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

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Chapter 4
Nationalising a revolt, globalising a struggle
Hatta and Semaoen in Brussels

This chapter discusses the breakthrough of Indonesians at the international stage: their appearance at the Kongress gegen Imperialismus in Brussels 1927. This breakthrough was long pursued by the students, but external developments in the Dutch Indies and in the international communist world were decisive catalysts. The main question of the chapter is to what extent the PI succeeded in retaining its autonomy and agency on the international stage, in the context of political realities in the Dutch Indies and in the anticolonial world.

The end of the previous chapter described how Mononutu and his fellow students came under increasing pressure of the Dutch authorities, who with the aid of French and British security services extended their control beyond the Dutch borders. Ultimately, will be discussed in chapter five, this mounting pressure would lead to police raids and even arrests of PI members in June and September 1927 in the Netherlands. However, in the run-up to these police actions, while Dutch police and intelligence services were compiling extensive files on the students, the PI would experience the climax of its work abroad.

From 10 to 15 February 1927, six months after Indonesian students appeared at the pacifist conference in Bierville, five Indonesian students and activists attended the legendary Kongress gegen Koloniale Unterdrückung und Imperialismus (‘Congress against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism’, henceforth: Kongress gegen Imperialismus) in Brussels. In terms of propagandistic value and organisational appeal, this congress was arguably the most important anticolonial gathering of the interwar period. It marked a short-lived but inspiring confluence of anticolonial and anticapitalist movements in a worldwide struggle against imperialism.

Contemporary participants were well aware of the significance of the conference. On Friday evening 10 February, around eight o’clock, the Kongress gegen Imperialismus was officially opened by the renowned French author Henri Barbusse. The central hall of the neoclassicist Palais d’Egmont, where the conference took place, was full of people, and decorated with posters demanding “Liberté Nationale” and “Egalité Sociale”, and praising Sun Yat-sen and the Chinese nationalist struggle. 300 attendants, predominantly male, were seated in two blocks on either side of a wide pathway. On a low platform at the end of the pathway, a five-
headed honorary committee overlooked the attendants: the Nobel laureates Albert Einstein and Romain Rolland from Germany and France, Soong Qingling, the widow of Sun Yat-sen from China, Georges Lansbury, chairman of the British Labour Party, and Jawaharlal Nehru of the Indian Congress Party. All speeches that evening highlighted the unique character of the congress. As the French novelist and communist Henri Barbusse pointed out: “Zum ersten Male schließen sich die gefangenen, geopferten und gemordeten Völker zu einem Block zusammen.”

In the four following days, delegations from across Europe, North and South America, South Africa, North Africa, the Middle East and Asia held speeches, put resolutions to the vote and gathered in side meetings. A total number of 174 guests came to Brussels, representing 137 organisations from 34 countries. Among them were not only Western communist, social democratic and pacifist parties and unions, but also 71 representatives from the colonised world. According to Willi Münzenberg, the driving force behind the conference, who was also a leading communist propagandist and the chairman of the Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (‘International Workers’ Relief’, IAH), the conference represented a total number of eight million members.

372 Louis Gibarti, Eduard Fimmen and Mohammad Hatta, eds., Das Flammenzeichen vom Palais Egmont: Offizielles Protokoll des Kongresses gegen koloniale Unterdrückung und Imperialismus, Brüssel, 10-15 Februar 1927 (Berlin: Neuer Deutscher Verlag, 1927), 14: “For the first time, the imprisoned, sacrificed and murdered peoples form a united block.”

With five participants the Indonesians were a medium-sized delegation. Apart from Mohammad Hatta, who had just been re-elected as chairman of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia, the Indonesian group included three other students from the Netherlands, all between 25 and 30 years old: Nazir Pamontjak, Gatot Taroenomihardjo, and Achmad Soebardjo, who also went by the name of Abdul Manaf. The fifth Indonesian attendant was the communist organiser Semaoen, who had provided the Indonesian students with an invitation. On Friday evening, the second day of the congress, the situation in Indonesia was on the agenda. The official protocols of the congress mention Hatta as speaker, but Indonesian accounts, as well as in press and secret service reports indicate that Pamontjak acted as the spokesman. The thirty-year-old Mohamed Nazir Datoek Pamontjak had been among the first students who arrived in the Netherlands after the First World War. He had introduced Mohammad Hatta in the Indonesian student community in the Netherlands and was chairman of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia in 1923-1924. He was one of PI’s most vocal nationalist members and was well positioned to give the speech. In 45 minutes Pamontjak discussed the geography, history and economic characteristics of Indonesia. Just as Hatta had done in Bierville, Pamontjak began his speech sketching the contours of the archipelago and placing Indonesia literally on the world map. He stressed the importance of his fatherland by stating that the Dutch Indies, because of its natural resources and its location between the Indian and the Pacific Ocean, was predestined to play an important role in the near future. In the subsequent minutes, Pamontjak discussed the history of Indonesia’s colonisation, its economic exploitation, and the human suffering that resulted from it.

Judging from the size and from the limited attention it received in contemporary press reports, the Indonesian delegation was just one of the many colonial delegations, scheduled to speak between Egyptian and West African representatives. However, behind the screens Mohammad Hatta played an active role in the official and organising circles of the Kongress gegen Imperialismus. Many sessions were chaired by the Dutch trade unionist Edo Fimmen, but on Saturday evening, when Fimmen had to speak himself, Hatta was asked to hold the gavel. As pictures show, Hatta also chaired at least one of the meetings of the presidium of the congress.

375 Hatta, Memoir, 104-106; Subardjo, Kesadaran nasional, 92.
376 Gibarti, Das Flammenzeichen vom Palais Egmont, 131-142
377 Gibarti, Das Flammenzeichen vom Palais Egmont, after 140.
The fact that he was fluent in Dutch, German, English and French made him suitable as a chairman. But there must have been political reasons for Hatta’s prominence as well. More important than chairing these sessions, Hatta was also elected in the newly established Executive Committee. On the last evening of the congress, it was decided to establish a permanent organisation: the Liga gegen Imperialismus, Koloniale Unterdrückung und für National Unabhängigkeit (‘League against Imperialism, Colonial Oppression and for National Independence’, or League against Imperialism, LAI). The Executive Committee was to represent the League in between conferences, to determine the agenda of its conferences, and to conduct and distribute propaganda against the colonising powers. Moreover, it played a collecting, distributing and coordinating role among the many affiliated organisations.378

In this Executive Committee, Mohammad Hatta – a 25-year-old student with limited political experience and, as we will see, almost no political mandate – joined a group of established activists and politicians such as Nehru, Münzenberg and Fimmen, but also Liao Huanxing on behalf of the Chinese Guomindang Party, Lamine Senghor who represented Comité de Défense de la Race Nègre and was active in the PCF, George Lansbury from the British Labour Party, Albert Marteaux who was a socialist MP in Belgium, and finally the Argentinian socialist writer Manuel Ugarte.379 Consequently, Hatta acquired a large network of influential political leaders and activists, which boosted his prestige in the Indonesian national movement.

378 Gibarti, Das Flammenzeichen vom Palais Egmont, 228.
379 Gibarti, Das Flammenzeichen vom Palais Egmont, 241-242. Petrus Blumberger and Poeze mention that Semaoen was also elected in the Executive Committee but I have found no evidence for this. Semaoen was a member of the General Council of the League, but this body contained 32 persons: Petrus Blumberger, De nationalistische beweging, 193; Poeze, Politiek-Politionele Overzichten, 1:ci.
The LAI as a central episode of PI history

The League against Imperialism belongs to a central episode of the history of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia. The Kongress gegen Imperialismus, and the League against Imperialism that stemmed from it, were an enduring point of reference and pride for subsequent generations of Indonesian nationalists.\(^{380}\) Not only would the students get the opportunity to meet renowned political leaders from the colonised world, but it would also bring them in direct confrontation with the Dutch authorities, leading to house searches, arrests and a lengthy trial in 1927.\(^{381}\) Equally, the Kongress gegen Imperialismus left its marks in historiography. Of all international engagements of the PI students, the Kongress gegen Imperialismus and the LAI have received most – though still limited – attention of Indonesianists studying the political history of the late colonial period.\(^{382}\) Furthermore, the involvement of Indonesians in the LAI is one of the few episodes of Indonesian activity that is regularly mentioned, in general histories of international anticolonialism and leftist internationalism.\(^{383}\)

Yet, despite this relatively large attention, both scholarly traditions fail to grasp the dynamics behind the Indonesians presence in the LAI. Among Indonesianists, the Indonesian involvement in Brussels functions as an illustration of the successful emergence of Hatta and his fellow students in Europe in the Indonesian nationalist movement. The introduction at the Kongress gegen Imperialismus is understood as the reward for their conscious attempts to get their message across with other movements and peoples, and demonstrates their suitability to become political leaders in the Dutch Indies. This approach fails to address the question why the organising parties of the LAI were willing to provide this tiny Dutch student organisation a political platform and even include them in the Executive Committee. That the PI succeeded in presenting its claims on the international stage is clear, but how these claims were received by the other attendants remains equally unanswered.

