Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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What was actually known about Java? Very little, according to the archivist himself (De Haan I, 1910: 442). The Commissioner may have had to submit an annual report after the middle of the eighteenth century, but there was no such memorandum left behind when he stepped down. Knowledge gained on the job was hardly recorded and certainly did not go further than his own office. The curiosity of the VOC directors was limited to the Company’s trade results (De Haan I, 1910: 423). With the disappearance of the VOC, an early-colonial state emerged in the early years of the nineteenth century. What form did this take and what arrangements were made for the Priangan Regencies? After all, this remained the first and most profitable region for producing coffee for export to the metropolis. The experience gained in the Priangan was taken into account when drafting plans for the future and new policies were often first tried out here in practice.

A conservative reformer

The transition at home from the Batavian Republic to the newly founded Kingdom of Holland under French tutelage also meant a changing of the guard in the East Indies. A strong character was needed who could bring order to the chaotic colonial affairs and who possessed the military qualities to withstand the growing threat to Java from the English enemy. Herman Willem Daendels was the perfect man for the job. He was already Field Marshall of Holland when he was appointed Governor-General. On arriving in the colony in early 1808, he had a reputation as a domineering personality, which would be confirmed by the way in which he fulfilled his tasks in the three years that followed. His orders had been to prevent the British from taking over Java and, no less important, to bring order and structure to the management of the country’s Asian possessions without causing too much disruption. He was given explicit instructions not to introduce radical reforms (De Haan IV, 1912: 772-4). His first concern was to secure the incomes that were indispensable to Holland’s financial solvability, and there was no doubt about how they were to be obtained. Shortly after his arrival, he announced what would take priority in his policy: the cultivation of coffee (Daendels 1814).

The instruction announcing this intention to continue on the same course was known as the Priangan Ruling. It applied primarily to the region where coffee cultivation had first been made compulsory and had acquired the character of a tax in the form of labour. In Daendels’ opinion, Pieter Engelhard had greatly improved the payments owed to the peasant
producers for the coffee they supplied. Strict instructions were now intended to put a stop to practices allowing the long chain of European and native intermediaries to appropriate much more or, conversely, be paid much less than was merited by the services they provided. To achieve this, he proposed a differentiated scale of payment according to rank, based on a standard *pikul*, the unit of payment. One aim of the reform was to release the Priangan regents from their debts to the Commissioner or the coffee sergeants, which they attempted to pay off by extorting money from the peasants, who were therefore held in a state of subordination. In exchange for cancelling the enormous debts of the regents, they had to promise to give up their spendthrift behaviour. The new system also meant that the native chiefs would no longer be entitled to the homage and annual gifts they were accustomed to receiving and would give up their right to demand unlimited corvee services from their clientele for their own requirements. According to the same principle, the government could only requisition labour, for example for the transport of goods and persons, if it paid for the work done. The cautious attempt was to redesign the colonial apparatus along modern bureaucratic lines. It was no more than a first step, as the salaries of the officials remained linked to the collection of the colonial surplus. Furthermore, day-to-day practice remained far removed from this administrative guideline. The reforms meant no change in the modality of forced coffee cultivation, for example by introducing free labour or considering a transition to the free market, but represented more an attempt to clean up its corruptive features. Daendels solemnly promised to exempt the population from all other obligations than the cultivation of coffee. Essentially, this perpetuated the situation that he had encountered in the Priangan Regencies on his appointment. He made the pledge in the resolute expectation that it would result in an enormous boost in production.

To realize his optimistic planning, Daendels considered it advisable to introduce coffee cultivation in other parts of Java, and on the same basis as that he had ordered in the Priangan Regencies. The harvest, which had been 120,000 *pikul* the year before Daendels arrived, would – according to his calculations – rise to 180,000 *pikul* in the short term, and to no less than 300,000 *pikul* in the somewhat longer term. It was not until quite some time after the Priangan Ruling was announced that Daendels specified the tax that he would impose on the people of the main region of production: maintaining 1,000 fruit-bearing trees per household, twice as many as elsewhere on Java.

There were almost no exemptions from this labour tax (De Haan I 1910: 450-1). His long-serving advisers contradicted their superior’s belief that lack
of administrative will and carelessness had prevented a rapid expansion of coffee cultivation outside the Priangan Regencies. According to them, it would not have succeeded there without resorting to naked coercion. In 1810, Lawick once again made it clear that none of those involved in coffee cultivation, from the regent down to the most lowly cultivator, would have chosen to do freely what had been imposed on them as an obligation. This piece of information was not new; in his last annual report as Commissioner in 1800, Nicolaus Engelhard had stated that ‘the Javanese, with very few exceptions, plant coffee unwillingly and have to be driven to work at it with the use of violence’ (De Haan III, 1912: 628). Daendels did not appreciate or accept these assessments from his subordinates. He claimed that the Javanese peasants had never owned the land they tilled and had always had to pay tribute to their chiefs. In his view, the system of coffee cultivation was simply a continuation of a form of tribute through labour that the peasants had traditionally paid to their monarch, who was also the owner of the land (Daendels 1814: 104). Lawick was one of those who did not shy away from disagreeing with Daendels. In a memorandum he reported that the paddy fields in his jurisdiction, the Cirebon Priangan lands, were privately owned.

Daendels put forward other arguments to justify his policy. The Governor-General admitted that the lot of the common man was pitiful and needed to be improved but blamed this on the extortion of the indigenous chiefs, having nothing to do with the system of forced cultivation and delivery. He alleged that it was little effort for the Priangan peasants to do what was required of them. Moreover, their anything but heavy burden was richly rewarded with a wage equal to eight stuivers a day. Daendels made no secret of the fact that, since he had appeared on the colonial scene, the poverty-stricken lives of the local people had much improved. This was a conceit that not only later critics, but also many of his contemporaries, were not inclined to accept. There was no basis for Daendels’ statement that, under his regime, the coffee growers were paid the official rate, which was, moreover, fixed at an extremely low level. The man who actually created the Priangan system undeniably succeeded in increasing coffee production but, as before, coercion was the lever used to achieve it.

**Strengthening the government apparatus**

When he left the Netherlands, Daendels was given strict orders not to introduce any reforms. That would have to wait until peace had returned to the European continent now in a state of turmoil. The new