Miners, managers and the state: A socio-political history of the Ombilin coal-mines, West Sumatra, 1892-1996

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with organization and labour control during the wartime occupation of the Netherlands Indies by the Japanese imperial army and the subsequent period of Indonesian revolution. How were the mines and the coal-miners organized and controlled during these two disruptive, turbulent periods, and what was the miners' reaction to these developments? This task will not be easy, because the records of both these periods are fragmented, the sources seriously depleted. Before the Japanese left Sawahlunto in 1945 and the Dutch entered the town in 1948, a large part of the archives of the Ombilin coal-mines had been burned by both the Japanese and Indonesians. The fragmented information that has survived is not sufficient to trace anything but the barest outlines of the socio-political history of the Ombilin miners during this period. Therefore, I have combined it with the information that I have collected from interviews.

The following topics are important for the period under consideration. Economically speaking the Ombilin coal-mines went through a very unhappy period, a misery due not only to the lack of capital and mining machinery, but exacerbated by political instability. Therefore, indubitably, the two hectic periods were characterized by a continuing decline in production and bad working conditions. It was also a time marked by changes in the social hierarchy of the mining society, labour control, and work discipline. It was an era in which a process of evolution occurred whereby the Javanese labourers seized the opportunity and broke through the barriers created by the Dutch. More intensive contacts between the miners and the local community became usual, making for a more normal society. This was especially true when the Javanese started to look for additional income and activated the resources that existed in the areas surrounding the mines. This process of integration went through a dip during the Indonesian revolution, as indeed it did in East Sumatra, and latent resentments emerged as conflict between the Javanese and the local people.

1. Coal and War Industry: Under the Hokkaido Company (1942-1945)

Throughout most of December 1941 and January 1942, the Japanese had waged a campaign of serial bombardment on towns in Aceh, and North and West Sumatra. Having bombed these areas into submission, this was followed by the establishment of a Japanese military administration. In Sumatra this occupation was a steady progression following in the footsteps of the imperial army after the fall of Palembang (February 14), Bengkulu (February 24), Aceh, and East Sumatra (on February 25)(Akira Oki 1977:207). In West Sumatra, the first Japanese troops entered Padang on 17 March 1942 (Mansoer 1970:205; Enar 1976:2; Kahin 1979:52).
By 28 March 1942, the Japanese declared that the whole of Sumatra had been placed under the control of the 25th Army, which commanded Malaya and Sumatra. Its original headquarters had been in Singapore but was then moved to Bukittinggi.

Strategically speaking, Sumatra was extremely important to the Japanese for its proximity to Singapore, its abundant agricultural production, and its mineral resources. This strategic value can be clearly measured from Japanese investment in Sumatra, which was about 6.2 percent of the total Japanese investment in the South East Asian occupied area. This investment was divided between three sectors: agriculture and farming 29.4 percent, manufacturing 27.6 percent, and mining 21.6 percent.\(^1\)

In the mining sector, undoubtedly the main priority of the Japanese in Sumatra was to exploit its oil resources, followed by coal, and subsequently tin, bauxite, and gold. The pattern of exploitation also varied in response to these priorities. Oilfields in Palembang fell directly under control of the Japanese military, the Bukit Asam and Ombilin coal-mines were placed under the control of a semi-government company whereas other branches were in the hands of private companies.

In order to develop the mining sector in Sumatra, particularly in the fields of exploration, rehabilitation, and exploitation, in August 1943 the Japanese formed the Sumatran Mining Association or *Sumatora Kogyo KK*. On April 28, 1944, the Sumatra Industrial Organization Law, promulgated on January 12, 1943, was declared to apply to the Sumatran Mining Association, which was coupled with two organizations, namely the Agricultural Association and the Forestry Association.\(^2\)

This Sumatran Mining Association, which had its main office in Padang, consisted of five companies engaged in mining. The principal objectives of the organization were to improve the industrial policies of the five companies which would facilitate the supply of essential funds, labour, and means of transportation. Apart from those practical considerations it was expected to engage in research for the development of Sumatra's mineral resources.\(^3\) Any information about the extent to which the mining association realized its programme and to what extent the Ombilin coal-mines were affected by this seems to have been lost.

The essential question is what did the Japanese do in the Ombilin coal-mines? After taking over Padang, the Japanese launched an operation to take over the other important towns in West Sumatra. From an economic point of view, the Japanese were only interested in two big local companies; namely the cement works at Indarung, on the outskirts of Padang, and the Ombilin coal-mines at Sawahlunto. After landing at Padang, the Japanese took over the cement factory that was located on the southern perimeter of that town. In the same month, the

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3. ARA, BZ London Archives no.968. Economic Situation Government Care of Mineral Production no. 94.113. The Japanese also issued regulations on the education of the mining officials. For a more detailed explanation, see *Peratoeran tentang Chishtsu Chosa Gijutsuin Yoseisha* 2604/1944.
single shot. Many Indonesians welcomed the Japanese and even helped the Japanese to round up the European citizens. These people were not immediately transported away to prison camps as their skills were badly needed and they continued to be employed for some months until the Japanese could get themselves established there. Once the Japanese were firmly in the saddle, they were arrested and assembled first at the Ombilin hospital and then moved to the mission complex in Padang. In October and December 1943 the men were moved to an internment camp at Bangkinang, whereas women and children went to Payakumbuh.