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\(^{381}\) See chapter five.


In scholarly research on transnational anticolonialism and interwar internationalism, the Indonesian delegation usually appears in a long list of organisations and movements from the colonised world that were approached and mobilised by anticolonial and communist structures in Europe, such as Willi Münzenberg’s IAH, the Comintern and the LAI itself. In these works, Hatta and the PI are taken as a pars pro toto for the Indonesian national movement at large, perhaps justified by the fact that Hatta would later become a prominent politician. There is, however, less understanding of who this young man was in 1927 – before he acquired prominence – what his position was in the PI, and how this organisation was embedded in the Indonesian political landscape. Furthermore, traditional studies on anti-imperialist networks in the interwar years usually concentrate on the main organisers in these networks, who are often Western communists, socialists, artists and intellectuals. They are less sensitive to the political perspectives, tactics and experiences of smaller anticolonial delegations, such as the PI, but also of the Algerian Étoile Nord-Africaine, and of representatives from Latin America, Korea and Arab countries, or even of Chinese attendants representing the large and powerful GMD.384 The mobilisation of these ‘bourgeois’ nationalist organisations from the colonised world is typically described as a result of the United Front Policy of the Comintern and of organisational efforts of Willi Münzenberg and other Western communists. It is, however, not explained why these organisations were interested in engaging with structures affiliated to the Comintern.

This chapter will therefore discuss the attitude of the students within the PI towards the communist movement in the Dutch Indies, the Netherlands and on the international stage, in the run-up to their engagement in the LAI. Secondly, the chapter will devote attention to the attitude of the communist world towards the Indonesian national movement, both in the Dutch Indies and in international communist networks. It will become clear that the PI, as a tiny Dutch student association, found itself in a unique position to represent the Indonesian movement at the Kongress gegen Imperialismus, following a failed communist uprising of November 1926. In previous chapters, a micro-historical focus was applied to describe the journeys of Ratu Langie in Zürich and Mononutu in Paris. The networks that they built in these cities were largely the result of the PI’s own effort and initiative. However, with regard to the LAI the prominence of Hatta and the PI cannot be understood from internal explanation schemes alone. Instead, this chapter will approach the introduction of the PI on

384 An exception is Fredrik Petersson, who also devotes attention to smaller anticolonial groupings in his comprehensive dissertation about the LAI. However, the major part of the book remains focuses on the ‘Communist solar system’. About the PI: We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers, 123-124, 179-183.
the international stage in Brussels from several sides: as part of the history of the PI itself, as a reaction to the destruction of the communist movement in the Dutch Indies, and as the result of heated debates in the higher echelons of the Comintern and the IAH.

First approach: Mohammad Hatta’s rise to prominence
With regard to the first approach, it is worthwhile to devote attention to Hatta’s political background and to his attitude towards communism, in order to understand the motives of the PI to engage with a ‘communist’ organisation such as the LAI. Mohammad Hatta was born in 1902 in Fort de Kock, present-day Bukittinggi. This town was an administrative centre and military outpost in the hills of West Sumatra, a region better known as the Minangkabau region. While Mononutu’s and Ratu Langie’s parents had acquired a prominent position within the colonial bureaucracy, Hatta’s elite status was derived from different sources.

Hatta came from a mixed religious and commercial background. His paternal grandfather had established a Sufi Islamic learning centre and mosque near Fort de Kock, and his father worked in this centre as an ulama, a Muslim scholar. However, due to the early death of his father, Hatta was more influenced by his mother and stepfather, who belonged to well-to-do business families. In his autobiography, Hatta described his youth as a constant negotiation between a religious upbringing, with the possibility to study in Mecca or Cairo, and a Dutch education which was much more useful to acquire business skills. Around the age of 10, Hatta enrolled in a Dutch elementary School in Padang, as one of the few Minangkabau children, but he also had a private religious teacher.

385 Hatta, Memoir, 22-23.
As a young boy, Hatta was very conscious of his ethnic background and, as he mentions in his autobiography, he was often harassed by white children, for example during the Balkan War of 1912 in which the Muslim Ottomans were defeated by Christian Orthodox Balkan states. He was constantly reminded of his cultural inferiority by his teachers, and highly esteemed historical figures at home, such as Imam Bonjol and Diponegoro, were condemned as bandits and rebels at school. Moreover, Hatta recalls how he, at the age of six, was witness of a local uprising in the Kamang district near Fort de Kock, which left over 100 people dead and led to the banishment of his beloved uncle Rais.\(^{386}\)

These personal experiences formed the backdrop of the early political awakening of Mohammad Hatta. At a political rally in Padang at the end of 1917, when he was 15 years old, he was recruited in the Jong Sumatranen Bond by the earlier mentioned Nazir Pamontjak. The two became good friends and until the 1930s, the political lives of Hatta and Pamontjak ran largely parallel. Pamontjak was from the same Minangkabau region as Hatta, but he was five years older and he had already moved to study at the Koning Willem III HBS in Batavia – the same school as Mononutu. In Batavia, Pamontjak had been one of the founders of the Jong Sumatranen Bond, which was established after the example of Jong Java and which campaigned for democratisation and autonomy for the Sumatran population.\(^{387}\)

Hatta was inspired by this political youth organisation and, on the request of Pamontjak, he became the treasurer of a branch in the capital city of the Minangkabau region, Padang.\(^{388}\)

As with many young activists at this stage, the political identity of Hatta and Pamontjak was eclectic and diffuse. Throughout his life, Hatta was a devout Muslim observing the religious duties of Islam, without choosing sides in the intense social and political strives between modernist, Sufist and Wahhabist religious streams. His Dutch schooling introduced him to Western philosophical and political traditions, and through the historical introduction on socialism of H.P.G. Quack, Hatta became interested in Marxist thought, which appealed to his fascination for economics.\(^{389}\) Although Hatta would never call himself a Marxist, his student writings often revealed Marxian explanation schemes. They helped him to understand the economic rationale behind Western colonisation, the continuous pressure on wages, and the exploitation of labour.\(^{390}\)

\(^{386}\) Hatta, Memoir, 9-11, 26-27.
\(^{387}\) Hatta, Memoir, 42-45; Rose, Indonesia Free, 9.
\(^{388}\) Rose, Indonesia Free, 10.
\(^{389}\) Mrázek, Sjahrir, 65
\(^{390}\) Rose, Indonesia Free, v-vi; Ingleson, Road to Exile, 6-7; Hatta, Memoir, 69-72.
Hatta has often been characterised as a quiet, introvert and intelligent boy, who seldom allowed his emotions to surface. Throughout his political career, and much unlike someone like Soekarno, Hatta was rather restrained, and not inclined to use dramatic effect in his public speaking. According to his biographer Mavis Rose: “[h]is solemnity sometimes made him appear morose, yet this was deceptive. Under his reserve lurked a warm, gentle, and compassionate nature.”\(^{391}\) Hatta was a studious boy, an obsessed reader, and his distaste for drama made him diplomatic by character.\(^{392}\)

After graduation of the MULO in May 1919, Hatta enrolled in the HBS Prins Hendrikschool in Batavia, which was a school that prepared for a commercial career. In Batavia he became treasurer once again in the Central Jong Sumatranen Bond, the poor financial situation of which Hatta improved with a firm hand. His period in Batavia also brought him in contact with youngsters from other regions of the archipelago. Hatta was a classic example of someone moving along Benedict Anderson’s educational pyramid, driving colonial students and functionaries from regional centres to provincial, colonial and imperial capitals, shaping their colonial awareness along the way.\(^{393}\) However, an important difference between Hatta and other Indonesian students was the fact that Hatta’s ambitions were not necessarily limited to a career in the colonial administration, and that he had already experienced colonial violence in his personal and familial life before he sought confrontation as an anticolonial activist. This probably explains his relatively uncompromising and hostile anti-Dutch attitude as a student. In Batavia, Hatta and other students began to think of overcoming the regional divisions within the youth movement, and made plans to start a Malay language nationalist journal. However, before that happened, Hatta’s radical uncle Rais, with whom he lived in Batavia, convinced him to follow the example of Pamontjak and continue his education in the Netherlands.\(^{394}\) On 5 September 1921, Hatta arrived in the Netherlands. He found a room in Rotterdam, and enrolled in a business school in that same city.\(^{395}\)

Hatta in the Netherlands

Soon after his arrival in the Netherlands, Hatta re-established contacts with Pamontjak. The latter was among the first students who arrived in Europe after the First World War.

