

Merdeka

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*The Struggle for Indonesian Independence and the
Republic's Precarious Rise
1945–1950*

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Translated by Gioia Marini

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Cover image: President Sukarno arrives in Jakarta on 28 December 1949. Bettmann / Getty Images

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On 18 June 1970, Mohammad Hatta visited Sukarno on his deathbed. It had been years since they had last seen each other. In 1956, they had parted ways when Hatta resigned as vice president because he did not agree with President Sukarno's populist policies. In 1965, Sukarno lost power to General Suharto. He spent his last years in isolation, under house arrest.

Sukarno and Hatta were the great leaders of the Indonesian nationalist movement, and together they had led their country to independence in the war against the Netherlands. Now, after all those years, they were seeing each other again. Despite their disagreements, they remained deeply connected.

When Hatta sat beside Sukarno's bed, he whispered: 'How is it, No?' Sukarno opened his eyes and asked: 'Is that you, Hatta?' He was barely able to speak anymore.

They held each other's hands. They didn't need to say much to each other because they knew: 'We did it!'

(Based on a passage in Taufik Abdullah 2009: 331)

Foreword

How does one write a book about a revolution that everyone knows the outcome of, while at the time none of those directly involved had any idea how it would end? Even if Sukarno and Hatta had been firmly convinced that Indonesia would one day become a free country, when they declared independence on 17 August 1945 they had no idea when their Republic would be recognised. We cannot ask the readers of this book to erase their prior knowledge of this. What we do try to show in this book is the complexity of the struggle for independence and how full of unforeseen developments and unexpected outcomes it was.

This book provides a new overview of the Indonesian Revolution from 1945 to 1950, with a focus on the Republic's precarious rise. In August 1945, the Republic had neither an organised framework nor a well-thought-out plan for the future. Competing interest groups tried to determine the course of the Revolution, which led to much improvisation, conflict, strife and even civil war. As we will point out, the Revolution was regularly characterised by an individual's (or a group of individuals') desire to take action without the actors being able to foresee the consequences.

A guiding creed in these exhilarating times was the word '*Merdeka*' (freedom). It was a cry that was ubiquitous; open and light and vague enough to gain momentum; a programmatic slogan that promised a better future within reach; a greeting that brought people together in the midst of all the uncertainties and dangers.¹ Hence the title of this book.

In writing this book, we have made use of the extensive literature that already exists about the Indonesian Revolution. H.A.J. Klooster's 1997 *Bibliography of the Indonesian Revolution* includes no less than 7,000 titles, and many more have been added since then.² This book is also based on the thorough archival research and the 200 interviews that Harry Poeze has conducted over the course of many years, which is reflected in his comprehensive biography about Tan Malaka entitled *Verguisd en vergeten: Tan Malaka, de linkse beweging en de Indonesische Revolutie, 1945–1949* [Reviled and Forgotten: Tan Malaka, the Left-Wing Movement and the Indonesian Revolution, 1945–1949], from which this book has borrowed heavily.³

1 The description 'insubstantial and vague enough to gain momentum' is derived from Willem Anker's novel *Buys* (2017).

2 Klooster 1997.

3 Poeze 2007. A new edition of Poeze's 1976 manuscript about Tan Malaka's life until 1945, which includes much new unpublished material, is forthcoming.

This book differentiates itself from the older but still leading studies of the Revolution written by the Americans George Kahin and Benedict Anderson, who respectively focused on the formation of the new nation and the romanticised role of the revolutionary youth (*pemuda*) but paid little attention to the violence that occurred during the Revolution.⁴ We see the Indonesian struggle for independence as a violent process with countless civilian casualties.

The last English-language overview of the Revolution was published in 1974 by Anthony Reid.⁵ After that, Anglo-Saxon research became fragmented by the many sub-studies that sought mainly to reveal the regional dimensions of the battle.⁶

The Dutch and the Indonesian approaches to the colonial past diverge considerably. In the Netherlands, the interest has mainly been on the colonial past and the 'decolonisation' of Indonesia, and little attention has been paid to independent Indonesia. For most Indonesians, however, their national history only began in August 1945, and much attention is paid to the rise of nationalism but hardly any interest is shown in the colonial regime.