On May 16, 1942, the Japanese government had given the Hokkaido and Steamship Company Limited (Co.Ltd) in Tokio permission to exploit the Ombilin mines with a capital of 87,500,000 yen (Hikita 1994:19). The Hokkaido and Steamship Co.Ltd. was a subsidiary branch of the Mtsui Company, which had exploited the Bukit Asam coal-mines.

Table V.1: The Names of Enterprises and the Kinds of Mining Industries which were engaged in Sumatra (1942-1945).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enterprises in Charge</th>
<th>Kind of Mining</th>
<th>Areas of Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mitsui Mining Co</td>
<td>Coal</td>
<td>Bukit Asam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitsubishi Mining Co</td>
<td>Tin ore</td>
<td>Bangka, including Belitung, Singkep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furukawa Mining Co</td>
<td>Bauxite</td>
<td>Bintan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furukawa Mining Co</td>
<td>Bauxite</td>
<td>Batam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hokkaido and Steamship Co.Ltd.</td>
<td>Coal</td>
<td>Onpirin*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitsui Kosan Kaisha</td>
<td>Gold</td>
<td>Simau, Bengkulu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *Onpirin is Ombilin.
Information for Simau Gold Mine at Bengkulu was taken from ARA, MvK. Rapportage Indonesië, no.528.

This was a semi-official/state company. Other mining areas in Sumatra were exploited by the private Japanese companies as demonstrated in table V.1. The general trend was that under the occupation, companies which had been state-owned during the Dutch colonial period, like Bangka tin-mines and the Simau gold-mines were run by the Japanese private companies (Hikita 1994:3).

The Japanese still used some European staff until July 1943. About experiences and living conditions in the camp written by former internees, see for example, Spijker-Kesselaar 1966; Van Raalten 1997. RIOD, Indisch Collection, Sawahlunto 000620-627, De arrestaties van het Ombilin Personeel, Sumatra 1943; Een interpretatie van de meest relevante getuigenissen.

A more detailed information on the exploitation of the Japanese government in the mining sector in South-East Asia, see Hiroaki 1998.
The process by which these companies were selected was based on a plan (decision) of the Committee of the Planning Bureau, \textit{Nanpo Keizai Taisaku Yoko}, the Economic Measures applying to the Southern Areas, issued on 11 December 1941. The document explained that the aim of these measures was to contribute to the war production by developing important resources, thereby building up the self-sufficiency of the Japanese Empire. The process of selection and the measures which were stipulated by the Japanese government provided the basis for the policy followed by the Japanese mining companies in the occupied areas.

Apart from oil, the most important product contributing to the war effort was coal. The Japanese government estimated that beyond meeting the demands of Sumatra the production of the Ombilin and Bukit Asam coal-mines would also facilitate export to Java and Malaya.\textsuperscript{6} Because of the high importance of coal for the war efforts, Japanese entrepreneurs in Tokyo were even considering plans to recruit the Japanese coal-miners to work at the same mines in Indonesia.\textsuperscript{7} They were moved to think of such contingencies because of an estimate that only 30 percent of the total demand of coal would be met by the production of coal from East Asia. The writing was on the wall: to fulfill the demand for coal by industries and steamships, the Japanese would have to try to produce coal in the occupied areas for themselves as much as possible.\textsuperscript{8}

Meeting the demand for coal meant more than mining, it also meant transportation. The Japanese Army constructed a railway from the Ombilin coal-mines to the East Coast (Colombijn 1994, Abdullah 1987). The construction of this railway was to facilitate transport to the centre of power of the Japanese Army in Singapore. This was not a new plan, because the Dutch had already been toying with plans to construct a railway to the East Coast but had never done anything about it. The Japanese employed not only Javanese recruited straight from Java but also workers from Ombilin coal-mines and European prisoners-of-war were used to work as \textit{romsha} (forced labourers) on the construction of the railways.

In common with other mining companies in Sumatra, the Hokkaido and Steamship Co. Ltd. suffered from a lack of skilled labourers to manage the mines and to do the actual mining. Although the Japanese had seriously planned to recruit the Japanese coal-miners to work in Indonesia, that plan never saw the light of day. The number of the native Japanese staff was very small, only about twenty. They held some of the important positions at the central office, and acted as overseers, particularly, at the workshop, the central electricity plant, and in the mines (Interviews with Pak Wahab, 24-4-1996; Pak Oejoeb, 20-4-1996). In the first months of the occupation, the European staff was still required to work at certain jobs, such as in the hospital,

\textsuperscript{6} The Japanese sent two staff members to Sumatra to enquire into the possibilities for coal exports. They investigated the conditions in the coal-mines, and the ports in Sumatra. The 16th Army submitted a request to import coal from Sumatra to Java to the Southern Region General Army Headquarters. In 1942 the import of coal from Sumatra was 150,000 tons, then 200,000 tons in 1943, 120,000 tons in 1944 and 40,000 tons in 1945. See Sato 1994:180; \textit{Nanpo Sakusen}, Appendix 3:9 as quoted by Kahin 1979:62.

\textsuperscript{7} ARA, London Archives no.965; 6.4.

\textsuperscript{8} To reduce the dependence on imported coal in Java, coal-mines at Baya, Cimandiri, and Bojomanik in the southeastern part of Banten were developed by the Japanese, see Kurasawa 1994:9; Sato 1994:180. See RIOD, \textit{Indische Collection}, no.005593-5797. \textit{Kolenmijnen Bantam (De Weerd)}. 
a task they fulfilled until July 1943. After that, their positions were taken over by Japanese and Indonesians.