\(^{392}\) Rose, *Indonesia Free*, v-vi, 1, 22; Ingleson, *Road to Exile*, 3; Mrázek, *Sjahrir*, 67.
\(^{393}\) Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 121-131.
\(^{395}\) Hatta, *Memoir*, 104.
Pamontjak studied law in Leiden, but also got involved in the Indische Vereeniging. He was its treasurer in 1920, but mainly played a role behind the scenes. Just as he had asked Hatta to get involved in the Jong Sumatranen Bond, he suggested the latter to become a member of the Indische Vereeniging. To Hatta, he explained that the organisation had recently made a political turn, and had principally discarded the use of the term ‘inlander’ (‘Native’) for being derogatory. For the transition process, Pamontjak needed a good treasurer, and, as he told Hatta: “Your name as treasurer of the [Jong Sumatranen Bond] is being mentioned ever since you arrived here”. Hatta agreed, and became a member within a month after his arrival. Immediately, he was appointed as treasurer by the new chairman Hermen Kartowisastro, who also owed his position to Pamontjak’s negotiations.

Much has been written about Hatta’s position in the Indische Vereeniging/Perhimpoenan Indonesia. From September 1921 until February 1926, Hatta was the treasurer of the association, after which he assumed position as chairman until the end of 1929. He was generally recognised as the driving ideological force behind the association, with his studious nature, and with the largest library of all Indonesian students in the Netherlands. Relevant for this study is the fact that Hatta, as has been mentioned before with regard to the students in general, had a strong international orientation, and an awareness that foreign propaganda was indispensable to win the world’s public opinion for Indonesian independence. Hatta’s involvement in the peace conference in Bierville has been discussed in the previous chapter, and in the IV/PI journal Hatta wrote several articles on ‘Indonesia in the world community’, and ‘Indonesia in the Middle of the Asian Revolution’. Another indication of his international orientation are his excursions abroad, such as for instance his trip to Denmark, Sweden and Norway in the summer of 1925 to study the cooperative movement in these countries. There, he visited farmers and fishermen’s cooperatives, which collectively

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396 Hatta, Memoir, 106.
397 Hatta, Memoir, 123.
398 For example: Rose, Indonesia Free, 17-58; Poeze, In het land van de overheerser, 1:188 passim; Ingleson, Road to Exile, 3-29; Ingleson, Perhimpunan Indonesia.
organised the export of dairy products and fish. In Sweden, he also visited a collective of producers and consumers, which exchanged products and services without payment. These cooperatives inspired Hatta. In his view, they could be used in the Dutch Indies to by-pass the dominance of Chinese and European merchants and financers in the colony’s economy, and to empower Indonesian smallholders and artisanal workers. He would continue to write about the Scandinavian cooperative system throughout his life.400

In search of unity: cooperation with communists on a nationalist basis

Another frequent trope in the writings of Hatta in his student years, was the hopelessly divided Indonesian political landscape of the time. In the early 1920s, the moderate Islamist Sarekat Islam, had just expelled its radical branches, which were heavily influenced by the Indonesian Communist Party PKI. Moreover, there was a strong division between mass organisations focusing on the vast peasant population and organisations such as Boedi Oetomo that were centred around the interests of the traditional elites. Finally, Hatta had experienced himself that there was a tendency among youth organisations to organise along regional and ethnic lines. According to Hatta, disunity was the main reason for the inability of Indonesians to effectively challenge the colonial government.401 As a statement against this disunity, Hatta had provided input on the new principles of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia that were proclaimed in 1925. Here, the association emphasised, among others, that:

1. Only a united Indonesia putting aside particularistic differences, can break the power of the oppressors. The common aim – the creation of a free Indonesia – demands the building of nationalism based on a conscious self-reliant mass action. […]
2. An essential condition for the achievement of this aim is the participation of all layers of the Indonesian people in a unified struggle for Independence.
3. The essential and dominant element in every colonial political problem is the conflict of interest between the rulers and the ruled. The tendency of the ruling side to blur and mask this must be countered by a sharpening and accentuation of this conflict of interests.402

As mentioned in the first chapter, this statement remains vague on the character of ‘the rulers’ and ‘the ruled’. It is for example unclear to which category Arab and Chinese organisations

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402 “Bestuurswisseling,” Indonesia Merdeka 3.1 (February 1925): 3; my translation, original in the appendix. Ingleson, Road to Exile, 6.
belonged. However, Hatta’s plea for unity implied that he favoured cooperation with communist organisations such as the PKI on nationalist grounds. Although the PI refuted the communist juxtaposition of labouring and capitalist classes, the students also argued that in a colonial society an indigenous bourgeoisie did not exist, and the capitalist class fully coincided with foreign colonial domination. In this way, anticolonialism and anticapitalism converged.

With this open attitude towards Indonesian communists, Hatta occupied a difficult political position. Being in the Netherlands, and seeing the inability of the Indonesian political parties to challenge the colonial status quo, Hatta began to advocate the establishment of a national alliance which united all political groupings behind a programme of independence. Via returned PI students that had joined political organisations in the colony, such as Soekiman Wirjosandjojo within the Partai Sarekat Islam and Sartono in the Comité Persatuan Indonesia, Hatta tried to form a national political bloc, based on earlier attempts in 1918 and 1923. However, rifts were deep, and most political organisations refused cooperation with communists. Even the group that stood closest to the Perhimpunan Indonesia, the Algemeene Studieclub in Bandung, refused to accept members of the PKI. This was against the taste of Mohammad Hatta. In an intercepted letter to Sudjadi in the Dutch Indies Hatta wrote:

We are here of the opinion that [the chairman of the Algemeene Studieclub] is wrong tactically, for by his action he will disappoint the national ‘communists’, while we in fact are endeavouring to form a national bloc with a strong radical nationalist hue and with the communists by our side. Cooperation with the communists does no harm; on the contrary, provided we do not lose sight of our principles, it strengthens the creation of a national bloc. This is very easy for in the first instance the Indonesian communists have the same aim as us, i.e. Indonesian Independence. And the decision of the Comintern of Moscow a few years ago [in July 1924] forbids them fighting against revolutionary nationalists; even further, they must support the latter in their activities to achieve absolute independence.

Also within the Netherlands, Hatta and the Indonesian nationalists adopted an open attitude towards Indonesian communists. Some students were strongly influenced by Marxism themselves, most notably Iwa Koesoema Soemantri, Boediarto and later Abdulmadjid

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404 NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 296, 28 June 1927 M10; my translation, original emphasis and punctuation, original in the appendix. Ingleson, *Road to Exile*, 16-17.
Djojoadiningrat, and although the PI kept a nationalist distance from the Dutch Communist Party CPH, they welcomed exiled Indonesian communists, such as Tan Malaka, Darsono and Semaoen in their midst.\footnote{Poeze, In het land van de overheerser, 173. Tan Malaka stayed in the Netherlands from 1913 to 1919, and from May 1922 until July 1922. Although his second stay in the Netherlands was only three months, the Perhimpoenan Indonesia backed his candidacy for the Dutch parliamentary elections of 1922. He was not elected, and soon left to Berlin and Moscow. Hatta, interrogated by the Dutch police in November 1927, asserted that Achmad Soebardjo and Gato Taroenomihardjo held communist beliefs as well: NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 310, 16 February 1928 A3, transcription interrogation Mohammed Hatta, dd. 8 November 1927, p. 7, 33. None of the students were member of a communist party.} The close collaboration that developed between Semaoen and the Perhimpoenan Indonesia is crucial, because it would be Semaoen who provided the PI with a ticket to the Kongress gegen Imperialismus.

The PI and Semaoen

Before he came to the Netherlands, Semaoen, who as many Javanese went by only one name, had been the first Indonesian leader of the PKI and leading man of the Dutch-Indonesian Vereeniging van Spoor- en Tramwegpersoneel (‘Union for Train and Tramway Personnel’, VSTP). Because of his involvement in a large railway strike in 1923, he was expelled to the Netherlands by the Dutch colonial authorities. The banishment was to separate him from his popular support base. However, his exiled position in Europe did not stop him from working for the Indonesian revolution. Having the confidence of the communist trade union international, the Profintern, and of the Comintern, he remained the main expert on the Dutch Indies and the PKI within the international communist world. In an effort to restore contacts with the colony, Semaoen established an information bureau in 1924 that aimed to assist the PKI from abroad, and an Indonesian sailors union, the Sarekat Pegawai Laut

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\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure4_5.jpg}
\caption{Portrait Semaoen.}
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Source: Recht en Vrijheid, January 28, 1928, 3.
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Indonesia (‘Indonesian Union for Maritime Workers’, SPLI), in that same year. The latter organisation, which would never attract a mass following, was nonetheless important, because it organised sailors who could smuggle letters and propaganda from Europe to the Dutch Indies.406

Furthermore, Semaoen established contacts with the Indonesian students in the Netherlands, in particular with the 1923 PI chair Iwa Koesoema Soemantri. Together they ran the SPLI, for which they distributed leaflets in the harbours of Amsterdam and Rotterdam and organised secret gatherings among Javanese sailors. Correspondence with the Comintern in Moscow, even suggests that Semaoen had convinced the students Soebroto, Boediarto and Iwa Koesoema Soemantri to study in Moscow at the expenses of the Comintern.407 Towards the end of 1925 Koesoema Soemantri joined Semaoen on a trip to Moscow and enrolled in the Communist University of the Toilers of the East.408 Other students with whom Semaoen felt he shared common ground were Mohammad Hatta, Achmad Soebardjo and Gatot Taroenomihardjo.

