Behind the Banner of Unity: Nationalism and anticolonialism among Indonesian students in Europe, 1917-1931

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Introduction

In November 1926, a young Indonesian student in the Netherlands by the name of Mohammad Hatta published an article in *Indonesia Merdeka*, the periodical of the Indonesian nationalist student association in the Netherlands. The article stressed the necessity of foreign propaganda for Indonesia in Europe.¹ Within the next two decades Hatta would become a central figure in the nationalist movement in the Dutch East Indies, the co-signatory with Soekarno of the *Proklamasi* of independence from the Netherlands in August 1945, and the first vice-president of the independent Indonesian Republic. But in 1926 he was still young of age, 24 years old, and only recently elected as chairman of the Indonesian student association in the Netherlands, Perhimpoenan Indonesia (‘Indonesian Association’, PI).

In the article, titled ‘Our foreign propaganda’, Hatta complained that Europeans were largely unaware of the existence of a nationalist movement in the Dutch Indies. “In Europe, one can hear speak of the […] Chinese, Indian, Filipino or Annamite etc. problem, but one never hears about Indonesia. Thus far, the outside world remains ignorant of what happens in our Fatherland.”² The chairman of PI emphasised that it was of fundamental importance for the association to publish articles in French, English and German newspapers, to attend foreign meetings and to meet students and activists from other colonised countries.

With pride, Hatta mentioned the attendance of the PI at the annual Congrès Démocratique International pour la Paix, which had taken place just three months before in Bierville, a small village northwest of Paris. This congress was organised by the French political party Ligue de la Jeune-République, which was a strong proponent of a détente between France and Germany after the First World War, and advocated the advancement of peace through the League of Nations and the Locarno Treaties of 1925.³ At the congress, Hatta and the PI were exotic guests in a European audience of German *Wandervogels*, progressive catholic clerics, high-ranking French politicians and other ‘pilgrims of peace’.⁴ But the Indonesians were not alone in representing the colonised voice. In his article, Mohammad Hatta mentioned that he was part of an ‘Asian bloc’ with six individuals and representatives from different parts of the continent. “For the first time the Western pacifists saw Asia being represented at their congress. And for the first time they heard Asia’s voice,

¹ “Onze buitenlandse propaganda,” *Indonesia Merdeka* 4.5-6 (October-November 1926): 67-72.
which declared in clear language that no lasting peace is possible as long as the oppressed peoples are not free of the foreign yoke.\(^5\)

This Asian bloc, which was formed on an ad-hoc basis, attracts the attention. According to the article, Alimardan Bey Topchubachev from Azerbaijan, Kavalam Madhava Panikkar from British India, Duong Van Giao from French Indochina, Prayun Phamonmontri from Siam (present-day Thailand) and a certain Tung Meau from China were part of it. But who were these people? How did they meet and why did they choose to operate as an Asian bloc? In the article in *Indonesia Merdeka*, Hatta presents this Asian bloc as a group with a common political agenda, with “similar, though for some people still latent ideas”.\(^6\) However, further research makes clear that behind this banner of unity, the small group represented various political traditions, ranging from Francophile anti-communism to anticolonial nationalism, and from moderate colonial reformism on a Western liberal basis to culturalist Pan-Asianism close to the Greater India Society.\(^7\) This raises questions about the political basis for cooperation, and about the position of the Indonesian students within this group.

The fact that these people came from Asia was indeed a common denominator, but how was the situation in Azerbaijan – recently invaded by the Red Army – comparable with colonised British India, or with the formally independent buffer state Siam manoeuvring between French Indochina and the British Empire? What did the Indonesian students mean, when they mentioned ‘Asia’s voice’, and how did this voice change after contact with other Asian voices? Posing and answering questions such as those mentioned above are central to the effort of reaching a more fundamental understanding of the nature of political encounters across national and political divides, and the praxis of cooperation and demarcation in composite political movements and alliances.

The presence of Hatta and his fellow Asian activists at the rather moderate and law-abiding Bierville congress is remarkable as well. It could have been a strategic move to gain access to a prestigious European stage, but interestingly, Hatta was quick to remind his readers that his performance in Bierville was not an expression of loyalty or admiration:

> When we actively participate in the International Democratic Congress in Bierville, this is not because we endorse the […] insufficient methods of the Western democrats to realise universal peace, and discard our revolutionary principle based on [an interpretation of international relations as an] antagonism of powers. No! Our presence in Bierville has only this reason that we want to seize this

\(^5\) “Onze buitenlandse propaganda,” *Indonesia Merdeka* 4.5-6 (October-November 1926): 70.
\(^6\) “Onze buitenlandse propaganda,” *Indonesia Merdeka* 4.5-6 (October-November 1926): 69.
\(^7\) See chapter three.
opportunity to demonstrate the Western democrats the unbreakable bond between any humanitarian principle and the revolutionary struggle for national independence.  

We could take this firm stance as an indication that Hatta did not see the congress in Bierville as a forum to exchange ideas and opinions, or to build a political network among European political elites. Rather, he wanted to teach the attendants an anticolonial lesson. Alternatively, this disclaimer can be interpreted as a message to the Indonesian and Dutch reading audiences of Indonesia Merdeka that the PI remained faithful to its nationalist principles, and carefully protected its political agenda. Either way, it raises the question how the anticolonial nationalist political agenda of the Indonesians – as a small group of youngsters – was influenced by self-pursued encounters with political networks in Europe. The obstinate attitude of Hatta in Bierville is unconvincing when we take into account that Indonesian involvement with larger political power blocs in Europe – such as the communist, liberal pacifist or socialist movements – did not end after 1926. How were the Indonesian claims received by the European audience in Bierville and elsewhere? Did Hatta adjust his message to accommodate the different European audiences? Vice versa, Hatta’s claim leaves us with the question to what extent the Indonesian students were inspired by other political actors and what they learnt from them. In other words, how did the anticolonial message of a small pressure group in Europe survive in a turbulent and non-colonial environment?