In order to solve the problem of the skilled-labour shortage, the Japanese promoted many Indonesian people to higher positions with a higher salary than they had ever enjoyed before. This brought about a dramatic change in the social hierarchy of the mining society, because from now on Indonesians could and would hold important positions. The position of director was first occupied by a Japanese engineer, Kubota who was then replaced by Kobayashi, while the position of deputy-director was held by Roesli, a graduate of the mining school at Sawahlunto. Some other former students of the mining school such as A. Aziz, Sjahbuddin Sutan Radijo Nando, and Baharson were also promoted to higher positions. Perhaps too many examples are mentioned here, but they serve to show that the Hokkaido and Steamship Co.Ltd. gave indigenous people much more opportunities to reach better positions than they had ever had before, and this was especially true for Minangkabau people.

The Hokkaido and Steamship Co.Ltd. did not overwhelm the mine with too many innovations in mining technology and work organization. It continued to use the existing mining machinery dating from before the occupation, although some of the machines that had been destroyed, were replaced by machines from the Bangka tin-mines (Haluan 22-6-1953). The Japanese engineers tried also to make coke which could be consumed by heavy industries in Japan, but this attempt was fizzled out. To answer the need to produce skilled-labourers the Mining School, which continued to teach the Dutch curriculum, was re-opened. Only its name changed from Mijnbouw School to Koo-In-Yo-Seizyo (Interview with Pak Oejoeb, 12-5-1995). All these efforts came in for a bumpy ride, owing to the fact that the Hokkaido and Steamship Co. Ltd. had to contribute men and food to the war effort, especially after the second year of the occupation.

Using the work shift system introduced by the Dutch, at first the Hokkaido and Steamship Co. Ltd. produced coal in large quantities. In 1942, coal production remained high at 228,724 tons because troubles had not yet made themselves felt. But in 1943, the production decreased drastically to less than half, at 92,878 tons. The figures did not pick up, and dropped to an even lower level, namely 72,780 tons in 1944. At the end of the Hokkaido and Steamship Co. Ltd. management, production was less than one quarter of what it had been four years previously, at 50,324 tons in 1945 (Appendix 1).

Leaving aside the lack of maintenance of the machinery, the spectacular drop in production was caused by the decline in the number of labourers. In the last full year of the pre-war colonial period, in 1941, the total number of labourers was 3,268. All of them were free labourers, consisting mainly of Javanese and local inhabitants. In 1942 the total number of labourers rose to 3,465. Some were recruited from Java by the Japanese and from

9 RIOD, Indische Collection, no.34271-272/10-034. Verslag van Dr.P.A.Vis over toestand ziekenhuis der Ombilin mijnen te Sawahlunto, ged.Japanese bezetting op 17-3-1942.

10 For example, P.H.A. Zaalberg, a mining engineer who worked at the Gemeenschappelijke Maatschappij Billiton (GMB), reported that many indigenous personnel there were appointed to higher positions such as chief engineer with a higher salary than had been paid for the position in the colonial period. RIOD, Indische Collection, no.2996. St. 9-2-3 Billiton Maatschappij; R.029182-*89, Billiton-bedrijven.
among the children of the former contract labourers and local inhabitants. From interviews with Pak Tukimin, a former underground miner who was recruited by the Japanese, I have learned that there were five groups of such labourers recruited from Java. Pak Tukimin himself was recruited in 1943 along with 240 labourers from Solo and from Bayah, West Java (Interview with Pak Tukimin 14-4-1995). The rise in the number of labourers is also partially explained by the fact that the local people and the former contract labourers preferred to work in the mines rather than to try their luck elsewhere. They hoped to be paid in kind, especially in rice, which by then was already a scarce commodity. As reality dawned that a job in the mines was not a passport to supplies of scarce food, this situation did not last long. In the following years the number of labourers declined. In 1943 the total number of labourers was 2,878 but in 1944 this had been reduced to less than two-third of what it had been originally at 2,533. At the end of the presence of Hokkaido there were only 2,443 labourers left working in the mines (Djalal 1972: 21).

As was explained earlier, in the first years of the Japanese occupation, labour conditions under the Hokkaido and Steamship Co. Ltd. were better than they had even been before. Like other Japanese mining companies in Sumatra, the Hokkaido and Steamship Co. Ltd. set up a distribution system for articles such as rice, salt fish, sugar and other essential commodities for the labourers. Therefore, the Javanese and local people at Sawahlunto preferred to work in the mine rather than at other places where there were no such guarantees. It was very difficult for people who worked outside the mine to get rice. Better conditions were also the fortune of the Indonesian personnel and the students of the Mining School. Financially their situation improved as they got more money from the Hokkaido and Steamship Co. Ltd than they had ever done under the Dutch.

By mid-1943 the situation in West Sumatra had changed dramatically. Allied attacks on Japanese ships moving in the Malacca Straits made it increasingly problematic to export Sumatran raw materials to Japan (Akira Oki 1977: 230). Therefore, from about the middle of 1943, shipping traffic decreased, and communications between Java and Sumatra were virtually cut off. The price of food rose. Akira Oki has made calculations and showed that by the end of 1942, the price of rice had tripled, and that of vegetables, beef, chicken, fresh fish, coconuts, and sugar had at least doubled (Akira Oki 1977:230). Textiles were virtually non-existent and throughout much of the region, the people were wearing clothing made of tree bark.