Mohammad Hatta saw in Semaoen a useful contact, and happily answered his overtures. Being open to cooperation with nationalists, Semaoen was markedly different than Dutch communists, even those who had been active in the ISDV/PKI and were banned from the colony.409 Most Dutch communists from the Dutch Indies were in favour of communist agitation among the Indonesian masses within mass organisations such as the Sarekat Islam. In their eyes, the Perhimpoenan Indonesia was a rather insignificant club of nationalist elites. Semaoen, however, had witnessed the recent politicisation of the PI and regarded the organisation as a radical revolutionary nationalist club that comprised many individual students with interest in Marxist thought and communist strategies. Moreover, it was a useful source for political cadres. Perhaps he also sensed that sympathy for nationalism was growing in the Dutch Indies, and that it could attract the masses of the future.410 Semaoen felt that there was no space within the CPH for his own work, and he experienced Dutch Communist


407 IISH, Archief Komintern - Partai Komunis Indonesia, inv. nr. 10, letters from Semaoen to the Comintern, 1924.

408 Iwa Kusuma Sumantri, *Sang pejuang dalam gejolak sejarah* (Bandung: Satya Historika Universitas Padjadjaran, 2002), 53-57; IISH, Archief Komintern - Partai Komunis Indonesia, inv. nr. 10, letters from Semaoen to the Comintern, 1924.

409 For example Henk Sneevliet, Piet Bergsma, Jacob Brandsteder, Adolf Baars and Harry Dekker.

Party members as paternalistic. Accordingly, he rather wanted to establish an independent PKI bureau in the Netherlands than to work within the CPH. He thus shared the distrust of Hatta towards Dutch political parties. In a fierce polemic with Dutch communists, fought out in correspondence with Comintern functionaries, Semaoen accused Sneevliet, Bergsma and Wijnkoop – who were in mutual disagreement as well – of leaving the Indonesian communists no space to determine their own course. Comparable to the distance of Lamine Senghor and Abdelkader Hadj Ali from the PCF in France, Semaoen tried to keep distance from the Dutch CPH. Instead, he began to seek allies who were committed to the struggle of Indonesia, such as the Indonesian nationalists in the Perhimpoenan Indonesia. Although these conflicts within the communist circles were not displayed in public, Semaoen must have been recognised by the Indonesian students as a communist unlike the others.

Upon leaving to Moscow, in November 1925, the PI authorised Semaoen and Iwa Koesoema Soemantri “to represent and to promote the interests” of the association in Moscow. Hatta saw no harm in cooperating with Semaoen. The latter was well embedded in the international structures of the communist world, and could introduce the PI to the international stage. Ideologically, he would pose no threat to the nationalists. Hatta even questioned if Semaoen was a communist at all. In the above-mentioned letter to Sudjadi in the Dutch Indies, Hatta wrote:

I see in the Indonesian communists only disguised nationalists. […] Whether they later remain communists, when we have obtained our independence, remains to be seen. But there are good reasons to doubt this. The social and economic structure of Indonesian society is not fertile ground for communists in the Western sense. I have made this clear to Semaoen and he appears to understand it well. Also I doubt if he is a communist in the deeper sense. He does not trust his Dutch comrades but gives us his full trust. He advises us to refuse all cooperation with the Dutch communists. Is this then communism? […] Through cooperation with them we have a great chance to influence their activities in our direction.414

411 McVey, The Rise of Indonesian Communism, 244-256. It should be noted that the CPH in this period, after May 1926, underwent a severe crisis, resulting in an almost equal split between the main CPH under formal leadership of Louis de Visser, and a CPH-Central Committee (CPH-CC) led by David Wijnkoop, a member of the old guard of the Party. Semaoen belonged to the Wijnkoop faction, while Bergsma, Sneevliet and Dekker had helped to oust Wijnkoop from the CPH leadership. Perthus, Henk Sneevliet, 314-315, 319; Morriën, Indonesië los van Holland, 73-81; Albert F. Mellink, “Wijnkoop, David Jozef,” in Biografisch Woordenboek van het socialisme en de arbeidersbeweging in Nederland, vol. 1, ed. P.J. Meertens (Amsterdam: Stichting Beheer IISG, 1986), 155-159; Gerrit Voerman, De meridiaan van Moskou: De CPN en de Communistische Internationale (1919-1930) (Amsterdam: Veen, 2001), 355-373.

412 McVey, The Rise of Indonesian Communism, 244.


414 NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 296, 28 June 1927 M10; translation from Ingleson, Road to Exile, 16-17, original in the appendix.
The open attitude of Hatta towards Semaoen even led to secret negotiations between the two. Hatta saw himself as the architect of the national bloc of anticolonial parties, and, although he was isolated from his support base, Semaoen was the most prominent PKI-leader in exile. After his departure from the Dutch Indies in 1923, no new leader could eclipse his prominence within the PKI.

On 23 November 1926, Semaoen drew up a seven page “organisation plan for our national movement”, which he saw as the basis for cooperation with Hatta. This plan proposed to build autonomous social structures and self-help organisations, and to form a shadow cabinet to come to a “state within a state”. These parallel structures had to work towards a well-coordinated armed revolution, which had to erupt on all islands simultaneously. Armed cells were to be built up clandestinely after the example of the Italian Carbonarists and the Young Turks.

Hatta refused to support Semaoen’s plan. During interrogations with the Dutch police in December 1927 he said that he disliked the “communist constructions”. The plan was presented to him just two weeks after communist riots had broken out in parts of Java. These were quickly repressed by the colonial authorities, and with an equal alliance between the PKI and his own organisation, Hatta feared that repression would be extended to nationalists as well. Moreover, it was unclear what the status of the PKI was after the latest round of repression. Instead, Hatta presented another, much shorter plan, which was less detailed and only specified the hierarchical relations within the national movement. On 5 December 1926, Semaoen and Hatta signed this plan, in which Semaoen formally transferred the authority of the PKI in the hands of the PI as the leader of the nationalist movement in Indonesia. With this agreement Hatta gained confidence to lead an Indonesian delegation of PI members and Semaoen to the international Kongress gegen Imperialismus in Brussels, which was scheduled two months later in February 1927. At this conference, he would

415 NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 291, 8 March 1927 G4.
416 NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 291, 8 March 1927 G4. It seems that Semaoen carefully avoided talking about ‘Soviets’ and adopted nationalist examples instead.
418 Poeze, Politiek-Politionele Overzichten, 1:lxx; Ingleson, Road to Exile, 28; Hatta, Memoir, 206-207.
419 Ingleson, Road to Exile, 28; Kahin, Nationalism and Revolution, 89. Some scholars have argued that the Hatta-Semaoen convention came to an end on 19 December 1926, within two weeks after its confirmation. However, the agreement existed for months, and was publicly revoked by Semaoen a year later, on 19 December 1927: Semaoen, “Verklaring van Semaoen,” De Tribune, December 19, 1927, 3; Petrus Blumberger, De communistische beweging, 142; Kahin, Nationalism and Revolution 89. Compare Poeze, Politiek-Politionele Overzichten, 1:3; Ingleson, Road to Exile, 28; Ingleson, Perhimpunan Indonesia, 43; Rose, Indonesia Free, 33.
present himself as the representative of the national movement in the Dutch Indies, and as such he is remembered by most anticolonial experts.

Second approach: Semaoen and the turbulent history of the PKI

In order to understand the cooperation between Hatta and Semaoen, and the dynamics behind the PI presence at the Kongress gegen Imperialismus, we cannot just follow the contemporary accounts of Hatta and the PI itself. Indeed, Semaoen seemed to assign an important place to the Indonesian nationalists within the national movement; an attitude which Hatta explained as Semaoen being a nationalist in disguise. However, the rapprochement of the PI by Semaoen was part of a much longer and dramatic history than the students in PI could suspect or oversee. Semaoen’s proposal to Hatta, and their agreement were related to another plan, which Semaoen presented to the Comintern in June 1926, and which was fuelled by the dramatic destruction of the PKI in November 1926.420

Although the person of Semaoen lies beyond the scope of this book as far as his background, his activities and political affiliation are concerned, he was a central figure. He tied together the three histories of the political awakening of Indonesia, the relation between the Comintern and the PKI, and the breakthrough of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia on the world stage. Moreover, he can serve as a reminder of the fact that the nationalist student elites were not the only ones active abroad. Actually, Semaoen belonged to a very active group of internationally minded Indonesian communists.