‘The rising tide of colour’

These questions stem from the research I conducted roughly six years ago, in the context of my master’s thesis about the same Indonesian association Perhimpoenan Indonesia. The pages of Indonesia Merdeka mentioned several international political events, and revealed that the sphere of activity of the Indonesian nationalists extended beyond the territory of the Netherlands and the Dutch Indies. With hindsight, the thesis remained largely an elaborate inventory of all the meetings and encounters the Indonesian students mentioned themselves, and consequently too closely followed the positive narrative of the sources. As Indonesia Merdeka wrote: “More than ever, Indonesia is known and acknowledged. With the other representatives of colonised and oppressed peoples we have tightened the bonds of friendship

8 “Onze buitenlandse propaganda,” Indonesia Merdeka 4.5-6 (October-November 1926): 71; my translation, original in the appendix.

“…”. Questions such as who these representatives actually were, what their position was in their respective constituencies, and how Indonesians related to the political dynamics within the networks in which they got involved, were insufficiently addressed.

The present dissertation attempts to fill this lacuna, and describes the emergence of Indonesian nationalist and anticolonial thought against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving global stage, and in coherence and contestation with other political movements and networks. A basic assumption of this dissertation is that Indonesian nationalism and anticolonialism did not develop in isolation. The end of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of powerful political democratisation and liberation movements in various parts of the colonised world. They were epitomised by parties and iconic leaders such as the Indian National Congress (INC) around Mahatma Gandhi, the Guomindang (GMD) around Sun Yat-sen in China, and the Wafd Party around Saad Zaghloul in Egypt. The various political organisations in the Dutch Indies, such as Boedi Oetomo, Sarekat Islam, or Perserikatan Kommunist di India/Partai Komunis Indonesia – to name only the most well-known – emerged in this same era and were well aware of developments in other parts of the colonised world. Each of the Indonesian organisations developed – in the words of Rebecca Karl – a “synchronic global historical consciousness”, a distinct discursive geography of engagement with movements and struggles which they found inspiring and instructive for their own movement, and which they used to support their own claims.11

What is more, despite the many colonial restrictions on the movement of people, journals and ideas, these Indonesian political organisations were active beyond the borders of the Dutch Empire. Within global centres such as Singapore, Shanghai, Cairo, Moscow and Paris, activists exchanged ideas, established connections, and found exile.12 Sometimes this interaction occurred in explicitly political environments, but often they took place within the context of religion, trade, or education as well.

This study elaborates on encounters between Indonesian nationalists and other anticolonial activists in one of the global centres – Western Europe as a place where multiple empires connected to each other – and aims to describe them in as much detail as possible.

The simple fact that Hatta and others met inspiring people in smoky Parisian cafés and at prestigious international conferences is only the starting point to explore the networks that facilitated these encounters, the political transfers that were the result from them, and the complex political negotiations behind expressions of unity and solidarity. Consequently, this study is as much about the dynamics within organisations, networks, and political ‘solar systems’ around the Indonesians, as it is about Indonesian nationalists themselves.\(^{13}\)

**The Perhimpoenan Indonesia and the Indonesian political landscape**

In order to position Indonesian nationalism and anticolonialism in a global context, this study focuses on the Perhimpoenan Indonesia. The total membership of this student association was small when compared to youth organisations in the colony, or to other anticolonial organisations in Europe such as the Étoile Nord-Africaine and European branches of the Chinese Guomindang Party. It grew from some dozens of members in the first two decades of the twentieth century, to reach a membership of around 150 people in the peak years before the Great Depression.\(^{14}\) However, it was a remarkable group in Indonesian history. As many Indonesia scholars have recognised, Indonesian nationalism as an ideology that transgressed regional and religious affiliations, found its first articulation within this group.\(^{15}\) Many of the students who once studied in the Netherlands – Mohammad Hatta for instance, but also Soetan Sjahrir, and Ali Sastroamidjojo – would play a prominent political role upon returning in the colony. Former students from the Netherlands also took a leading role in early postcolonial state formation, with the future vice-president Mohammad Hatta again as the most clear example. Consequently, scholarly interest in this organisation has been large.

In previous studies the Perhimpoenan Indonesia has been either regarded as a peculiar group within the Indonesian political landscape, or described in the context of Dutch anticolonial politics. In the first perspective, the students interacted from an eccentric position with various Indonesian political organisations, such as the Algemeene Studieclub in Bandung, the Indonesische Studieclub in Surabaya, or parties such as Boedi Oetomo, the

\(^{13}\) For a very systematic study on the communist ‘solar system’ around the League against Imperialism, see Fredrik Petersson, *We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers: Willi Münzenberg, the League against Imperialism and the Comintern, 1925-1933* (PhD diss., Åbo Akademi University, 2013), 34-36.


Partai Sarekat Islam and the Partai Nasional Indonesia. Isolated from the turbulent politics of everyday in the Dutch Indies, the students in the Perhimpoenan Indonesia were among the first to realise that ethnic, religious and social divides prevented the movement for democratisation and autonomy from building effective political pressure against the colonial authorities. As a voice coming from afar, the PI began to advocate unity in the movement and non-cooperation with the colonial authorities, and via the return of its members it succeeded in gaining influence in existing political parties. As such, the PI affected the course of the Indonesian nationalist movement at large.

In this reading, the ‘Westernising’ political influence of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia plays an important role. In fact, the (former) students of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia constituted the core of what is often referred to as the Angkatan 1928, or the ‘Generation of 1928’. In Weinstein’s definition, this political generation, which followed after more traditional political organisations such as the Javanese nationalist Boedi Oetomo, had received education following a European model in the Dutch Indies or in the Netherlands, had a strong orientation on Western intellectual traditions, and began to see Dutch colonialism as an intrinsic part of an international capitalist economic system. Often, they were strongly influenced by Marxism and other Western intellectual currents, had an intellectualist political approach, and were pioneers in establishing modern organised political organisations in the Dutch Indies.

