately benefitted in recruiting mercenaries from being embedded within the centuries-old transimperial military labour market structures.

Secondly, it enables us to enhance our knowledge of the Dutch Empire's colonial repercussions on other European nations without formal colonial possessions. While some recent works have shed light on several such transimperial

connections, they have primarily been limited to agents who belong to a "global bourgeoise" or religious circles: scientists, merchants, missionaries, travellers and other members from Europe's globally connected (semi-)urban middle- and upper-class societies.[12] However, since the majority of the mercenaries originated from poorer urban and rural backgrounds, their examination, in contrast, allows us to gain a broader understanding of colonialism and its impact on micro-social communities beyond the nineteenth-century bourgeoise classes.

Thirdly, by limiting the scope to the second half of the nineteenth century up to World War I, attention is given not only to the phase of expansive military developments in the Dutch East Indies as highlighted at the outset but also to the early years of the nascent Swiss federal state founded in 1848. In doing so, it sheds new light on the connection between colonialism and nation-states without formal colonial possessions since modern Switzerland was built through its profound social, economic, and epistemic involvements in the broader phenomenon of European colonialism even though it never possessed any colonies of its own. Finally, while research on "Swiss colonial history" has so far focused mainly on economic and cultural entanglements, this book further demonstrates that acts of extreme violence, sexual exploitation and colonial racism should also be part of the national historiography.

Examining these Swiss mercenaries, therefore, allows us to better understand the larger European dimension of colonialism, beyond the dichotomy of metropolis and colony and beyond imperial borders.

State of Research

This study draws on and contributes to three overlapping fields of research, attempting to connect different historiographies from the Netherlands, Indonesia and Switzerland, namely *New Military History*, *New Imperial History* and *History of Migration*.[13]

New Military History

As a history of mercenaries, the present inquiry ties in with the broad field of military history, or more precisely, with the subfield of *New Military History*. While this current is no longer quite as "new" as its name suggests—it already took roots in the 1960s—, it still helps distinguish itself from a supposedly "old" or "traditional" military history, whose main subjects are primarily great commanders, weaponry, battles, tactics, and logistics. However, since *New Military History* defines itself mainly by what it is not, it lacks a clear identity, subsuming a "hotchpotch" of the

most diverse topics.[14] What most of the works that label themselves as *New Military History* have in common, though, is their openness to approaches grounded in social and cultural history. Taken together, they opt for a "bottom-up perspective", addressing questions about the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of warfare and violence, gender-specific implications of the military milieu, and the sexuality and everyday life of soldiers and their social environment.[15]

This approach is also echoed in two bodies of literature that are of particular relevance to this inquiry. The first concerns the historiography of Swiss mercenaries. Hundreds of thousands of Swiss soldiers served foreign European monarchs from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century.[16] This intense involvement had a decisive influence on Switzerland's political, economic and social history. Until the 1970s, however, research primarily focused on heroic deeds, acts of bravery or their importance in the process of forging a national identity.[17] It was not until the last quarter of the twentieth century that an increasing number of works addressed economic and social dimensions. They examined, for example, not only how pensions allowed individual families to accumulate enormous wealth, hold high office for generations and forego collecting taxes but also the crucial role of women within "family military enterprises" as managing directors and head recruiters.[18] In addition to these works focusing on local elites, further studies have elucidated the rank-and-file mercenaries of such regiments.[19] Ultimately, following an international historiographical trend towards the "transnationalisation" of national narratives, there have also been increasing efforts to synthesise the numerous case studies and to analyse how Switzerland was involved in transregional European "markets of violence", and to what extent this position, surrounded by monarchs, shaped the loose structure of the Old Confederation on the territory of present-day Switzerland.[20]

Despite the broad scope and undisputable originality of these recent works, it is striking that this body of literature suffers from two fundamental conceptual limitations. Firstly, it confines the analytical framework of Swiss mercenary historiography temporally almost exclusively to the period prior to 1800. Secondly, it remains Eurocentric: it neither takes into account the colonial rivalries of the European powers in the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans, which shaped the demand for Swiss mercenaries in the European mainland, nor does it examine the extra-European theatres of war where numerous Swiss fought for colonial powers.