The period 1945–1950 is one in which both Indonesians and Dutch people are interested, but even here there appears to be little common ground. The traditional Dutch historiography describes the 'decolonisation' of the Dutch East Indies from a diplomatic perspective and, above all, in terms of the 'defeat' of the Dutch.⁷ While this book recognises that diplomacy played an important role between 1945 and 1950, it repudiates the prevailing Dutch perspective. Instead of emphasising the causes of the Dutch defeat ('What went wrong?'), we believe the Indonesian victory is important and therefore focus on the rise of the Republic.⁸

In this book, we emphasise the conservative attitude of the Netherlands both in its political and military leadership. Even Lieutenant Governor General H.J. van Mook, who had a reputation as a progressive, clung to outdated ideas. The belief among the Dutch that they could control the decolonisation of Indonesia turned out to be an illusion. On top of that, the Netherlands proved itself to be a bad loser during the final negotiations in 1949.

4 Kahin 1952; Anderson 1972.

5 Reid 1974.

6 See Audrey Kahin 1985.

7 Smit 1952, 1962; Van den Doel 2000; De Jong 2015.

8 During a discussion on the 50th anniversary of Indonesian independence at the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam in 1995, the chairman of the panel asked the question 'What went wrong?' Henk Schulte Nordholt's reply was: 'Nothing went wrong, because Indonesia gained its independence.'

It took a long time for the Dutch to pay serious attention to the violent nature of the Indonesian struggle for independence and, in particular, to the part that Dutch soldiers played in it. We will not go into this in detail because it has already been addressed in the results of the study published in 2022 by the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, the Netherlands Institute for Military History and the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies.⁹

In Indonesian historiography, the struggle for independence constitutes the glorious bedrock on which the nation-state was established. This narrative still gives the army its legitimacy as the guardian of national unity. The years 1945 to 1950 are therefore all about the united struggle against the Dutch, the overcoming of internal problems, the fight for independence and the construction of new state institutions. Serious internal fault lines are only touched on peripherally, and relatively little attention is paid to the violence committed during this period. The many unnamed victims are not commemorated at the national level; this honour belongs only to the heroes who died in the battle against the Dutch.¹⁰ At the local level, however, there are many monuments that commemorate the civilian victims of the revolution.

In addition to the official history, more and more regional histories of the revolution are appearing, and critical contributions are being published on new platforms such as *historia.id*. We hope this book can also contribute to counter the monolithic view that still dominates the official Indonesian account.

In 2020, the book *Revolusi* by David van Reybrouck was published.¹¹ Why then, you might ask, should we come out with another book on the same topic? *Revolusi* focuses on the personal experiences and testimonies of those who lived through the Indonesian Revolution. Van Reybrouck was just in time, for many of those he interviewed are no longer alive. The great value of a book such as *Revolusi* is that Van Reybrouck has been able to reach a large audience through the captivating way in which he recounts all the stories, making the Indonesian Revolution almost tangible. Our book tells a different story by taking an in-depth look at the internal political ups and downs in Indonesia and the precarious path by which the Republic ultimately

9 Oostindie 2022. Koninklijk Instituut van Taal- Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV), Nederlandse Instituut voor Militaire Historie (NIMH) and NIOD Instituut voor Oorlogs-, Holocaust- en Genocidestudies (NIOD).

10 See Mestika Zed and Mukhlis PaEni 2012.

11 The English translation is published in 2024.

secured victory. Moreover, because Van Reybrouck chose to base his account primarily on the stories of contemporaries of the Indonesian Revolution who were still alive at the time he was conducting his research, certain important events are insufficiently conveyed when no surviving witnesses of those events were found. He devotes only a few words, for example, to the crises that threatened the survival of the Republic in 1946, which we examine in depth in Chapters 6 and 7. The leftist leader Tan Malaka, who played an important role at the beginning of the revolution, is not included in his book. His reading of the Madiun rebellion of September 1948 – which we would characterise as a civil war – is based on an outdated view that we refute in Chapter 10. The Republican military regime that emerged following the second Dutch attack in December 1948 also remains unmentioned in *Revolusi*, as is the role of the many Republican warlords. As a result, the military violence on the Republican side that was to cast a dark shadow over postcolonial Indonesia is overlooked. Another striking omission is the position of groups of Chinese who, similar to the Europeans and Indo-Europeans, fell victim to violence meted out by revolutionary youths, but who also played a crucial role in the vulnerable Republican economy and provided Republican military leaders with crucial supplies. Van Reybrouck largely confines his story to Java, while our perspective is broader. We also look at the dramatic developments in North Sumatra, where atrocities occurred in 1946 and 1947. He also barely mentions the federal Indonesia – of great significance to many Indonesians – that was being built at the time and that competed with the Republic. It was, moreover, federal nationalists – a group that has now been almost entirely forgotten – that came to the rescue of the Republic at a critical juncture.