Semaoen was born in 1899 in a small Eastern Javanese town, along the railway track between Madiun and Mojokerto. Belonging to an impoverished aristocratic family of prijayi, his father was a railway employee. After a few years of education at a low-level primary school for Indonesians, Semaoen succeeded his father in service of the railway company at a very young age. However, he had more ambitious plans. Soon, Semaoen left his native soil and moved a few stations up the railway line to settle in the large city of Surabaya. There, he became an employee of the national railway company.421

More important, in Surabaya Semaoen became politically active. He was greatly inspired by the renowned Dutch union leader and communist Henk Sneevliet, who in 1913 resided a few months in Surabaya before settling in Semarang, and who was an active organiser in the earlier mentioned union for railway personnel, the VSTP. Semaoen joined

421 Ingleson, In Search of Justice, 78.
the Surabaya branch of this union, as well as the local branch of the Sarekat Islam. Finally, he also joined the Indies branch of the SDAP, the Indische Sociaal-Democratische Vereeniging (ISDV). Although he was still very young by then, only 15 years old, his organising skills were apparent, and soon, he assumed office functions in all three organisations. When Semaoen was elected in the central executive of the VSTP in Semarang, he was fired by the railway company, after which in July 1915 at the age of 16, he became a salaried full-time activist and among the first Indonesian communist activists.422

The ISDV organised mainly Dutch and Eurasian skilled workers.423 According to Sneevliet, who was in the leadership of both the ISDV and the VSTP, this prevented the organisation from growing. He came to the conclusion that the European management would attract little Indonesian and, therefore, little mass support, without Indonesian leaders and without addressing the party where the Indonesian proletariat was naturally to be found: the Sarekat Islam.424 Different from the ISDV, the latter organisation had strong local roots in villages and regions throughout the country. It had experienced a spectacular growth from some thousands of members around its establishment in 1908 to become the most prominent mass party in the Dutch Indies with more than 2,5 million members in 1919. Initially, the SI attracted mainly petty bourgeois and smallholder families, but soon it also performed the functions of a trade union, a consultation office and a general self-help organisation, strongly attached to local needs and circumstances.425 In order to gain influence in this multifaceted mass organisation, Sneevliet approached Semaoen, who was already active in the SI. Together they began to address and influence specific urban branches of the SI, most notably the Semarang branch, and bring them under control of ISDV cells.

In terms of membership, the ISDV and VSTP were nothing but small and devoted internal pressure groups within the large and amorphous body of the Sarekat Islam. Nevertheless, the ISDV-led SI branches succeeded in putting pressure on the entire organisation. The central directorate, the Centrale Sarekat Islam (CSI) which was dominated by modernist Islamic factions, opposed the radicalising influence of Semaoen and Sneevliet, but could not exercise enough influence over its branches to prevent leftists from

423 This was different for the VSTP. As Tichelman mentions, this union consisted for 90% of Indonesians, but they remained largely passive members: Tichelman, Socialisme in Indoneisië, 15-16, 44.
424 Ingleson, In Search of Justice, 76-77; McVey, The Rise of Indonesian Communism, 19-21; Tichelman, Socialisme in Indoneisië, 4, 16, 24-26; Kahin, Nationalism and Revolution, 71.
More and more local branches of the Sarekat Islam came under revolutionary Marxist influence. While the Sarekat Islam as a whole grew in these years from 360,000 members in 1916, to 450,000 in 1918 and 2.5 million in 1919, the ISDV core grew proportionally from 85 members in 1915, to 134 members in 1916 and 740 in 1918. Although these seem largely incomparable quantities, we have to take into consideration that the ranks of the Sarekat Islam were filled with workers and farmers, who incidentally paid a small membership fee upon enrolment in times of action and distress but showed little commitment thereafter. By contrast, the cadres of the ISDV within the SI were more dedicated, better schooled, and better organised. Thus, at the second national Sarekat Islam conference in October 1917, the radical ISDV-dominated factions of the SI succeeded in having adopted a resolution condemning “sinful capitalism”, calling for extensive social reforms, and complete independence from colonial rule, by any means necessary.

In May 1920, a few months after Sneevliet had been expelled by the Dutch authorities, Semaoen assumed the leadership over the ISDV. At the same party meeting, which naturally convened in the Sarekat Islam office in Semarang, the name Indische Sociaal-Democratische Vereeniging was changed to Perserikatan Kommunist di India (‘Indies Communist Association’), a few years later to be changed again to Partai Komunis Indonesia (‘Communist Party of Indonesia’). This change of names was to associate the Indonesian communist movement more closely to the international communist world, and to distinguish the party from the “false socialists” of the social democratic Second International. On the other hand, with the term ‘Indonesia’ the organisation aligned itself to the trend to reject the imposed name of the ‘Dutch Indies’.

Semaoen tried to maintain good relations with the Islamic leadership in the CSI. The strategy of infiltration proved to be extremely successful. It also had repercussions for the ideological stance of the ISDV/PKI towards political Islam as an organising and emancipating force for the toiling Indonesian masses. Although Semaoen and his fellows rejected the conservative influence of tradition and patriarchy, they also emphasised, for

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instance in a joint statement with the Islamist Hadji Agoes Salim, that Marxism and Islam shared many of the same principles:

Regarding the division of the fruits of toil, Islam forbids anyone from hoarding these for himself, requiring instead that the common interest be served by using the results of all labor to further the goal of human equality. It is felt this can be achieved only if the distribution of products and profits is in the hands of a popular assembly.430

Nevertheless, statements like these could not conceal the fact that the CSI grew increasingly worried over the expanding influence of the PKI within the Sarekat Islam, and constant internal opposition of the communists had brought the organisation to a condition in which it could only be split, or purged from communist influence. After the SI congress of October 1921 and of February 1923, the Islamist CSI succeeded in enforcing party discipline on its members, which implied that dual membership of the PKI and the SI was no longer possible.431 As such, the PKI was expelled from the branches of the Sarekat Islam.

For the PKI leadership, the expulsion was a severe blow, because it deprived them from access to not-yet-mobilised impoverished rural masses. Moreover, changing political circumstances were also detrimental to the political space of the PKI. After years of interventionist ethical colonial politics, the new Governor General Dirk Fock had inaugurated a liberal laissez-faire policy in 1921, aimed at reducing government expenditures. Backed by the conservative Minister of Colonies Simon de Graaff, he imposed new taxes, in spite of the deteriorating economic situation as a result of the international recession after the First World War.432 Meanwhile, the new Governor General was less inclined than his ethical predecessors to lend an ear to Indonesian political movements, and under his leadership police repression made it almost impossible to express criticism on colonial government in a non-militant way. In some cities, the right of assembly was permanently restricted under the pretext of maintaining the public order. The Criminal Code was also stretched to the point that the

430 Quoted in McVey, The Rise of Indonesian Communism, 97. A similar attitude was displayed by Henk Sneevliet at the Second World Congress of the Comintern in Moscow in July and August 1920. Here, he stressed that the SI was primarily a proletarian movement. Among others, he said: “It is the duty of the socialist revolutionary movement to establish firm bonds with this mass organization, with the Sarekat Islam,” Quoted in McVey, The Rise of Indonesian Communism, 57-58.

431 Poeze, Politiek-Politioneele Overzichten, I:xxv; McVey, The Rise of Indonesian Communism, 104, 141-145, 158.

432 Ingleson, In Search of Justice, 34-35; McVey, The Rise of Indonesian Communism, 109-111.
freedom of speech and press were virtually non-existent, and that activists could be detained indefinitely without a charge.\textsuperscript{433}

These repressive measures and increasingly difficult economic circumstances generated disillusionment with the colonial government within the rank and file of the PKI, and enhanced the support for non-cooperation towards the authorities and for militant political and labour activism. In some areas demonstrations and disturbances occurred on a weekly basis, and in industrial sectors the readiness for strike actions was large. In May 1923, a large strike of the VSTP – now the colony’s strongest union – erupted under direction of Semaoen, which soon spread out as an industry-wide strike throughout Java. The strikers protested wage and personnel cuts and deplored the decision to abolish a special cost-of-living bonus for the railway workers. However, it was as much a strike against the unwillingness of employers and authorities to listen to the needs of workers. The strike ended in a major defeat for the VSTP, and instead of negotiating with the union, the government held Semaoen accountable for illegal political activity. In July 1923, he was exiled and permitted to leave to the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{434}

\textbf{Moving towards revolt}

The strike was lost, but Indonesian public opinion nearly unanimously condemned the expulsion of Semaoen. Sympathy for the PKI and disillusionment with the colonial status grew accordingly. However, because of strong governmental repression, there was no room for the PKI to challenge the government on a national basis. With the departure of Semaoen, the PKI became more decentralised and focused on action on the work floor and in the regions. From 1923 onwards the Party, with Sugono, Alimin Prawirodirdjo and Musso in leading positions, began to sever relations with other parties and organisations such as the SI, for example by establishing rival Sarekat Rakjat (‘People’s Unions’, SR) branches in every place with a Sarekat Islam chapter. Also, as a reaction to continuous repression and surveillance of the police and the authorities, the PKI stopped its mass rallies in rural areas and cities, and instead began to reorganise the party into a clandestine organ working with