This ‘Western’ influence was important in the analysis of some scholars who believed it to be the prime difference between two important tendencies in Indonesian secular nationalism from 1931 onwards: an ‘Indonesian’ populist movement around Soekarno’s

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18 The year 1928 refers to the year of the Sumpah Pemuda (‘Youth Oath’), a defining nationalist moment when a dozen youth organisations from different parts of the archipelago swore allegiance to the idea of unitary nationalism, beyond regional and religious divides, with one fatherland (Indonesia) and one language (Bahasa Indonesia). Subsequent political generations are the Angkatan 1945, and the Angkatan 1966, referring to the beginning of the Indonesian National Revolution and the overthrow of President Soekarno by General Soeharto.

Perserikatan Nasional Indonesia (‘Indonesian Nationalist Association’, PNI) and later Partindo, and a ‘European’ intellectualist movement around former PI students Mohammad Hatta and Soetan Sjahrir, who established the Pendidikan Nasional Indonesia (‘New Indonesian Nationalist Education’, PNI Baru) and the Partai Sosialis (‘Socialist Party’) after the Second World War. Although the difference between the two tendencies has been characterised as a difference in personalities (a charismatic populist Soekarno versus an introvert Hatta), a difference in political strategy (an orientation on the masses versus an emphasis on cadre building), and a difference in ideological consistency (a general anti-Dutch policy versus a more sophisticated perception of the nature of imperialism) scholars such as Legge and Dahm continued to stress the ‘Western’ ingredient. As Legge concluded after a systematic comparison between two journals representing the two tendencies:

The differences [between Soekarno and Sartono, and Hatta and Sjahrir] were differences of temper rather than of ideology, which made the New PNI [of Hatta and Sjahrir] in a sense a more intellectual organization in fact than was the old PNI [of Soekarno], more Western, more in tune with the temper of European social democracy of the thirties.\(^{20}\)

It remains unclear, however, what the sources of this ‘Western’ political attitude actually were. Legge, for instance, concluded that both tendencies did not differ fundamentally on ideological levels, and Ingleson remarked that Soekarno and many of his fellow party men had also enjoyed Western education in the colony.\(^{21}\) Consequently much emphasis was put on the Dutch university curriculum, the Dutch social environment, or Dutch political friends in socialist circles. Ingleson, for example, wrote the following about the PI: “These Western-educated intellectuals felt righteously indignant at the impact of the Netherlands on their country, the drainage of its economy, the destruction of its social systems and the belittling of its cultures.”\(^{22}\) Mrázek pointed out that “any member of the association, when he returned home – a man exposed to Holland, and sometimes with a Dutch degree – was thought to be qualified to become a leader”.\(^{23}\) More recently Robert Elson remarked that “the Netherlands was the major site for the development and refining of new ideas about the nature and trajectory of the strange new concept of Indonésia”.\(^{24}\) Implicitly or explicitly, this has led to

\(^{21}\) Legge, “Daulat Ra’jat,” 166; Ingleson, *Road to Exile*, 193.
\(^{22}\) Ingleson, *Perhimpunan Indonesia*, 14.
\(^{23}\) Mrázek, *Sjahrir*, 68.
an image of Indonesian nationalism as a Dutch colonial by-product, which eventually – analogous to the making of the working class – would be the grave digger of colonialism itself. In the words of Benedict Anderson: “the colonial state engendered the grammar of the nationalisms that eventually arose to combat it”.25

This study argues that it was not just the Dutch society or the Dutch university curriculum that provided the students with authority and legitimacy in the Dutch Indies, although these undoubtedly provided social networks, practical skills and political ammunition to effectively counter the Dutch colonial status quo. Instead, I want to call the attention to their unique political position on the European stage, which facilitated direct relations with inspiring anticolonial movements abroad, and propelled their political career in the Dutch Indies. These foreign relations – or Dutch political repression as a reaction to these relations – brought the students of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia a reputation in the Dutch Indies, and provided a direct stimulus for organisations back home to elevate the small student organisation to an advanced post of the Indonesian national movement on the international stage.

The Perhimpoenan Indonesia and the Dutch political landscape
A second body of literature describes the Perhimpoenan Indonesia as part of the Dutch social and political landscape.26 In this approach, their historical relevance was derived from the fact that they brought anticolonial opposition to the heart of empire. Often, these publications describe the complicated relationship of the nationalist students with their non-nationalist and conservative compatriots, with Dutch political parties such as the Communistische Partij Holland (‘Communist Party Holland’, CPH) and the Sociaal Democratische Arbeiders Partij (‘Social Democratic Workers’ Party’, SDAP), and with individuals such as the revolutionary socialists Henk Sneevliet and Henriette Roland Holst, and social liberals such as Jacques Henrij Abendanon and Cornelis van Vollenhoven. Crucial was also the direct confrontation

Biographies tend to focus less on one of the two contexts: René Karels, Mijn aardse leven vol moeite en strijd, Raden Mas Noto Soeroto, Javaan, dichter, politicus 1888-1951 (Leiden: KITLV, 2010); Mrázek, Sjahrir; Poeze, Tan Malaka; Rose, Indonesia Free.
of the students with the Dutch authorities in 1927. Especially in the 1920s, the Perhimpoenan Indonesia constituted the most vocal opposition to Dutch colonial rule in the Netherlands.

This body of literature assigns great importance to structural factors that led to the political evolution of the Indonesians in the Netherlands. The very experience of migration and exile, and the social promotion from a colonised ‘Native’ to the European political and social elite, made the students receptive of progressive thought. The political environment in the Netherlands was much less restrictive than the atmosphere in the colony, and provided the students the possibility to gain experience in anticolonial politics. Furthermore, the fact that students from various parts of the archipelago were equally regarded as ‘Indisch’ or ‘Indonesisch’, and were part of the same colonial educational pyramid, stimulated the emergence of a new Indonesian self-identification beyond the Javanese, Minahasan or Minangkabau identities. It is a fascinating idea that Indonesian anticolonialism grew from the belly of the beast.