The same fate hit the other companies in Sumatra. The mining companies were forced to help the Japanese military, for instance, by supplying men for the labour force and contributing food for army rations. Pressed to its limits, the Hokkaido and Steamship Co. Ltd. paid more attention to increasing coal production simply to meet self-sufficiency than to repairing the parts of the mines which were damaged or destroyed. Many mine accidents resulted from this neglect (Table V.2). Table V.2 shows us that the highest rate of the mine accidents was in 1943. In that year, nine people were killed, eight seriously injured, there were ten fairly serious accidents, and nine minor accidents. In the years after this, the number of mine accidents would seem to have decreased if one goes by the statistics alone, but this does not mean that the working conditions were better than before. The reason is that information on the mine accidents for the years of 1944 and 1945 is not complete. From information that I have obtained in interviews, it appears that many mine accidents, which claimed many victims were not properly recorded. From some interviews, for
instance, I have found out that many labourers were killed by a gas explosion inside the mine in 1944.

Table V.2: Mine Accidents 1942-1945

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Light</th>
<th>Middle Heavy</th>
<th>Heavy</th>
<th>Death</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*1944: February to November.
*1945: February to April.
Source: PTBA-UPO Archives Buku Kecelakaan Tambang.

Towards the end of the Japanese occupation, the Hokkaido and Steamship Co. Ltd., was no longer able to pay either enough salary, or supply other social benefits to the labourers, because its food stock had to be sacrificed to the war effort. It was also facing yet more labour problems, because some of the labour force was taken to Bukittinggi to work as *romusha*, constructing the Japanese fortifications there. The labourers who remained working at the mine were forced under increasing duress to produce as much coal as possible for the war effort. Given this situation, exacerbated by the lack of food and medical treatment, it does not require a stretch of the imagination to visualize how hard living conditions were. Many labourers died, falling victim to mine accidents and worn out by the impossible workload. Apart from these hazards they also fell ill with malaria, typhus, various other diseases, and suffered from malnutrition. The following story gives an impression of the experience of Pak Suwardi Kisut, the son of a Javanese contract labourer.

During the Japanese period, the number of foremen was reduced. Many of them left the mine. The Japanese time was very tragic. People went on working without a salary, because they were very afraid of the Japanese. It was a period of colonial rule. At Tangsi Baru I saw that nobody was wearing proper clothes. They wore cloth made from jute. People died every day, not because of illness, but from lack of food. They lost all their teeth. I was lucky, because my mother was inventive. My father got cassava from the mine. My mother cut them, and soaked them. Afterwards, they were hung up to dry, soaked again. Only then were they cooked, mixed with bananas, and rice. That food is filling. (Interview with Pak Suwardi Kisut 22-8-1995)


A similar story is told by a former foreman, Pak Rahmat, 74 years old, also a son of a former contract labourer.

During the Japanese period, I continue to work as a mandor. The salary was not even enough to buy one coconut. I was given sweet potatoes. We ate sawut (sweet potatoes) with vegetables. After working in the mine, I would pan for gold in the Lunto River which was located at the front of my house. It was very miserable. Rice was mixed with corn. Insyaallah (thank God) we had clothes. I got gold and sold it to buy the daily necessities. (Interview with Pak Rahmat, 15-5-1995)

These quotations reveal the harsh living conditions suffered by the labourers during the Japanese occupation. They continued to work under a regime of physical violence. Beating was very common during the Japanese military regime, and some of the indigenous overseers and foremen were also guilty of this. Other overseers and foremen were very aware of the harsh living conditions, and they tended not to use physical violence (Interview with Pak Rahmat, 15-5-1995). From interviews I have collected, it appears that some labourers tried to break their contract and run away from the mine. In 1942, 123 labourers stopped working or removed themselves to other places, and in addition eight ran away. In 1943 these figures rose to 153 who stopped and moved away and 104 ran away. Because of this, the supervision was tightened up and the strict controls were imposed by the Japanese military, so the figures declined to thirty for the people who stopped working and moved away and twelve were runaways in 1944 (PTBA-UPO Archives, Buku Register, 1942-1948).

One major question is who were the labourers who stopped working and removed to other places. The answer is men who were unmarried or had previous experiences working in other places. Men who were married remained working in the mine. Newcomers who had no work experience in other places did not know where to go. They tried to survive by making illegal dryfields in areas owned by the mine, or by the local inhabitants located in the vicinity of the mine, to cultivate food. This was a change from the regime during the Dutch period, when the labourers were not permitted to work in the agricultural sector at all. Now trying to overcome adversity they worked together with their shift-mates or with their work group, growing cassava, sweet potatoes, and other vegetables. They also tried to earn a living as wage labourers, working in the rice-fields of the local peasants.

The harsh living conditions during the Japanese occupation created a strong sense of solidarity within the same ethnic group and between different ethnic groups of the Javanese.

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Sundanese, Minangkabau and Bataks. Many of the Javanese labourers who escaped from the forced labour building the railways in Sijunjung were taken in and protected by both the Javanese and the local people at Sawahlunto. The harsh living conditions also encouraged intensive social contacts between the people from the barracks and the local community. It frequently happened that patron-client ties which determined political choices in the years after Indonesian Independence dated from that time.