In their seminal contributions on the French Foreign Legion, however, Peter Huber and Christian Koller proved that Swiss mercenaryism was a "mass phenomenon" well into the twentieth century.[21] Even if exact figures on national affiliation cannot be determined due to the anonymous entry into the Legion as well as the restrictive access to archives, Koller estimates that 30,000 to 40,000 Swiss served as legionaries for the French Empire in Africa, Asia, Europe and Mexico from 1831 to 1962.[22] Moreover, Koller's research also provides valuable insights into the

self-image of these mercenaries. Focusing on the legionaries' self-testimonies, Koller convincingly demonstrates that they developed a shared sense of camaraderie that blurred the social and cultural differences within the Legion. This collective identity was soaked in an attitude of "European superiority", which was both formed and challenged in demarcation from an extra-European "Other".[23]

With their works, Koller and Huber stand at the threshold of the second body of literature, namely that of the historiography of the colonial armies. In recent years, numerous publications have appeared that take a closer look at the colonial armies of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Michelle Moyd, for example, has made an essential contribution to the history of the so-called "Askaris" in the German *Schutztruppe*, which also provides a critical theoretical foundation for the analysis of colonial armies in general.[24] Additionally, Erica Wald offeres a substantial social examination of the life of British colonial soldiers in the barracks of South Asia.[25] Kate Imy's detailed exploration of the British Indian Army highlights how the army enforced religious and racial divisions; and Heather Streets-Salter, a few years prior, released an extensive work on martial races, masculinity, and imperial culture in the British Indian Army.[26] The anthology by Tanja Bührer, Christian Stachelbeck, and Dierk Walter, focusing on imperial wars from 1500 to the present, is equally vital for understanding colonial military forces.[27]

With regard to the KNIL, Martin Bossenbroek's comprehensive work forms an important reference point for this book because it extrapolates the recruited nations and its thorough depiction of the motives, fears and concerns of the Dutch recruiting authorities.[28] Another significant source is a recently published book called *Krijgsgeweld en kolonie*, in which Petra Groen, Anita van Dissel, Mark Loderichs, Rémy Limpach, and Thijs Brocades Zaalberg, for the first time, provide a comprehensive analysis of the KNIL in the Dutch East and West Indies.[29] In this respect, their work represents the culmination of almost forty years of critical engagement with the history of the KNIL, building on contributions on African, Javanese or "Ambonese" soldiers,[30] colonial warfare,[31] barracks concubinage[32] and military administration.[33]

Despite the diversity of the scholarship on the KNIL, a comprehensive account of the actions, experiences and perceptions of non-Dutch European soldiers is still lacking. In analysing micro-historical cases of single mercenaries, however, several articles have already indicated that such an investigation could provide valuable insights. Thomas Bürgisser, for example, tells the story of the farmer's son Arnold Egloff, who succumbed to his wanderlust in 1889 and enlisted with the KNIL to travel to Java, from where he regularly reported on his life in the barracks in letters to his parents.[34] Following the traces of Swiss mercenary Louis Wyrsch, Bernhard C. Schär discusses the influence Wyrsch's Asian concubine Silla had on Swiss history and why such subaltern voices have hardly been heard until now.[35] Andreas Zangger, to name another example, reconstructs what motivated the offspring of

a wealthy Swiss family to join the KNIL in 1858 and how he tried in vain to escape from there again.[36]

Furthermore, an extensive examination of nineteenth-century colonial mercenaries provides new impulses to the discussion revolving around the various facets of (non-)physical colonial violence in recent years. Only recently, for example, a project group consisting of researchers from the three Dutch institutes KITLV, NIMH and NIOD published their first findings concerning the question of the extent to which the KNIL systematically used acts of "extreme violence".[37] By using the concept of extreme violence, the authors refer, on the one hand, to acts violating the core of international humanitarian law, which was already common at the time; on the other hand, to acts of violence carried out beyond direct combat operations without military necessity against the civilian population or fighters of the Indonesian army.[38] Undoubtedly, this concept has its shortcomings—Roel Frakking and Anne van Mourik, for instance, rightly warned that it could evoke the idea that, alongside extreme transgressive violence, there is also its twin "accepted violence".[39] Notwithstanding, authors such as Petra Groen, Tom Menger, Michelle Gordon and Susanne Kuss demonstrated that it is yielding to extend the time period of this concept to the *fin de siècle*, as it allows for an analytical grasp of physical acts of violence considered controversial even in the eyes of contemporaries when they were directed against "white" people.[40] Ultimately, one must bear in mind that colonial violence was more than the mere exercise of extreme physical force; it shaped everyday colonial life in manifold ways—be it as threats of violence, the exercise of coercion or in the form of epistemic violence.[41] Drawing on these discussions, the present book highlights the hitherto neglected transimperial dimension of these acts of colonial violence from a bottom-up perspective.