\textsuperscript{434} Ingleson, \textit{In Search of Justice}, 228-255; McVey, \textit{The Rise of Indonesian Communism}, 147-153.
cells and secret gatherings at home. Consequently, the PKI was decentralised and the local branches of the PKI and the SR enjoyed greater freedom to determine their own course.435

This new policy of decentralisation and underground action also implied that central coordination and control was more difficult than before. After Semaoen’s departure, ‘anarchist’ bombing attacks occurred, and wildcat strikes broke out on a regular basis.436 This was not only a concern for the Dutch authorities, but also made the PKI leadership, now seated in Bandung, realise that it could not contain the anger of the population much longer. The leadership was held hostage by the situation, because it considered the organisation as yet too weak to start a successful revolution, but at the same time it could not temper the radicalism of its branches without losing their support.437 The most important activists of the PKI (Semaoen in the Netherlands and Moscow, Darsono in Berlin and Moscow, and Tan Malaka in Canton and Manila), were all opposed to an uprising at this stage. However, some of the more distant party chapters began to set deadlines to the PKI leadership. If the central executive in Bandung would not start preparations for a revolution soon, these branches threatened to do it themselves.438

Thus, at a secret meeting in Prambanan near Yogyakarta, in December 1925, the Party’s leadership decided that it would indeed prepare for a coordinated revolt, half a year from then, hoping that Moscow would support them and that other Indonesian organisations would join along the way. The leadership then, gave the order to the different chapters and cells to prepare for illegality and an armed insurrection, at a date to be announced later. In the meantime, the party bureau reached out to the leaders in exile and to Moscow. Gathering in Singapore, they first tried to get in contact with Tan Malaka, who was suffering from tuberculosis and lived in Manila. Soon, it turned out that the latter opposed the ill-fated revolt, and instead argued that the PKI would return to the mass line and seek cooperation with other Indonesian movements, such as the SI. It was clear that Semaoen would share this opinion. The PKI leaders then decided to send Alimin and Musso to Moscow directly, to seek approval and assistance. After months of waiting in Moscow, Musso and Alimin learned that the Comintern disapproved of the plan. The newly installed ‘National Secretariat for Indonesia’, which included Semaoen, Darsono and M. N. Roy, first wanted to gain better

436 Petrus Blumberger, *De communistische beweging*, 57-60.
437 In December 1925, the PKI had around 3000 members in 65 sections. The Sarekat Rakjat was much larger, numbering around 31,000 in 340 branches: Kahin, *Nationalism and Revolution*, 84.
insight into the situation in the Dutch Indies, and preferred to wait.\textsuperscript{439} Months had gone by in this attempt to embed the pending Indonesian revolution in an international framework, but to no avail. Empty handed, Alimin and Musso undertook the long journey back to the Dutch Indies.\textsuperscript{440}

Meanwhile, the police in the Dutch Indies had continued to intensify its repression on the PKI, with increasing success.\textsuperscript{441} According to John Ingleson, the organisation of urban workers was virtually made impossible by December 1925.\textsuperscript{442} Party branches were being infiltrated, meetings dispersed, and leaders arrested. This only added to the sense of urgency of some of the most prepared PKI branches, because they worried that the momentum would disappear if the revolution would not be planned soon.\textsuperscript{443}

In this atmosphere of impatience and chaos, the local branches of Batavia, Tegal and Bantam decided not to wait for the delayed return of Alimin and Musso from Moscow and for instructions of the Bandung leadership to start the revolt. They formed a secret committee and set the date for the revolt to start at 12 November 1926. They reached out to the other branches of the PKI, but more than half of them were not willing or prepared to take part in an uprising without the approval from Moscow or even from Bandung. In various regions, the police found out about the plans and started to make pre-emptive arrests.\textsuperscript{444} On 12 November, the day of revolt, it remained eerily quiet in some of the most active districts of Central Java. Only in Batavia, scuffles broke out, and in Bantam and Priangan the atmosphere was tense for about a week. In the very active PKI branch of West Sumatra it would take until the new year before an uprising would break out, which was also easily suppressed, in roughly a week. By the time Alimin and Musso arrived in the Dutch Indies, the authorities were in full control of the situation, and the PKI and its aspirations were crushed.\textsuperscript{445} Within months, 13,000 persons were arrested, some leaders were executed and 1300 persons were deported to the penal colony of Upper Digul in New Guinea. The VSTP, before the revolt a union of

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\textsuperscript{439} IISH, Archief Komintern - Partai Komunis Indonesia, inv. nr. 2, minutes 29 July 1926.
\textsuperscript{441} See for an interesting account from the side of the police and intelligence forces: Bloembergen, \textit{De geschiedenis van de politie in Nederlands-Indië}, 251-260.
\textsuperscript{442} Ingleson, \textit{In Search of Justice}, 314. This is why Ingleson dates the end of the first phase of the Indonesian labour movement in December 1925, and not in January 1927 when the PKI was effectively destroyed.
\textsuperscript{444} Poeze, \textit{Politiek-Politieke Overzichten}, 1:xlii; McVey, \textit{The Rise of Indonesian Communism}, 334.
\textsuperscript{445} McVey, \textit{The Rise of Indonesian Communism}, 341-346.
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8000 workers, was banned, as well as the PKI. The revolt of 1926 marked the end of the PKI or any other communist mass party, until its re-emergence after the Second World War.\textsuperscript{446}

A number of preliminary conclusions need to be drawn, before we shift our focus to the international level of analysis and the communist world. Firstly, the 1926 revolt responded to a general sense of disillusionment and poverty in the Dutch Indies, but was not carried by a broad popular movement itself. It was primarily the work of a few dissenting communist PKI-branches in Java and the West coast of Sumatra. Secondly, the revolt was ill-prepared and unsparingly repressed within weeks by the colonial authorities. The revolt and its direct aftermath marked the decisive end of public communist agitation in the late colonial period. Thirdly, and this will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter, the developments in the Dutch Indies were significant, as they put Indonesia and its struggle for independence on the world map while clearing the way for the Perhimpoenan Indonesia in the Netherlands to enter the international stage.

**Third approach: Reaction of the Comintern**

When the Comintern learned of the insurrection in Java and Sumatra, it was not amused.\textsuperscript{447} In previous months, it had received indications that the PKI was on a deviationist path. However, it had had difficulties getting a clear picture of the state of the Party and the political course it was pursuing. For the Soviet Union and the Comintern, the Dutch Indies were of minor importance. The Soviet Union invested far more energy in its direct neighbour China than in the Dutch Indies. There were no Soviet functionaries in the Dutch colony, and the exchange of information between the Comintern and the PKI was fragile and irregular. As McVey argues, it is even questionable if the Comintern was sufficiently able to assess the situation in the Dutch Indies. Dutch and Indonesian Party members who reported about the Dutch Indies in Moscow persistently gave a distorted and too favourable impression of the nature of the alliance with the Sarekat Islam and of the sympathy for communism among the rural and urban masses, and thus the Comintern remained ignorant of the situation in the Dutch Indies.\textsuperscript{448} Moreover, due to the many exiled activists and the effective isolation of the archipelago by the Dutch authorities, it had lacked possibilities to address the PKI directly


\textsuperscript{447} IISH, Archief Komintern - Partai Komunis Indonesia, inv. nr. 2, minutes 17 November 1926.

and to enforce discipline from above.449 When it took notice of the plans for revolt from Alimin and Musso in Moscow, a newly appointed National Secretariat for Indonesia which was to manage the Indonesian crisis and which contained Semaoen, Darsono and Roy, reacted negatively.450 Five days after the start of the revolt, the National Secretariat for Indonesia drew up a letter of instruction for the PKI, pointing out the errors in its current policy and urging the Party to change its course.451

However, in external communication, the Comintern did not want to condemn a movement that was undeniably communist, and it chose to remain shrouded in silence over the disorganisation of the PKI. The news of the failed insurrection in the Dutch Indies concurred with alarming reports from China, where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) worked within the nationalist GMD. Initially, this strategy of infiltration within a larger mass movement was equally successful as in the Dutch Indies, but after the death of GMD leader Sun Yat-sen in March 1925, and his succession by the right wing army general Chiang Kai-shek, CCP members were gradually removed from influential positions in the GMD. From the beginning of the 1926 onwards, this situation even led to violent incidents and armed conflicts between workers and soldiers loyal to the CCP and factions loyal to Chiang Kai-shek.452 A bloody clash between communists and nationalists in China was immanent, and the Comintern did not want to admit the defeat of the PKI on top of that. This would effectively declare the Asia policy of the Comintern bankrupt.