From what has just been said it can be concluded that the control exercised over labourers during the Japanese occupation was very strict. Through Hokkaido and Steamship Co.Ltd. Japanese officials employed free labourers as forced labourers or *romusha*. This is highly reminiscent of the beginning of the exploitation where the Dutch worked convict labourers in the mines for the construction of railways from Padang to Sawahlunto. During the period 1942-1945, the Japanese military officials also employed labourers as *romusha* in the mine, for the construction of railways, and for other projects to aid the Japanese war effort. Although they were kept under stringent guard by Japanese military officials, individual resistance shown by the miners in running away never stopped. This can be seen in the high figures of those either trying to escape the regime or trying to find sources of additional income in other places, even during the revolution. When the Dutch returned to Sawahlunto in 1948, many Javanese miners returned to Sawahlunto, to work again with their old masters. Working together with the Dutch had nothing to do with the problem of whether one was *Republiken* or not *Republiken*. It was a matter of survival for the Javanese people.


The Revolution by which Independence was won was a central episode of Indonesian history, and it was therefore a powerful element in the Indonesian nation’s perception of itself. All the uncertain groupings that searched for new identities, for unity in the face of foreign rule, and for social order, seemed to come to fruition in the years after World War II. For the first time in the lives of most Indonesians, the artificial restraints of foreign rule were suddenly lifted. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that the result was not the emergence of a harmonious new nation, but a bitter struggle between contending individuals and social forces, between the younger generation and the older generation, the left and the right, between Islamic and ‘secular’ forces, and also between different ethnic groups. This section will show the effects of the Indonesian Revolution on labour control and the miners’ actions in the Ombilin coal-mines.

Though there had been a lack of communication with Java during the period of isolation under the Japanese, the Minangkabau responded quickly to the declaration of independence of August 17, 1945. News of the declaration was received as early as August 17 itself from members of the Domei news agency offices in Jakarta or Bandung. They immediately informed the West Sumatran nationalist leaders, and within a day copies of the proclamation had been run off, and being distributed from the headquarters of the *Hokokai* in Padang and from the *Giyungun* (voluntary army) offices in Bukittinggi (*Haluan*, 10-8-1976; Kahin 1979: 96-97). It was not until August 21 that the 25th Army Command finally announced publicly over the radio that a cease-fire had been reached between Tokyo and the Allies.
A few days after the news of the proclamation of Independence had reached Padang and Bukittinggi, a Balai Penerangan Pemuda Indonesia (BPPI—Indonesian Youth Information Office), later renamed Pemuda Republik Indonesia (PRI), was formed in Padang. Members of organizations who had had a military training during the Japanese occupation, were recruited to join the Tentera Keamanan Rakyat or TKR, the embryo of the Tentara Nasional Indonesia (the Indonesian Nationalist Army) in Sumatra (Kahin 1979:111-12). The rest, who did not have a background of military training, would act as local defence forces and remained in the PRI. After its membership declined, the PRI was transformed into the Pemuda Sosialis Indonesia (Pesindo or Indonesian Young Socialists). The Pesindo was led by Aziz Chan, a religious teacher and former member of the Indonesian Socialist Party or PSI (Ilyas 1973:38-9). Many Sumatran youth leaders, especially from the religious organizations, were however suspicious, and preferred to form their own para-military organizations, including Hizbullah (a body close to the Muhammadiyah), Sabitillah (Majelis Islam Tinggi) and Laskar Muslimin Indonesia or Lasmu (Perti) (Hamka 1966:335-6; Anderson 1972:253-68).

The West Sumatran people responded quickly to political developments at the centre, such as the formation of the Indonesian National Committee or KNI, the founding of political parties, the formation of the national Army and various groups organized to commit themselves to the struggle for Independence. The formation of a Republican administration by the West Sumatran leaders took place before Allied powers had had a chance to reassert Dutch sovereignty. A Local KNI was formed on August 29, 1945. At its first meeting on September 1, Mohammad Syafei was appointed Resident of West Sumatra (Kahin 1979:112-21; Amal 1992:20). Once Hatta signed the decree authorizing the establishment of political parties in Indonesia (Anderson 1972:177-8), several parties had been formed in West Sumatra, each with their own military forces by early 1946.14

The strong local defence groups and the formation of the Dewan Perwakilan Nagari (Representative Nagari Council) that was dominated by the socialist-oriented radical elements of the Partai Buruh Indonesia (The Indonesian Labour Party) or PBI, PKI, PSI, and the PRI made it difficult for the Dutch to reach the hinterland areas. But there were other factors such as the limited military forces of the Dutch in Padang, the topography of the area which made military movements difficult, or the fact that the Dutch considered, economically, West Sumatra to be of less strategic importance than Medan and Palembang. It was only, in their second 'Police Action', launched in December 1948, that the Dutch concentrated their military forces on trying to recapture big towns in West Sumatra, including Sawahlunto (Amal 1992: 23).