Unlike most historians who write about the Revolution, we do not end our account in December 1949 when the formal transfer of sovereignty took place. The following year, 1950, marked the final stage of the Revolution when the Federal Republic became defunct and the unitary state was established. That, too, was fraught with much violence, and it is striking that former soldiers of the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (Koninklijk Nederlands-Indisch Leger, KNIL) played a leading role in that violence.

Revolutions come in all shapes and sizes. In most cases, they involve a change of power without any major impact on the social order. More sweeping revolutions involve a social upheaval in which ruling classes are overthrown. Charles Tilly characterises revolutions as a struggle between rival regimes,¹² which would apply to the period between 1945 and 1950 in

12 Tilly 1978.

Indonesia when British troops (albeit briefly), Dutch officials and Dutch troops, the federal states, and the Republic each tried to establish their authority. Within the Republic as well, there was a struggle for power between secular politicians, left-wing radical organisations, Muslims, soldiers and warlords. This book follows all these parties closely.

In this regard, it is important for us to take to heart a comment made by the historian Frederick Cooper. He argues that it is important to look at what tends to be hidden from view: the alternative routes that people had in mind but were not followed, or the attempts that failed as well as the dead ends.¹³ From the point of view of someone on the ground at the time, the conflict – which was fought on multiple fronts – had a precarious quality. This obliges us to look at ambitions that could have been realised such as a left-wing regime that wanted to make profound social changes or a federal system that would have kept old local elites in power throughout much of the archipelago. It is important to understand that these were serious options in the period 1945–1950. This is why we pay significant attention to the left-wing leader Tan Malaka, who posed a serious threat to the leadership of Sukarno and Hatta at the beginning of the Revolution. In September 1948, the communist rebellion, which developed into a civil war, nearly overthrew the Republican leadership. These incidents tend to be suppressed in the historiography because they failed, but we must remind ourselves that they were real alternatives at the time.

Finally, we should address the question of why two white Dutch researchers are writing a book about a Revolution that is not theirs. First and foremost, we are historians. We do not hide the fact that the fight for Indonesian independence has a special place in our hearts. Without turning a blind eye to the sharp edges of the Revolution, we also acknowledge that the Netherlands was unable to rise above its own colonial past.

Harry Poeze has devoted 50 years of his life to researching the Revolution, and in the course of that research, during our many discussions with Indonesian colleagues, we were explicitly asked to write this book to contribute to the discussion about the Revolution. We do this as involved outsiders, knowing that we are treading on 'sacred ground'. This will undoubtedly be criticised, but we are prepared to accept such criticism.

We are deeply indebted to our institute, the KITLV in Leiden, as well as the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijke Onderzoek, NWO), which funded a research project

13 Cooper 2005: 18.

that includes this book.¹⁴ We also thank our colleagues from the KITLV, the NIMH, the NIOD and the Universitas Gadjah Mada in Yogyakarta who were involved in the major study of Dutch military violence during the Indonesian Revolution. Thanks should also go to Amsterdam University Press, the KITLV Members Association, and a private donor for funding the English translation and the Open Access edition. We are grateful to Aggie Langedijk, Gert Oostindie, Paul van Os and Marnix van der Sijs for critically reading a few chapters, and Taufiq Hanafi for providing the images. Many thanks to Gioia Marini for the translation and for her perceptive editorial advice, as well as the editors of Amsterdam University Press.

Finally, our deepest thanks go to our wives Henny and Margreet, without whom this book would never have been published.

14 This project was called *Indonesia in Transition: A History from Revolution to Nation-Building 1943–1958* and was led by Henk Schulte Nordholt and carried out by Abdul Wahid, Bart Luttikhuis and Peter Keppy from 2017 to mid-2021. In mid-2020, Luttikhuis left the project and was replaced by Roel Frakking. Various publications resulting from this project are currently being prepared.