Therefore, on 20 November 1926, a week after the PKI revolts had begun and ended with heavy repression by the authorities, and three days after the National Secretariat for Indonesia urged the PKI to change its course, the Comintern issued a statement in solidarity with the brave people of Indonesia. “Suppressed peoples of the world! The insurrectionary Indonesians are your advance guard, they express the will to freedom which is your common property. Do everything in your power to support them in their struggle!”453 The message was to express comradely solidarity in times of distress, but was Janus-faced because the

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449 Poeze, Politiek-Politionele Overzichten, 1:xliii.
450 IISH, Archief Komintern - Partai Komunis Indonesia, inv. nr. 2, minutes 29 July 1926.
451 IISH, Archief Komintern - Partai Komunis Indonesia, inv. nr. 2, minutes 17 November 1926.
453 Quoted in McVey, The Rise of Indonesian Communism, 347. Also Kahin, Nationalism and Revolution, 78; Poeze, Politiek-Politionele Overzichten, 1:15.
Comintern had actively worked to delay and discourage the preparations for the revolt, and had been unsupportive of the confrontational course of the PKI, which was fuelled from its most radical local branches.\textsuperscript{454}

Be it as it may, the Indonesian case was briefly embraced by the Comintern in November and December 1926, and this was weeks before the first conference of the League against Imperialism. It led to the promotion of Semaoen to the Presidium of the Executive Committee of the Comintern in December in 1926.\textsuperscript{455} Moreover, the fact that the PKI itself was eliminated within weeks of the stalled revolt provided the opportunity for the Perhimpoenan Indonesia to present itself, by mediation of Semaoen, as the only legitimate heir of the anticolonial movement in the colony, and to accept the international cheers of solidarity on behalf of the Indonesian people.

\textbf{The dual promotion of Semaoen and the Perhimpoenan Indonesia}

Returning to the rapprochement of Semaoen and Hatta in the closing months of 1926, it seems that the dual promotion of Semaoen and the Perhimpoenan Indonesia in the Comintern’s estimation was interlinked. After Semaoen was banned from the Dutch Indies he was condemned to an onlooker’s position over what happened in the colony, and he was unable to exercise influence over the radicalising PKI branches. However, as a member of the Presidium of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, he began to exert his recently acquired influence within the Comintern to advocate a “national democratic” strategy in solving the Indonesian crisis; which boiled down to cooperation with Indonesian nationalists in the Netherlands. In the summer of 1926, Semaoen, who was a member of the National Secretariat for Indonesia from 1926 onwards, reacted sceptically to the plan of Alimin and Musso in Moscow for the planned revolt in the Dutch Indies. Alimin did everything he could to convince the Comintern committee that the PKI was in good shape, and that the leadership had a clear strategy to make the revolt a success. Although Alimin admitted that the precise demands and objectives of the revolt were to be sorted out during the process, he argued that the population was impoverished and dissatisfied to such an extent that it would immediately lend its support to the PKI, which would force the government to make far reaching concessions. Semaoen disagreed with this optimism. He strongly doubted the positive

\textsuperscript{454} Semaoen acknowledged the negative effect of delaying Alimin and Musso on the PKI at large in a report in March 1927, IISH, Archief Komintern - Partai Komunis Indonesia, inv. nr. 3, “Report of Comrade Samoun to British Secretariat meeting of March 8, 1927, on Indonesian question,” p. 3.

\textsuperscript{455} “Election of the Presidium,” \textit{International Press Correspondence} 6, December 1, 1926, 1433; McVey, \textit{The Rise of Indonesian Communism}, 349; Poeze, \textit{Politiek-Politieke Overzichten}, 1:15.
outcome of the revolt and criticised the reliance on a favourable reaction of the Comintern: “I think on this point they are weak”.\footnote{IISH, Archief Komintern - Partai Komunis Indonesia, inv. nr. 1, stenographic report of the Indonesian Conference, 22 July 1926.} Semaoen agreed with Alimin and Musso of the general support among the masses for an armed insurrection, but he argued that the PKI did not have a clear and secure strategy for a controlled assumption of power. In its current version, the insurrection was doomed to failure.

However, Semaoen was equally critical of the solution preferred by the majority of the National Secretariat for Indonesia. Roy, Darsono and others wanted to have better insight into the preparations for the revolt before they could lend support to the PKI plans. Comintern officials Pianitsky and Pogany suggested that a legal “Indian path” in the form of a parliamentary campaign to get indigenous political representation could be more fruitful and less hazardous.\footnote{IISH, Archief Komintern - Partai Komunis Indonesia, inv. nr. 1-2.} Semaoen considered this strategy dangerously naive as well. The general political atmosphere was already past the reliance on a legalistic parliamentary strategy, and unrest was to be expected anyway, with or without the PKI. Moreover, unlike British India, the colonial Volksraad was constituted in such a way that an indigenous majority was simply impossible.

Instead, Semaoen wrote a political programme in June 1926 in which he proposed a third strategy. In the programme, written in poor English, Semaoen indeed acknowledged the revolutionary atmosphere in the country. However, a “Soviet-dictatorship-of-proletariat”-strategy [sic] as proposed by Alimin and Musso would be understood by the colonial government and the international powers as a frontal attack, and would only lead to ruthless repression against the weak structures of the PKI and the Sarekat Rakjat. Instead, the PKI was to exercise patience and try to seek cooperation with the burgeoning national movement. By prioritising national autonomy and the end of foreign rule, the large masses of the population could be mobilised and radicalised, but in the case of state repression the Communist Party would not take all the blows. A communist programme could even be presented as the only alternative against a recalcitrant colonial government. Eventually, “the ‘pure’ national system” could “easily be changed into a soviet one!”\footnote{IISH, Archief Komintern - Partai Komunis Indonesia, inv. nr. 2, Document 4, Semaoen, “Something after the Discussions in the British Sub-Secretariat of 3 June 1926,” p. 2-3.}

In this atmosphere of repression and chaos, activists in the Dutch Indies were difficult to approach, but Semaoen had good contacts in the Netherlands. He had experienced the gradual radicalisation of the PI from around the time he arrived in the Netherlands in 1923.
Although the organisation itself was not communist, and although the students were typically of a non-proletarian background, Semaoen still regarded them as revolutionary allies. To Semaoen’s judgement, the Indonesian intelligentsia was by law and by practice as much excluded from capitalist competition as the proletariat and the farmers, and had no possibility to turn into an indigenous capitalist class.\(^{459}\) Moreover, some of the students had shown serious interest in the classics of Marxism and Lenin’s work on imperialism.

Initially, Semaoen’s programme did not seem to have received much support within the National Secretariat for Indonesia, and the Comintern chose a strategy of delay rather than active political intervention. However, after the suppression of the revolt of November 1926, both PKI’s strategy of confrontation and the Comintern’s strategy of moderation and legalisation were rendered obsolete. Combined with the fact that the Comintern preferred to conceal the painful Indonesian situation, Semaoen got the opportunity to seek cooperation with the nationalists and to rescue the remains of the Indonesian Communist Party. Based in the Netherlands, this implied collaboration with the Perhimpoenan Indonesia.

In other words, Semaoen’s proposal to Hatta to make an agreement on the future of the national movement was more than an isolated initiative of a “disguised nationalist”, as Hatta liked to see it. It fitted in political considerations in the highest echelons of the international communist world. Hatta’s appraisal that the Indonesian nationalists, through collaboration with communists, had “a great chance to influence their activities in our direction”, interestingly mirrors Semaoen’s assessment that after the Indonesian revolution the nationalist government could “easily be changed into a soviet one!”\(^{460}\) These considerations also provided the rationale for the invitation of Hatta and four other PI students to the Kongress gegen Imperialismus in Brussels in February 1927.

**The League against Imperialism: A communist front or a sympathising structure?**

The long history of Semaoen and the PKI, and the complex deliberations within the Comintern demonstrate that the introduction of the PI on the international stage cannot only be explained as the result of successful advocacy of the Indonesian students themselves. Instead, the PI was presented a unique window of opportunity offered by Indonesian situation

\(^{459}\) IISH, Archief Komintern - Partai Komunis Indonesia, inv. nr. 2, Document 4, Semaoen, “Something after the Discussions in the British Sub-Secretariat of 3 June 1926,” p. 4; McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, 240-241, 244.

\(^{460}\) NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 296, 28 June 1927 M10; translation from Ingleson, *Road to Exile*, 16-17; IISH, Archief Komintern - Partai Komunis Indonesia, inv. nr. 2, Document 4, Semaoen, “Something after the Discussions in the British Sub-Secretariat of 3 June 1926,” p. 2-3.
and the reaction of the international communist world. To make this clear, the character of
the League against Imperialism itself needs to be examined.