How did the people in the small town of Sawahlunto face the Revolution? Directly or indirectly the political developments in West Sumatra during the Revolution had had an inexorable influence on both the small town of Sawahlunto and the Ombilin coal-mines. Sawahlunto and the Ombilin coal-mines benefited from the fact that the Dutch in Padang were unable to reach all the towns in the hinterland. Unlike what happened in the other

14 Fatimah Enar gives the following dates for establishment of some of the major parties in West Sumatra: PKI formed on 12 November; PSII on 18 November; Perti on 26 November; MTKAAN on December 20; MIT on December 25; and the PSI on 12 January. See Enar 1976:72.
mining industries in Sumatra, such as the tin-mines in Bangka-Belitung and the coal-mines and oilfields in South and North Sumatra which were brought under Dutch control without much difficulty, wresting the Ombilin coal-mines from the hands of Indonesian management was difficult. The mines remained under the management of Indonesians until 1948 at least, by which time the mines and the mining society had become accustomed to the needs of the revolution.

The gap created between Javanese labourers and the local community by Dutch management gradually disappeared. This situation was unlike that in other places in Sumatra where Dutch rule re-established very quickly, such as the Bangka-Belitung tin-mines and the plantations in East Sumatra, where the Chinese or Javanese were soon back working under their old Dutch masters (Stoler 1989:93-124).

In the last months of the Japanese occupation, the conditions in the mine and in the mining society at Sawahlunto were very bad. The Japanese who were working in the Hokkaido and Steamship Co. Ltd. were not unaware of or apathetic about these conditions, but the manager, Kubota, was also having to cope with the precarious economic and political situation in which the Japanese found themselves as a result of Allied attacks. Supplying coal desperately needed for the war industry was the main priority of the Japanese managers. In other words, the interests of the state were dominated, and were far more important than the interests of the company. Under such circumstances, the only thing that Kubota could do, was work together with his staff and try to fulfil the demands made on him.

When the news of Independence reached the mining town, the Indonesians, especially the young people who were members of the PRI branch at Sawahlunto, immediately took over all the Japanese offices, the schools, and the Ombilin coal-mines. The take-over went smoothly. Some of the Japanese were even reluctant to leave the town. They joined the groups, preparing to struggle for Independence along with other local inhabitants. After they had been taken over, the Ombilin coal-mines were run by Roesli, a Minangkabau, who had been deputy-director during the Japanese occupation. He was immediately appointed as the manager, a post which he held from September 1, 1945 until January 1, 1947. The system of appointment was based formally on the agreement between the members of the Ombilin staff and the local political leaders and administrators. In practice, the election of the manager was in the hands of the dominant political parties at the local level. It is possible, but so far unproven, that the managers

15 The Dutch government had predicted the stopping of transportation of coal from Sawahlunto to Tanjung Periuk. See ARNAS-RI, *Algemeene Secretarie* no.8. Telegram from Pontianak 1-11-1946 from Co.Amecab to Co-Ordinator Dept. V& W., Kol Droog, no.100/geheim; Letter of the director of the Department of Traffic and Irrigation C. J.Warners to Governor-General in Batavia,4-7-1947,no.A/11858/VW/47/geheim about Steenkolen Voorziening.

16 Unfortunately I do not have the names of the Japanese who joined the battle groups.

17 Roesli was replaced by Abdul Aziz (1947-1948). He is also a former student of *Mijnbouw School*. See Appendix 2.
also acted as representatives of certain political parties. All that remained for the central government to do was to ratify a decision based on the suggestions made from below. Another of the manager's function was to represent the miners' trade union in the local KNI.

In the course of the Revolution, and even until 1960, in fact, the management functions at higher and middle levels were held by former students of the Mining School. Most of them were Minangkabau. One of the reasons for this was the lack of skilled staff who had graduated from university or academy. The nascent Indonesian Republic did not able to produce them. Nevertheless, their experiences during the Japanese occupation had proved that had expertise necessary to manage the company after Independence.

During the Revolution, the management of the Ombilin coal-mines faced a difficult task. On the one hand, the winds of change born of the struggle for Independence put pressure on it. The mines were to be put into a healthier condition by improving production and the living conditions of the mining society. On the other hand, as representatives of a state-owned company, the management was not a free agent and had to obey central decisions, while keeping an eye on local interests. Its relations with the central government, in this case, the General Directorate of Mining, were difficult during the revolution. For one thing, simply keeping in touch was difficult. The main office of the Director moved from one place to another, i.e. from Bandung to Yogya, following the movements of the Indonesian Republic. Therefore, the decisions of the managers The people whom I interviewed, could no longer recall their names were largely determined by considerations at the local level.

During the first months of Independence, manager Roesli, faced by a precarious political situation in the town created by the emergence of the Barisan Maut. This radical group was formed in the village of Air Dingin, consisted of twenty members, headed by Mohammad Nur, a Minangkabau mine labourer. Most members of this group were young Minangkabau. They were jealous of the riches that the Javanese had supposedly obtained from the Dutch. Fed by rumours, envy exploded ethnic conflict to break out between the Javanese and Minangkabau. The latter killed a number of Javanese. This turbulent situation was of only short duration, until another organization of young people, the Pemuda Rakyat, was able to appease the hostility. But the violence had many Javanese labourers worried about working in the mine.

The harsh economic and political situation in which the Republic of Indonesia found itself during the Revolution made it impossible for the management to improve either coal production or living conditions. The financial condition of the Republic was very precarious, and all possibilities to introduce technological innovations in order to increase coal production had to be ruled out. The management went on working in the damaged and seriously dilapidated mine under the same labour system that the Dutch and the Japanese had used before.

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18 Interviews with Atamoso Soehoed, 16-8-1995. A more detailed discussion about this will be found in chapter VI.