Reading these publications, one gets a clear impression of the social and political life of this small colonial community in interwar Holland. Apparently, the Indonesian students thrived well in the higher echelons of the Dutch society, and succeeded in taking a centre stage position in the colonial debate. We should, however, not forget that despite the propagandistic success of the students, the Perhimpoenan Indonesia as an organisation – too radical for some, and too elitist for others – was actually highly isolated from a political point of view. The students received most recognition and esteem from organisations beyond the borders of the Netherlands, and they regarded foreign propaganda and organisation as a core activity of the association.

Although I recognise the importance of structural social factors that put them in a privileged social position in the Netherlands, it was the lack of support from Dutch established political organisations from the left and the right which forced them to seek support in informal political networks abroad. Therefore, this book situates the Indonesian political experience of the PI within a European political sphere, as part of a global anticolonial movement. I take the PI neither as an imperial organisation that was ‘educated’ by Dutch university professors of the ‘ethical policy’ or politicians of the anticolonial left, nor as a Dutch migrant organisation which gave a voice to the Indonesian student community in the Netherlands. It was an Indonesian group which had extended its activities to a trans-imperial European stage, and which is part of both Indonesian political history and of the history of the anti-imperial left. To quote Erez Manela:
Much of the history of anticolonial movements has been written as if it occurred solely within the boundaries of the emerging nation, or of the imperial enclosure from which it emerged.[…] When we expand our field of vision and place anticolonial nationalist histories within an international context, it is easy to see […] that after World War I, the circumstances for decolonization were generated as much from the international situation as any other.  

The Perhimpoenan Indonesia as a trans-imperial organisation

By emphasising the transnational character of Indonesian anticolonial nationalism, this study connects to several trends in adjacent historiographic fields to transcend the traditional nation-state-centred research focus, namely in the fields of Indonesian studies, anticolonialism studies, nationalism studies and social movement studies.

In Indonesian studies, there is a tendency to break away from the ‘internal’ focus on the Indonesian political landscape itself, or the ‘imperial’ focus on the problematic relationship between Indonesian organisations and the Dutch colonial authorities. Following an upsurge of regional and ethnic studies in the 1980s, scholars began to ask how the different parts of the archipelago maintained independent cultural and social relations, and shared particular histories with areas outside the current Indonesian state. The Strait of Malacca was obviously not just a waterway separating Malaysia from Indonesia, or British Malaya from the Dutch Indies, but was historically and culturally an area of exchange. The same could be said of the Bay of Bengal, the South China Sea, or even the Indian Ocean at large. The presence of sizeable diasporic minorities in Indonesia, such as Japanese, Indians, Hadrami Arabs and above all Chinese similarly demonstrated the limitations of the Indonesian or colonial state as a the central frame of research.

The embedding of Indonesia within a wider Southeast Asian environment, and a wider world, makes one aware that it was not just the colonial relation that shaped Indonesia’s conception of the future, but that political inspiration could come from various sides. With regard to political manifestations of transnational interactions, it is an arresting fact that already in 1952 Kahin recognised that the establishment of the Sarekat Dagang Islam in 1911 was provoked by the emergence of a modern organised Chinese nationalist movement in the Dutch Indies, although he did not elaborate on it further.  

Another classic publication, Ruth McVey’s The Rise of Indonesian Communism, devoted much attention to

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the interaction of Indonesian communists with the international communist world.\textsuperscript{29}

However, only recently the transnational has emerged as a central topic of research, for instance in the work of Michael Laffan, who examined Islamic conceptions of Indonesian nationhood in Jawi communities in the Hejaz and at the Al Azhar University in Cairo.\textsuperscript{30} Interesting is also the recently finished research project ‘Sites of Asian Interaction: Networks, Ideas, Archives’ under direction of Tim Harper and Sunil Amrith, who aimed to write the history of South and Southeast Asia as a coherent whole by focusing on specific sites of interaction such as madrasahs, plantations, universities and port cities.\textsuperscript{31} The authors tried to find cultural and political identifications that developed parallel to, and sometimes largely autonomous from the colonial experience.\textsuperscript{32}

It is important to acknowledge alternative political narratives that inform the Indonesian political debate, historically and contemporary. But while these studies often try to think beyond the colonial project, the colonial power relation is too important to bypass in the case of anticolonial nationalism. Not only was Indonesian nationalism a political movement in direct contestation with colonialism – the consequences of which some of the students had to endure themselves – the Indonesians also made use of the structures and facilities provided by the colonial system, for example in the form of a study trip to the Netherlands, to establish autonomous anticolonial political relations outside the Dutch Empire.

Over the last few years, the trend to transcend national and imperial research frames can also be discerned in anticolonialism studies. Scholars in this field have come to acknowledge the considerable degree of agency and interaction of anticolonial activists through the institutions of empire. On first sight, the colonial relationship between the Netherlands and the Dutch Indies was almost bilateral, because apart from a few small

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colonies in the Caribbean and some possessions in West Africa, the archipelago was the only sizeable colony of the Netherlands for more than a century. This has led to a dominant historiographical focus on the colonial axis between the motherland and the colony. However, experts of anticolonial movements from the French or the British colonial empires, probably aided by the fact that these empires were truly global, have become more susceptible to intra-imperial mobility of colonial subjects. This awareness has led to several fascinating studies on the interactions between anticolonial movements from different parts of an empire, or even from different imperial realms. Similar to the work of Harper and Amrith on Southeast Asia as a global space of interaction, scholars have focused on other non-national and non-imperial territorial spaces as well, such as the Indian Ocean, the Caribbean, and Eastern Asia. Others attempted to rewrite the history of anticolonial movements by concentrating on confined spaces and global junctions, often but not always