New Imperial History

By elucidating global entanglements reaching from the Dutch East Indies to the European hinterland, this study also can be placed in the realm of *New Imperial History*. Whilst the definition of what *New Imperial History* stands for is extensive, the bulk of these works share the approach of conceiving colonial empires as a multitude of networks between the colonies and metropolises in which people, objects and ideas circulated. In this respect, cultural history is given a higher priority than conventional narratives of political or economic history.[42] Furthermore, through placing the metropole and the colonies in the same analytical field, as Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper have famously called for,[43] these approaches seek to overcome conventional narratives according to which history unfolded in "national containers", as well as Eurocentric beliefs that ideas, knowledge and culture diffused from Europe to the world.[44] Embracing these assumptions, in the past two decades, a rich body of literature has provided fruitful insights into the British, Belgian, French,

German, and Japanese Empires.[45] In the Netherlands, this new imperial paradigm was also reflected in various works that located Dutch society in multiple global networks and examined the manifold colonial repercussions on the metropolis.[46]

However, several scholars have recently warned that it is insufficient to merely broaden the field of analyses from a national framework to an imperial one while continuing to treat colonial history as a "national affair". Sebastian Conrad, for example, bemoaned in 2018 that only "in the past few years have scholars seriously taken up the challenge of recreating a fuller, more comprehensive picture of the transborder interactions and global structures that shaped the colonial era".[47] In a similar vein, Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé criticise Stoler and Cooper's methodological approach, saying that although it is highly innovative, it still revolves solely around "intra-imperial processes". As a paradoxical result, national history has been transnationalised, whereas the history of Empires has been nationalised.[48]

How yielding it is to look beyond imperial borders has recently been shown by various studies on different colonial empires—be it in South Asia, the Caribbean or the Pacific.[49] David Arnold, for instance, reminds us that British colonial endeavours were rarely "purely" British but transimperial, involving the expertise and resources of outsiders from multiple nations.[50] Similarly, a number of scholars such as Marieke Bloembergen and Martijn Eickhoff, Karwan Fatah-Black, Francisca Hoyer, Jos Gommans, Susan Legêne, Monique Ligtenberg, Tom Menger and Bernhard C. Schär, have transgressed the spatial and lingual boundaries of the Dutch Empire.[51]

This book likewise aims to provide an example of how the Dutch Empire spread beyond its imperial borders into the European hinterland. By shedding light on these transimperial connections, it ties in with the recent historiography on "colonialism from the margins", a field of research that has been distinctively influenced by *Postcolonial Studies*, *New Imperial History* and *Global History*.[52] Taking Switzerland as a case in point, numerous scholars have not only illuminated the role of Swiss actors and institutions as plantation owners,[53] settlers,[54] soldiers,[55] missionaries,[56] colonial merchants[57] or natural scientists[58] in colonial settings around the world but also the economic and cultural repercussions of these colonial entanglements on financiers of the slave trade,[59] visitors to ethnological shows,[60] professors of "racial science",[61] readers of children's books,[62] or recipients of commodity racism in Switzerland.[63] With regard to the Dutch East Indies, Andreas Zangger's pioneering book *Koloniale Schweiz* deserves special mention, as it provides an important basis for further research into relations between the Dutch East Indies and Switzerland. Examining the social and economic history of Swiss merchants and plantation owners in Sumatra and Singapore, he reconstructs global networks of the Swiss bourgeois elite and illustrates how, on the one hand, they fitted in as part of the colonial elite, and on the other hand, they continuously sought to preserve an "authentic Swiss identity".[64]

History of Labour Migration

In between these two fields of research—and in many ways overlapping with them—lies the historiography of labour migration. It is debatable whether soldiering should be classified as labour since it involves killing or the exercise of other types of extreme violence.[65] According to Erik-Jan Zürcher, however, two relevant reasons exist for considering the soldiers' activity as work. Firstly, soldiers spent much more time in barracks than on campaigns, where they also carried out other tasks, such as building infrastructure. Secondly, if war is waged successfully, surplus value is created for states and their elites through territorial gains or economic advantages.[66] Even more than regular professional soldiers, mercenaries embodied job seekers in a labour market.[67] They weighed different options against each other and signed up where the overall offer of pay, lodging and conditions of service was most attractive.[68]

To this end, soldiers and mercenaries had to travel to where the work needed to be done. While there were still numerous job opportunities in Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century, they increasingly shifted to extra-European spaces in the second half of the century.[69] Dutch historian Ulbe Bosma estimates that around 6.5 million colonial soldiers left Europe in the period from 1846 to 1940. Surprisingly, however, these migration flows did not find their way into the European migration statistics of the nineteenth century.[70]

This also holds true for Switzerland.[71] A major reason for this lacuna lies in an overly narrow and linear concept of migration, which only focuses on one-sided and permanent settlement emigration without considering alternative forms of migration, such as circular migration or temporary sojourns abroad.[72] Recent approaches to Swiss migration research operate with a broader concept of migration and shed light on circulatory movements. Nevertheless, even these works fail to describe Swiss migration to the Dutch East Indies adequately. Pointing out this shortcoming, Andreas Zangger contends that Swiss migration to Asia has often been conceptualised rather "unfortunately" as "*Handelsmigration*" ("trade migration"), "*Einzelauswanderung*" ("individual emigration") or "*Elitewanderung*" ("elite migration"). By focusing on single individuals, these terms obscure the fact that their migration was part of a mass phenomenon and took place within dense and far-reaching networks of relationships.[73] This finding can also be extended to the mercenaries. Even if their networks differed from those of the merchants, their emigration would have been inconceivable without the existence of networks that operated partly officially and partly illegally.[74]