19 Interviews with Pak Wahab, 12-4-1995; AR, MvK, Rapportage Indonesie no.480:3.

20 For an interesting study about ethnic conflict in East Sumatra during the Revolution, see Van Langenberg 1976.
The working conditions were even worse. Because of a shortage of machines, the coal was mined only using open-pit mine technology. Because of inappropriate working methods, coal could only be produced in low quantities, namely 72,780 tons in 1945, 50,324 tons in 1946, 40,974 tons in 1947 and 40,974 tons in 1948. The lowest production occurred in 1949, namely 24,353 tons, when the mine was once again under Dutch control. The coal produced was used for local consumption, especially for the railways, the cement works, and for small iron foundries.21

Harsh living conditions were the order of the day throughout the nascent Republic. In West Sumatra, there were widespread shortages of food and clothing. The shortage of clothing was the direct consequence of the Japanese restrictions on imports. Even more disastrous for the population was the rice shortage during the first years of Independence. In April 1946, the aggregate shortage of rice for 1945-1946 was estimated at 35 percent.22 The Allied presence in Padang and then that of the Dutch exacerbated economic conditions in this region. Padang was deprived of its function as the backbone of the West Sumatran economy, because it was blockaded by the Dutch.

Along with the rest of Sumatra, Sawahlunto suffered from a shortage of rice, but conditions were worsened by the very bad economic state of the Ombilin coal-mines. Driven to desperation, it is not surprising that many labourers ran away from the mine. In 1946, 326 labourers escaped from the mines (PTBA-UPO, Archives Buku Register 1942-1949). A large number of the Javanese labourers tried to set themselves up as peasants or wage labourers elsewhere in West Sumatra. Anxious to fill the gap in the labour force, the management made propaganda to promote working in the mine among villagers in the surrounding areas. Most of this campaign was simply wasted energy, as the situation during the revolution was not safe.

The revolutionary conditions also made it difficult for the management to concentrate on coal production because, in addition to mining coal, the mine was also expected to support the revolution. As their contribution to the struggle, the miners were trained to make and use weapons under the supervision of the overseers Zainuddin and Azwar Hamid.23 Many of the overseers were attracted to working in the armaments department feeling, no doubt, that they were helping the groups of freedom fighters outside the mines.

The mine and mining society were involved in the thick of the revolution at least until the return of the Dutch in 1948. There were various battle groups which had been established in the mining town soon after the declaration of Indonesian Independence. Many of the local leaders came from the mine, drawn especially from the higher and middle-level ranks of the mining society. Most were Minangkabau or from other ethnic groups such as the Batak and the Buginese. They were usually Western-educated and enjoyed a higher status. For instance, the battle group of the PRI was led by Andi Radja, a mine overseer, while another group, the Pemuda Rakyat, was led by a colleague of his, Adenan. The members of these organisations

21 Interview with Pak Chaidir Anwar, 8-6-1996.

22 Propinsi Sumatera Tengah, 651-52; Kahin 1979:127.

23 Azwar Hamid worked in this armaments department and received the rank of lieutenant-colonel. After the revolution he gave up work at the mine, and moved to Jakarta and continued his career in the army. Interview with Pak Wahab, 13-3-1996.
were young local people who worked as clerks or as low-ranking civil servants in the administration. They had mixed ethnic background. Some of them were from well-educated Javanese families and others were Batak. According to information collected from interviews, most of the Javanese mine mandors were recruited to become members of the battle groups. Some of them left town when the Dutch returned in 1948, and were involved in battle groups in which they joined the local inhabitants. Some of the Javanese people who were mandors or low-ranking civil servants said that they had been introduced to politics by the higher level staff of the mine. Pak Rahmat, and Pak Kasno, both second generation Javanese labourers, were people whose political choice was closely related to their relations with non-Javanese people during the revolution.

Unfortunately, I lack any detailed information about labour control in the mining town until the Dutch returned in 1948. But it is clear that labour control in the Ombilin coal-mines was dominated by political motives rather than production needs. The mine had become a resource in the revolutionary struggle against the Dutch.

The gradual shifting of ethnic borders affected not just the Javanese mandors; it also spread to the ordinary Javanese miners. The Javanese foremen, participated in the battle groups with the local people, at least until the Dutch returned to the town. In their battle to overcome the harsh economic conditions, the Javanese labourers tried to farm on the land owned by the Ombilin coal-mines and by the local people, which would guarantee them an additional income, and source of food while they continued to work at the mine. This was possible because the work discipline was not so strong compared to the situation under the Dutch management. The overseers and mandors understood the way people were struggling to make ends meet under harsh economic conditions. Making a virtue of necessity, they regulated working hours according to a mutual understanding between the miners and themselves.