33 Indeed, in the first half of the twentieth century the Netherlands held – and in the latter case still holds – possession of Surinam and six islands in the Lesser Antilles, but this did not lead to extensive political interaction between anticolonial activists from different parts of the Dutch empire. In the period under scrutiny, only the Surinamese communists Anton de Kom and perhaps Otto Huiswoud were active in the same political networks as the Indonesian nationalists of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia. See Rob Woortman and Alice Boots, Anton de Kom: Biografie 1898-1945, 1945-2009 (Amsterdam: Contact, 2009); Gert Oostindie and Emy Maduro, In het land van de overheerders, vol. 2, Antilliaan en Surinamers in Nederland 1634/1667-1954 (Dordrecht: Foris Publications, 1986); Remco Raben, “A New Dutch Imperial History? Perambulations in a Prospective Field,” BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review 128 (2013): 9. Interestingly, historians of the early Dutch empire and of the Dutch East India Company – a multinational company that was active from the Cape of Good Hope to Dejima in Japan – have been much more sensitive to interactions between colonised subjects in different parts of the trade network. For example: Matthias van Rossum, Werkers van de wereld: Globalisering, arbeid en interculturele ontmoetingen tussen Aziatische en Europese zeelieden in dienst van de VOC, 1600-1800 (Hilversum: Verloren, 2014), and for the Caribbean world: Karwan Fatah-Black, “A Swiss Village in the Dutch Tropics: The Limitations of Empire-Centred Approaches to the Early Modern Atlantic World,” BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review 128 (2013): 34; Karwan Fatah-Black and Suze Zijlstra, “Introduction: A Dutch Perspective on Interimperial Encounters in the Caribbean, 1660–1680,” Journal of Early American History 4.2 (2014): 105-112.


imperial metropolises, where activists and movements came together, collided and merged. Several monographs, for example, focused on so-called *Paris Noir*, describing the lively interaction among students and activists from West Africa, Indochina, China and the Maghreb. These migrants were not only confronted with everyday life in the French colonial metropole, but more importantly they met and interacted with many other activists from all corners of the colonial empire.\(^{36}\)

These findings have led to a moderation of the strong traditional historical dichotomy between the ‘metropolis’ and the ‘periphery’, and ‘the West’ and ‘the non-West’. This was not with the aim to trivialise intrinsic colonial processes of exploitation and oppression of one state by another, but to recognise that colonial spatial and political restrictions did not prevent the flow of people and ideas from the colonised parts of empire to its colonising parts, and from colony to colony. Alan Lester and Tony Ballantyne had argued that the empire was essentially one historical space, in which multiple social networks operated and different views and ideologies about the colonial relation circulated. Settler communities, colonial functionaries, artists and scientists, missionary groups, soldiers, and many others travelled through empire, and this was not just a unidirectional flow from the ‘centre’ to its colonies.\(^{37}\) In the Dutch imperial context, Ulbe Bosma has demonstrated the existence of a “creole migration circuit”, with thousands of people who travelled back and forth multiple times in their lives.\(^{38}\) As such, it is self-evident that groups such as the Perhimpoenan Indonesia were active throughout the empire as well. As Alan Lester points out, “it is easy to overlook the

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fact that colonised subjects themselves could and did forge new, anticolonial networks of resistance, which similarly spanned imperial space”.

I would like to continue this train of thought, and argue that the imperial space as a whole is a too narrow political category, when it comes to shaping an international geography of engagements. Actors from colonised areas drew inspiration from ideas, movements and struggles regardless of their own imperial confines. In intellectual terms, this is beautifully demonstrated in *Under Three Flags* by Benedict Anderson, who traced the voyages of three Filipino intellectuals in the second half of the nineteenth century, from Manilla to Barcelona and Berlin, and from Hong Kong to Yokohama. Pankash Mishra similarly positioned the intellectuals Liang Qichao and Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani in an international context, while Rebecca Karl analysed early twentieth-century Chinese opera and described the emergence of a “synchronic global historical consciousness” among Chinese intellectuals of anticolonial movements in various other parts of the “non-Euro-American world”. Moreover, as this study will demonstrate, the ‘rising tide of colour’ as the Indonesian students called it, stimulated them to establish physical connections with anticolonial activists beyond the borders of the Dutch empire. For them, crossing imperial borders was an effective way to circumvent police repression and to find concrete political support.

**Nationalism studies and social movement studies**

In nationalism studies, there is an internationalising tendency as well. For long, the history of the nation was typically written with a strong focus on patriotic social and political movements that emerged from within. The fact that cultural and political nationalist movements and state-building processes took off in many (European) states largely simultaneously from around the turn of the nineteenth century onwards, was often explained as part of a similar process of modernisation and bureaucratisation. There are many publications that attempt to write a comparative and structural analysis of nationalism and

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40 For a similar argument: Raben, “A New Dutch Imperial History?,” 30; Fatah-Black, “A Swiss Village in the Dutch Tropics,” 34.
nation building in several countries. In recent times, scholars have started to write the history of nationalism in several countries as part of a coherent and cross-border movement that was not only synchronic but also interrelated. Either in the form of political and cultural transfers between intellectuals from different nations, or via expatriate communities and circular migration networks nationalist ideas started to gain ground internationally. In an article about romantic nationalism in nineteenth century Europe, Joep Leerssen has characterised the spread of the discourse of nationalism as “viral”. Nationalist intellectuals and academics, philologists in particular, “formed an international network whose tight interconnections may explain the remarkable synchronicity of national movements, in all parts of Europe”. Although the Indonesian students in Perhimpoenan Indonesia lived in different times and under different circumstances, these trends in nationalism studies confirm the relevance of looking at cross-border engagements in writing the history of anticolonial nationalism.