As this research will illustrate, the majority of Swiss military migrants regarded mercenary service as a life cycle. After its expiration, they intended to return to Europe. Some of them, however, remained in the Dutch Indies, where they found civilian employment and sometimes lived together with an Indo-European or Asian

woman and their joint children in petit-bourgeois households. Drawing from the groundbreaking studies on concubines and social and cultural "creolization" in South East Asia, this investigation aims to explore Swiss aspects of this migration history.[75]

Aims and Scope of This Study

This study pursues three main objectives. Its first and most obvious one is to rectify the temporal and spatial shortcomings of the historiography on Swiss military labour outlined above. It follows the mercenaries' trajectories on their way from Switzerland to the Dutch East Indies, determining their motives and social backgrounds, illuminating their daily lives in the barracks, examining friendly, sexual or hostile relations and tensions with other humans in the colonial contact zone, and tentatively reconstructing their life after service (at least for those who had one). Through such an analysis, the present book argues that the history of Swiss mercenaries did not end with the founding of modern Switzerland, nor did it stop at the borders of continental Europe. This spatial and temporal expansion ultimately allows us to comprehend colonialism, violence, and racism as formative components of modern Switzerland's social, economic, and cultural history.

Secondly, the Swiss mercenaries serve as a case in point to unveil the symbiotic—and sometimes toxic—relationship of the Dutch Empire with the European hinterland. The Dutch demand for military labour proved to be a unique opportunity for many young Swiss men to bridge periods of economic crisis or explore the other side of the world at no cost. Comparable to natural scientists who used research in colonial spaces to boost their careers while providing helpful knowledge to colonial administrations, the mercenaries' enlistment with the KNIL was also a case of "mutual instrumentalization". They could close the labour shortage and contribute to the military expansion of the Dutch Empire.[76] However, it must be added that this mutual instrumentalisation was not as balanced as with the scientists since almost 50 per cent of the mercenaries paid for their commitment with their lives. To uphold this—albeit unequal—mutual instrumentalisation, a wide variety of formal and informal networks transcending regional, national, and imperial borders were essential. This work, therefore, asks which actors, institutions, and administrations forged these networks and sheds light on the money, knowledge and patterns of thought that circulated within them. As shall be demonstrated, these economic, social and cultural ties reached the very bottom of Switzerland's rural and urban strata. Through letters, for example, mercenaries spread among their relatives and friends racist beliefs that were shaped by colonial discourses. Many families were torn apart, while numerous were founded across

cultural barriers. Returning veterans received quarterly pensions that contributed significantly to their income as bakers, farmers, or factory workers. Thus, the present examination probes the potential for what further research might yield on the remaining approximately 60,000 mercenaries from present-day Germany, Belgium, France, Poland, or Denmark.

On a more abstract level, this book thirdly seeks to marry *New Military History* with *New Imperial History*. In 2006, Historian Joanna Bourke concisely stated that the success of *New Military History* was due to its openness towards constantly integrating new approaches from related research fields such as social or cultural history.[77] Traditionally located in social history, this also concerns the *history of labour migration*. As explained above, numerous studies regard soldiers as workers who constantly had to relocate their centre of life. The approaches of *New Imperial History*, on the other hand, have received much less attention from military historians so far. Although numerous academics have looked into colonial armies, the colony and the metropolis have rarely been grasped within the same analytical framework, focusing often merely on non-European theatres of war.[78] As this research intends to prove, however, the "concubinage" between these fields allows us to address new questions at a theoretical level. Beyond the transregional and transimperial military connections, continuities and ruptures, intersectional approaches, in particular, gain relevance.[79] For example, to what extent is it still appropriate to refer to a "bottom-up" approach in military history if we put the spotlight on those men who—although they belonged to the underdogs in Europe—occupied more privileged positions within the racial hierarchy in colonial settings? Furthermore, where did the "racial dividend", as Harald Fischer-Tiné has called it,[80] of these "white subalterns" end? In answering these questions, this book also hopes to appeal to an audience whose interests lie outside Southeast Asia.

Sources, Structure & Methodology

Sources

Before getting to the sources, a critical remark needs to be prefaced beforehand: conspicuous by its absence, Indonesian archives could not be consulted. Although an archival trip of several months to Indonesia was planned—in particular, to consult the holdings in the National Archives of Indonesia (Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia), the surprising outbreak of COVID-19 made any on-site research impossible, necessitating a shift in research strategy. Despite these constraints, this study draws on a broad set of diverse private and public sources from Switzerland, the Netherlands and Indonesia.