During the second military action in December 1948, the Dutch captured all the big towns in West Sumatra, including Sawahlunto. In several of those towns, the Dutch succeeded in keeping the older generation of the West Sumatran leaders, especially those from the adat groups and from among Dutch educated professionals, from being seduced by the Republic. They persuaded them to create a Minangkabau state, named the West Sumatra Special Region (Daerah Istimewa Sumatera Barat or DISBA).24

During this period, the role of West Sumatra as a centre of the national revolution suddenly became more important than before, especially after the Dutch succeeded in arresting the top leaders of the Republic, including Sukarno and Hatta and many Cabinet ministers (Amal 1992:23). Bukittinggi now became the second capital of the Republic succeeding Yogya, when the Minister of Economic Affairs of the Republic, Sjafruddin Prawiranegara, established an Emergency Government, or Pemerintah Daerah Republik Indonesia (PDRI) in Bukittinggi and

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24 Among the leaders in West Sumatra who were attracted to the Dutch plan were Datuk Perpatih Baringek, and Harun Al Rasjid. These men were supported by the leaders of DISBA which was led by Dr. Anas and S. Alaudin. All these efforts received almost no popular support. After the Roem-Van Rooijen agreement of May 1949, when they saw that the winds of politics had turned in favour of the Republic, their leaders hurriedly made a statement which supported the inclusion of the Minangkabau area in the Republic, See Hamka 1966:373.
moved off into the rural areas of West Sumatra when the Dutch occupied that town. The Republic was now centred in West Sumatra, where a Commissariat of the PDRI was set up, under the authority of the West Sumatra-centred government existed until the end of armed resistance in August 1949 (Amal 1992:23; Zed 1997).

What had happened in the meantime at Sawahlunto and the Ombilin coal-mines? Before the Dutch returned in 1948, the Republican army had carried out a scorched earth strategy. The central electricity plant at Salak village and the mining machinery were destroyed at the command of the Head of the Banteng Regiment for the southern command, which had its headquarters at Sawahlunto (Kahin 1979:111). When the Dutch arrived, the army immediately decamped Sawahlunto, taking with it those people who decided to carry on a guerrilla war. Among them were the Javanese foremen.

From fragmented information I have been able to gather that the position of the Dutch during this period was not strong. They lacked the staff they needed to manage the mine because many of the Dutch overseers had died during the Japanese occupation, and those who were still alive had moved away to start working at the mines in the Dutch-ruled areas such as the Bukit Asam and Pulu Laut coal-mines, and the Bangka and Belitung tin-mines.

During the year, the Dutch instituted almost no changes in capital, technology, or management of labour. Coal continued to be produced under the most unpropitious conditions. This is shown by the fact that the lowest production figures for coal were recorded in 1949, namely 24,353 tons. From Dutch reports from Padang, we know that the total number of labourers was about 1,500. There was a tendency for this number to drop, owing to the fact that labourers who became involved in the battle groups left Sawahlunto to join the struggle for Independence. They were mostly local people. According to the report of L.B. van Stratene, Territorial Administration Advisor for West Sumatra, dated June 28 1949, there were only about 1,700 labourers including their families at Ombilin. They were mostly Javanese who felt secure while they remained under Dutch rule. The Dutch planned to recruit Ombilin labourers to work at the Bukit Asam coal-mines, but it is not known whether this plan was ever realized.

Labour conditions under Dutch management in 1948-1949 were better than during the years before. According to comments made by labourers who were working there during that time, the payment system was back to the level it was before the Japanese occupation. A labourer got a salary of 32 cent per day, supplemented by some other basic necessities such as rice and clothes (Interview with Pak Wahab, 19-3-1996). The Department of Social Affairs at Sawahlunto acted as distributor for all these goods. Most Javanese people had very good reasons for opting for their strategy co-operating with the Dutch. Their major concern was that they and their families would survive. Much of their uncertainty sprung from the fact that they...

25 Towns that were under the rule of the Dutch in West Sumatra maintained illegal contacts with the PDRI government. In Sawahlunto, illegal contacts were maintained between people who were working in the Ombilin coal-mines with the PDRI officials in Kototinggi. Reports on mine conditions and the role of the Dutch were passed to Sjafruddin Prawiranegara at Kototinggi by mediators such as Pak Wahab's wife and Situmorang. Interview with Pak Wahab, 19-3-1996.

26 ARA, MvK, Rapportage Indonesia no.483. Mr no.4/19/geh/48.

27 ARA, MvK, Rapportage Indonesia no.483. Mr no.4/19/geh/48.
felt their status at Sawahlunto was marginal, as they had no land or a village to fall back on like the Minangkabau or other ethnic groups from Sumatra. It was also difficult for them to return to their villages in Java. Caught on the horns of a dilemma, the only choice was to co-operate with the Dutch. This choice was not without risk. They were regarded by the local inhabitants as the "kacung Belanda" or Dutch lackeys. This situation continued until the transfer of sovereignty from the Dutch to the Indonesians in December 1949.

There are some important points concerning labour control and work discipline during the period of Revolution which should be reiterated. During the Japanese occupation, labour control by the management was defined more by state political interests than by economic consideration. This is demonstrated by the involvement of the mining society in battle groups and the dual function of the mine as producer of both coal and guns for the struggle. Nevertheless, when the Dutch returned to Sawahlunto and the mine, the work discipline of labourers was fragmented on the basis of ethnicity. The work discipline of the Javanese was higher than that of the Minangkabau, perhaps out of a sense of insecurity they continued to work at the mine under the Dutch control, whereas most of Minangkabau labourers left the mine, unrelenting in their struggle for the Republic. At this time, struggle for economic life was more important than political interests for the Javanese people.

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28 Sudono M. Wiguno, a son of contract labourers, graduated from the Hollandsch Inlandse School (HIS) worked at this department. He really avoided making recriminations against those who were regarded themselves as ‘Republiken’. Interview with Sudono M. Wiguno, 15-4-1995.