Finally, the attempt to reintroduce the agency of anticolonial intellectuals to make use of, and partially transgress dominant power structures to suit their own interests and agendas, is connected to similar endeavours in social movement studies. Indeed, in literature about the left and national liberation movements the significance of ‘internationalism’ and ‘international solidarity’ is traditionally strong. The fact that the last waves of decolonisation occurred in the context of the Cold War, and that anticolonial movements often appealed to transnational political ideologies such as Pan-Africanism or Pan-Arabism, made scholars sensitive to transnational factors of influence. However, too often research on internationalism has been reduced to state-directed influence of the Soviet Union, China or Cuba on colonised areas, or unidirectional solidarity campaigns in Europe and the United States with non-Western anticolonial movements in the ‘Third World’. Also for the period under scrutiny here – the interwar years – the ‘Spectre of Communism’ is traditionally


strongly present in scholarly research, reducing every study of an anticolonial movement to an assessment of its relation with ‘Moscow’ and the Comintern.\textsuperscript{45}

Only recently, scholars have revised this preoccupation with the Comintern, and have acknowledged that other leftist movements, such as anticolonial nationalism, but also anarchism and dissident leftist activists, were active on the international stage as well, without necessarily partaking in, or even recognising Moscow-led structures and facilities.\textsuperscript{46} In a recent study on anarchism and syndicalism in the colonised and postcolonial world, Arif Dirlik contends in a way that reverberates the regional approach of colonial historians, that “[a]narchism in China is best grasped through a regional perspective that makes it possible to glimpse the many translocal ties within which anarchism flourished for a period of three decades.”\textsuperscript{47} For South and Central America, Daniel Kersffeld has demonstrated that transnational anti-imperial united fronts existed before they came in contact with the Comintern and engaged with the League against Imperialism.\textsuperscript{48} From a different angle, Frederik Petersson and Kasper Braskén have discerned the many actors, structures and movements within a Comintern-dominated organisation such as the 1927 League against Imperialism to be able to see the dynamics and space for manoeuvring of anticolonial activists within these ‘communist organisations’.\textsuperscript{49}

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\textsuperscript{47} Arif Dirlik, “Anarchism and the Question of Place,” in \textit{Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870-1940}, ed. Steven Hirsch and Lucien van der Walt (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010), 132.

\textsuperscript{48} Daniel Kersffeld, \textit{Contra el imperio: Historia de la Liga Antimperialista de las Américas} (Mexico City: Siglo xxi, 2012).

mentioned studies, is that they consciously attempt to break with nation-centred histories of the left.\textsuperscript{50}

This study on Indonesian anticolonial nationalism in Europe – which indeed travelled to Europe on an imperial boat and was organised internationally in a communist sphere – demonstrates that they were keen on finding their own political networks and communities, and protecting their own interests and agendas. Indeed, the event of the Russian Revolution, the very presence of the Soviet Union, and the political strength of the Comintern made the organisational appeal of international communism very strong. But we have to keep in mind that even when anticolonial nationalists cooperated in political structures associated with the Comintern, this did not imply that their activities can be reduced to communist agitation, to ‘fellow travelling’, or that they were – perhaps unconsciously – abused in Soviet propaganda campaigns. Just as it is necessary to study the colonial relation to see how nationalists used it to fit their own agendas, it remains important to study the workings of international communism to see when, where and how the Indonesian nationalists chose to engage with, or distance themselves from this movement.

The praxis of composite political movements and alliances

Implicitly and explicitly, this study draws inspiration from all four internationalising tendencies: Indonesia in the world, anticolonialism across empires, nationalism as an internationalist ideology, and political autonomy in the margins of larger transnational political movements. This study does not only draw on these fields, but also seeks to contribute to them. For the field of Indonesia studies, it attempts to clarify what the Indonesian nationalists ‘really’ did on the international stage, for instance in Bierville in 1926. Their involvement in international networks is often briefly mentioned in a few sentences or paragraphs, usually as the positive result of Indonesian attempts to make propaganda abroad. Instead, I take the foreign engagements of the students in PI as a problematic encounter between a small group of nationalists from a largely unknown country with larger and established political movements.\textsuperscript{51} As mentioned above, this book will enrich our understanding of the PI as a ‘Western’ organisation, and will for the first time also shed light on the international activities of a few lesser known activists in the PI, such as Arnold Mononutu, Samuel Ratu Langie and Achmad Soebardjo.

\textsuperscript{50} Featherstone, \textit{Solidarity}, 11, 41-48; Hirsch and Van der Walt, \textit{Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World}, li.

\textsuperscript{51} For example: Ingleson, \textit{Perhimpunan Indonesia}, 31-35; Rose, \textit{Indonesia Free}, 35-36.
This study may also prove to be relevant reading for scholars of anticolonial movements in general, by tracing the (pre-)histories and social backgrounds of these Indonesian activists. Often, Mohammad Hatta is briefly mentioned in long enumerations of anticolonial activists and not seldomly with the epithet ‘the future first vice-president’. However, there is usually no understanding of who this young student actually was, what the nature of the PI was, and on what mandate they were active abroad.52 In the context of international meetings such as the 1927 Kongress gegen Imperialismus, the PI can be approached as an example of the various small anticolonial organisations, as opposed to European political power blocs and colonial mass parties such as the INC and the Chinese GMD. This dissertation, moreover, hopes to contribute to putting an end to the many misunderstandings and myth-making around Indonesian presence in Europe, for example about Soekarno being present at European congresses and collaboration between Mohammad Hatta and Ho Chi Minh.53

This study on Indonesian nationalism, as a minor faction within the larger anticolonial movement in Europe, can bring more depth to the historiography of transnational anti-imperialism, by enhancing our conception of the dynamics within the anti-imperial front, and the praxis of ‘international solidarity’. On the one hand it is not true that the PI successfully engaged with any European movement or anticolonial struggle they desired. It often proved to be highly complicated to find like-minded activists and to safeguard the own political agenda while cooperating with others. These difficulties also included racism, paternalism and political intrigue. On the other hand, it is equally not true that the PI was overwhelmed by the complicated European political landscape. This study shows that despite the difficult circumstances, it had its own ideas, strategies and agendas, and was no easy victims for political co-optation.

Finally, I take to heart Frederick Cooper’s theoretical reflections on the tendency among historians to ‘globalise’ every aspect of cross-border activity. Although this dissertation clearly aims to position the political work of the Indonesian students in the Netherlands, and the Indonesian national movement as a whole in an international context, I

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try to avoid the pitfall of transnational history writing to frame every foreign encounter as an example of globalisation-before-the-age-of-internet, or to take globalisation as a “single system of connection”. As Cooper rightly argues, the integration of the world economy, the expansion of networks of communication, transnational migration, and colonial conquest are largely asynchronous historical processes, which counteracted as well as reinforced each other.\footnote{Frederick Cooper, \textit{Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 91, 96.} Colonialism contains elements of global integration and connection as well as of spatial segregation and reduced mobility. Therefore, these phenomena should not be lumped together under the label of ‘globalisation’.\footnote{Cooper, \textit{Colonialism in Question}, 105.} Moreover, arguments against the claim that globalisation is a recent phenomenon should not leave unchallenged the conception of globalisation as an everincreasing and irreversible trend. As the Indonesian students will show, “[s]patial affinities could narrow, expand, and narrow again”.\footnote{Cooper, \textit{Colonialism in Question}, 94-95, 109.} A study on transnationalism should therefore specify how connections were established, while indicating the limits, barriers and blockages to cross-border interactions. I can only agree with Cooper, when he writes:

\begin{quote}
The network concept stressed the webs of connection that people developed as they crossed space, countering the somewhat artificial notion of situations as being spatially distinct. […] [But] the network concept puts as much emphasis on nodes and blockages as on movement, and thus calls attention to institutions – including police controls over migration, licensing, and welfare systems. It thus avoids the amorphous quality of an anthropology of flows and fragments.\footnote{Cooper, \textit{Colonialism in Question}, 108.}
\end{quote}

**Methodology and sources**

To analyse the network around the Indonesians requires not only an awareness of the risk to disregard factors that discourage, transform or obstruct interaction. Also methodologically, it presents the researcher with problems of limitation of the field of research. The assumption that we deal with a truly global network that ultimately could encompass the entire world population, implies that we cannot describe a network properly, without destroying the essence of it. As soon as one starts writing about one city, other cities appear. As soon as one selects one person, other people seem equally important. Even in temporal terms, it is tempting to discuss the history of each organisation with which the Indonesian students got involved before and after the interaction with the PI.

\footnote{Frederick Cooper, \textit{Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 91, 96.}
\footnote{Cooper, \textit{Colonialism in Question}, 105.}
\footnote{Cooper, \textit{Colonialism in Question}, 94-95, 109.}
\footnote{Cooper, \textit{Colonialism in Question}, 108.}
This study does not aim to give a complete overview of all engagements of Indonesian students outside the Netherlands in the interwar period. Although the membership of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia seems to provide a well-delineated dataset for computational analysis, we have to take into account that the membership was in constant flux and that quantifiable data are largely absent. I decided to use a qualitative and micro-historical approach describing specific persons in particular places, also because this allows for a better assessment of personal and political impressions and experiences of Indonesians in the field.

The chapters of this book bear the names of a student and a city: Ratu Langie in Zürich, Mononutu in Paris, Hatta and Semaoen in Brussels, and Soebardjo in Berlin. Together, these cases give a prosopographical account of the social and political background of the students, of the aims and objectives of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia, and of the reality of conducting anticolonial politics as a minority in the European political landscape. I deliberately chose to discuss the international activities of a few lesser known individuals, such as Ratu Langie and Mononutu, but it needs to be stressed that other students and cities could have been added as well, for instance Iwa Koesoema Soemantri in Moscow, Darsono in Berlin, or Sosrokarsono in Vienna.

The students and their cities are, however, not selected on an arbitrary basis. First of all, together the chapters have a chronologic order and discuss the most important activities of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia abroad. Secondly, they provide the opportunity to discuss Indonesian engagements with various political world views, such as Pan-Asianism, liberal culturalism, and communism. Moreover, they describe different degrees of integration within the international landscape, from extremely marginal in Zürich, to quite prominent in Brussels, and under repression in Berlin. Finally, the chapters discuss the period in which Indonesian nationalism in Europe was organisationally represented. The Perhimpoenan Indonesia existed before the First World War as a loyalist social club under the name of Indische Vereeniging, and survived the 1930s as a marginal communist front organisation. Also after the war, until today, Indonesian students in the Netherlands continued to gather in platforms and associations. As this study is about anticolonial nationalism, it will mainly discuss the period in which the Perhimpoenan Indonesia was a vehicle of nationalist thought, starting with the First World War and ending in November 1931 with the transformation of the PI to a communist front organisation.

It is good to be explicit about to whom I refer with ‘Indonesian anticolonial nationalists’. In the first half of the twentieth century, all three terms were under negotiation. I use ‘Indonesian’ not as an ethnic category, but largely as a self-applied term of auto-
identification, which was a politicised substitute for ‘inlander’ (Native), ‘Indisch’, or any other cultural identification in the Dutch Indies. The term deliberately excludes Chinese Indonesian students in the student association Chung Hwa Hui, whose world view merits a separate study, as well as Dutch and Eurasian students who were born in the Dutch Indies and also studied in the Netherlands. Politically, as Michael Freeden has indicated, the ideology of nationalism is “thin-centred” and in the Indonesian case it expressed the desire to far-reaching self-determination and ultimately independence. It was unspecific about the timeframe, the preferred constitutional relation to the Netherlands, and the political system that had to be installed after decolonisation. The students advocated full independence in the shortest term possible, but they sometimes differed in opinion on the political basis on which independence was to be built and the permitted strategies of revolution and revolt to reach this goal. With ‘anticolonialism’, finally, I mean all expressions of fundamental discontent with the colonial status-quo, that went beyond complaints of implementation of colonial governance.

Unfortunately, the books and administration of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia themselves are most likely destroyed. After the eruption of communist riots in November 1926 in Java, and in the context of (rightful) fears of police inspections, students seem to have burned documents that contained incriminating information. Furthermore, as members of the organisation participated in the resistance against nazism in the Netherlands during the Second World War, it is likely that other parts of the archive were destroyed in the face of German occupation in 1940. I have not found documents in private archives in Indonesia. We should remember that luggage space was limited upon return to the Dutch Indies, and that the many fearful episodes in Indonesian history did not encourage the preservation of documents. Consequently, most of the information that the students produced themselves is derived from intercepted correspondence in government archives, and from contemporary publications in journals and newspapers such as Hindia Poetra, Indonesia Merdeka, De Socialist, and Recht en Vrijheid. Selections of writings of Mohammad Hatta are assembled in two publications: Verspreide Geschriften and Portrait of a Patriot.


Apart from these primary sources, many students published their memoirs and wrote about their experiences in the Netherlands, sometimes making use of a ghost writer. The quality of these autobiographies varies strongly, and it is important to read the memoirs in relation to the period of writing. Often, the authors were selective in remembering episodes and anecdotes – not necessarily with bad intentions – and with regard to encounters with future celebrities and statesmen there is a strong risk of mythmaking in hindsight. A shared feature of the autobiographies is that they tend to remain factual and avoid to write about feelings, personal impressions and intellectual transformation. This lack of introspection makes it difficult to get an idea of how the individual experienced a certain event and what his subjective impression of other personalities was. Nevertheless, the autobiographies remain important as an access to names, locations, and specific events. Whenever I use autobiographic information for subjective details, I made the source explicit in the text.

Furthermore, much information is derived from governmental and ‘hostile’ archives and source publications. I spent a lot of time in the Dutch National Archive in The Hague, which contains official government reports and correspondence, as well as intercepted correspondence of the students. I gained a lot of valuable information from the Geheim and Openbaar Verbaal-collections of the Ministry of Colonies, as well as from correspondence between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and embassies in Paris, Berlin and Brussels. Finally, the documents compiled by the ‘Raadsman voor Studeerenden’, who was appointed to keep an eye on the students, are very insightful. I also consulted source publications of Harry Poeze and Reinier Cornelis Kwantes, and the digital collection of the Dutch Centrale Inlichtingendienst (‘Central Intelligence Service’, CID). Together with Dutch governmental


63 Nationaal Archief, Den Haag (NL-HaNa), Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken: Geheime Rapporten en Kabinetserapporten, 1868-1940, nummer toegang 2.05.19; Nederlandse Ambassade in Frankrijk te Parijs, 1943-1955; Consulaat te Parijs, 1945-1954; Nederlandse Missie te Parijs, nummer toegang 2.05.57; Ministerie van Koloniën: Geheim Archief [periode 1901-1940], nummer toegang 2.10.36.51.

64 Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Commissariaat voor Indische Zaken, nummer toegang 2.10.49, inventarisnummer 2692-2695.

archives in the Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia in Jakarta and state archives in France, the United Kingdom and Germany, they provide a good insight into the political activities of the Indonesians in Europe, although with a strongly antisubversive approach.

Non-governmental archives, finally, include the collections of the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam, especially the papers of the League against Imperialism, of the Indonesian communist party PKI and a selection of Comintern archive about the situation in the Dutch Indies. Newspaper databases such as Delpher in the Netherlands, and Gallica in France were very useful in providing journalistic accounts of conferences and other concrete historic events.66

Chapter overview
This study is divided in six chapters. The introductory chapter gives an impression of the social and political composition of the Indonesian population in the Netherlands between 1900 and 1940. Among other developments in this community, the changing political profile of the Indische Vereeniging/Perhimpoenan Indonesia is described as a consequence of a changing social profile of the students, and political developments in the Dutch Indies. Chapter two shifts the focus to the European stage, and uses the case of Samuel Ratu Langie in Zürich to illustrate the emergence of an Indonesian political identification as a cause and effect of a new international orientation, and the redrawing of an imaginary map of engagements. This chapter also discusses the relation between ‘regional’ identifications and the self-representation as ‘Indonesian’ on the international stage.

Chapter three zooms in and examines the praxis of political work in a foreign capital in as much detail as possible, with the case of Mononutu in Paris. He travelled to Paris to establish contacts with anticolonial activists in the capital of “men without a country”. Although he was quite successful, it seems that the political character of his network was as much coincidental as intentional. In this chapter Bierville and the ‘Asian bloc’ will be discussed, with much consideration for the internal differences and diverging opinions existing in colonial circles. As will become clear, the Indonesian involvement in Bierville was a performative statement, rather than a real attempt to build political collaboration.

Chapters four, five and six describe the activities of the Indonesians in the context of the League against Imperialism. Chapter four aims to demonstrate that the breakthrough of the students on the international stage was connected to the communist revolt at the end of

1926 in Java, and largely influenced by external developments – in the Dutch Indies and in the international communist world. This chapter will however also demonstrate that the students continued to pursue their own political agenda. Chapter five describes the repression by the Dutch authorities, and the activities of Soebardjo in Berlin as a consequence of it. In the last chapter, the position of the PI within a changing political atmosphere in the League against Imperialism and its Dutch section is studied. Although the PI struggled in both platforms to preserve its own course, and to stand aloof from the struggle between communists and social democrats, it was nonetheless affected by the diminished political space for cooperation on the left. The study closes with an assessment of the end of nationalism in the Perhimpoenan Indonesia in relation to the collapse of political cooperation on the international stage.

Together, the chapters provide an insight into the daily life of Indonesian students in the capital cities of Europe, and give an account of the difficulties of small ‘foreign’ pressure groups to negotiate political space behind the banner of unity.
Figure 1.1: Combined timeline of political events in the Dutch Indies, the Perhimpunan Indonesia in the Netherlands, and anticolonial events in Europe.