As Fredrik Petersson demonstrates in a detailed dissertation on the League against
Imperialism, the relation between the LAI and the Comintern was less direct and all-decisive
than suggested in contemporary press. He characterised the LAI as a “sympathising
organisation”, indicating that Communist factions and Comintern functionaries kept a low
profile within the LAI, as long as general support for the Soviet Union was ensured. Whereas
a ‘front organisation’ would function under the directives of a Communist Party in a specific
field of activity, a sympathising organisation typically tried to extend communist influence
outside the communist movement by establishing connections with other left-wing
movements; with intellectuals, pacifists and nationalists. Usually, these sympathising
organisations introduced a non-communist leadership to the public, and openly kept public
communist membership to a minimum. At the Kongress gegen Imperialismus, there was no
official Soviet delegation. Only a ‘communist faction’ of capable and trustworthy
communists was formed to ensure that general support for the Soviet Union remained
intact.461

This characterisation of the League against Imperialism, brings Petersson to devote
the major part of his dissertation to the interaction between the various players in the complex
“planetary system” of communism: the interplay between the International secretariat of the
LAI and its national sections, the communist faction or “core” within the LAI, the Executive
Committee of the Comintern in Moscow, the West European Bureau of the Comintern in
Berlin and key figures, such as Münzenberg, Chattopadhyaya and Roy. As such, Petersson
adds a new dynamism to our understanding of the complexities within the communist
international system. The LAI was not just a Comintern tool, but rather a space of negotiation
between Soviet centralism and national and individual political agency.462

However, although the political backgrounds of colonial delegations are mentioned,
Petersson does not break away from the dominant focus on the role of communists in the
LAI. Also in other works on the League against Imperialism the perspectives of non-
communist and anticolonial members remain somewhat understudied.463 For historians

461 Petersson, *We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers*, 47-50 and 109; Haikal, “Willi Münzenberg
und die ‘Liga gegen Imperialismus’,” 144-145.
462 Petersson, *We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers*, 34-38. Also Haikal, “Willi Münzenberg und
die ‘Liga gegen Imperialismus’,” 141-142.
463 Other works focusing primarily on the communist half of the LAI are Gross, *Willi Münzenberg*, 196-210;
‘Liga gegen Imperialismus’”.
interested in these groupings, it is more rewarding to examine the space and agency in the fringes of the communist planetary system, than to dissect the communist monolith bloc per se. As Petersson suggests himself and discusses throughout his book, the LAI, as a sympathising organisation, has served the interests of the IAH and the Comintern but also fits in the respective histories of the colonial delegates, each with their own backgrounds, interests and strategies.  

Colonial involvement in the LAI

Non-Western involvement in anticolonial politics in Europe was already manifest in the months preceding the establishment of the League against Imperialism. The initiative to organise the Kongress gegen Imperialismus was taken by the German communist Willi Münzenberg of the humanitarian communist organisation Internationale Arbeiterhilfe. This organisation was established in 1921 to facilitate international fund-raising and relief campaigns in support of the young Soviet Union, but in the course of the 1920s broadened its

Figure 4.6: Organisation chart of the LAI and its related political blocs around 1927-1928.

Holger Weiss makes a similar point with regard to West African delegates: Weiss, Framing a Radical African Atlantic, 93.
field of activities. From 1923 onwards, Münzenberg and the German section of the IAH organised a number of relief campaigns for communists in other parts of the world, for instance after a destructive earthquake in Japan in 1923 and floods in China in 1924. In June 1925, the killing of 13 Chinese protesters by British troops in Shanghai gave impetus to large communist demonstrations and protest meetings in Germany, and the collection of one million Gold Marks for activists in China. In December 1925, a committee ‘Against the Cruelties in Syria’ was established to protest the quelling of the Great Syrian Revolt by French colonial troops. In general, these movements were largely German communist events, with no direct involvement of or coordination with movements from the respective countries.

However, drawn by the massive and successful communist solidarity campaigns, small groups of migrant students and activists from Berlin began to join the meetings of the China and Syria campaigns, mainly on their own initiative. A speech by a Chinese student and GMD member at a large conference in August 1925 aroused euphoric reactions among the German public. After the conference, some professors and union activists from China approached Münzenberg, urging him to start building a more permanent and comprehensive anticolonial organisation in Europe. It was an eye-opener to Münzenberg that showed how colonial communities in Europe could be used, both as propagandistic figureheads and as intermediaries with anticolonial and nationalist organisations in China, Morocco, Egypt, India and elsewhere. Thinking along these lines, Münzenberg instigated a conference in February 1926, with the aim to unite all colonial groupings in Berlin. The Liga gegen Koloniale Unterdrückung (‘League against Colonial Oppression’, LACO) which came out of this initiative, began to work to expand the network to other Western European countries and colonial communities in Europe, eventually resulting in the establishment of the LAI.

Not as a result of directives from the Comintern – which was actually reluctant to engage in adventurous alliances – but rather as a consequence of the organising activities of leading activists in the IAH and colonial migrant groups, a “network of networks” was established. Via colonial migrant communities in Berlin, the Communist Party in France, the

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466 Petersson, *We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers*, 82.
467 Petersson, *We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers*, 71-73.
468 Petersson, *We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers*, 72-73, 84.
469 Petersson, *We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers*, 73-86, 93; BLA, IOR/L/PJ, inv. nr. 223, Indians in Germany.
Dutch socialist unionist and organiser Edo Fimmen, and Afro-American activists, a broad network of organisations and individuals was reached and invited to take part in the Kongress gegen Imperialismus, scheduled to take place in Brussels.470

The most prominent colonial delegation at the congress, both in terms of numbers as in terms of political urgency, was obviously the Chinese group. As Petersson mentions, this group was predominantly European in character and mainly consisted of Chinese migrants living in Europe. The group was led by Liao Huanxing, a left-leaning member of the central executive of the Guomindang. Other representatives included Hsiung Kwang Suen, a member of the national government in Guangzhou which was controlled by the GMD, a few army generals and representatives of Chinese unions, and a dozen representatives of Chinese student and workers communities in Europe. Among these students was also a delegation of the Dutch CHH. Board members Han Tiauw Kie and Lie Soen Keng were present at the Kongress gegen Imperialismus, although they were mistakenly registered as representatives of the Dutch section of the Guomindang. This section existed as well, but comprised Chinese sailors from the harbours of Amsterdam and Rotterdam.471

Headed by Liao Huanxing, it was clear that the Chinese delegation represented the leftist tendency within the GMD. After having been involved in the establishment of the CCP in China, Liao Huanxing travelled to Germany where he became a member of the KPD in 1923. As such, he participated in the German ‘Hands off China’ campaign, and in the preparations for the Kongress gegen Imperialismus. Leading communists considered him to be a trustworthy contact.472 Also in a report drafted by nationalist Chinese migrants in France of the rightist nationalist Chiang Kai-shek line, the GMD representatives at the Kongress gegen Imperialismus were described as communists in disguise. They had sent their own delegation of “true representatives of the GMD”, but, as they complained, they were squeezed out by Liao Huanxing. The French group could do no more than distribute pamphlets in the side wings of the congress.473 For the leftist faction of the GMD, which operated under increasingly difficult circumstances in China itself, it was important to

470 Petersson, We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers, 34, 85-86, 98-99.
472 Petersson, We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers, 169-170.
473 Levine and Chen San-ching, The Guomindang in Europe, 142.
enlarge its influence abroad by cooperating with communists and leftist nationalists from other colonial countries.474

More reluctant to associate with international communism was the Indian delegation, the second largest colonial group at the conference. The central figure in this group was Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, who lived in Berlin and worked as a communist organiser within the Indian community. Behind the scenes Chatto would develop into a moving force of the International Secretariat of the LAI in Berlin, and the linchpin between anticolonial movements in Europe. The most famous Indian at the Kongress gegen Imperialismus was however Jawaharlal Nehru, who was a much respected and devote follower of Gandhi in the Indian National Congress. Nehru was the only Indian delegate who came directly from British India. Other attendants were expatriate members of Indian associations in England, Germany and the United States.475 Nehru arrived in Europe in March 1926, primarily to get treatment for his wife in the Swiss mountains against chronic tuberculosis. While in Europe, he used his time to make trips to various European capitals to meet Indian exiles and revolutionaries, and to undertake field trips to economic enterprises. On a visit in Berlin in November 1926, Nehru met Chattopadhyaya and he accepted the latter’s invitation to come to Brussels in February.476

Nehru’s representation of the INC at the congress was not undisputed. Interesting is the difference in attitude towards the LAI of Nehru and Gandhi. From the start, Gandhi had persistently refused all invitations to join the efforts to build an international anti-imperialist front. He regarded the methods of “the socialists” too experimental and he was afraid that an affiliation with communism would damage the carefully maintained unity with moderates in the Indian movement.477 Upon Nehru’s request from Europe to send a large INC delegation to the congress in Brussels, including an expert on colonial economy and on the British imperial army, the INC leadership reacted negatively.478 In the end, Nehru was the only INC functionary who accepted the invitation of Chattopadhyaya and travelled to Brussels. Although he expressed scepticism to Gandhi on the viability of the LAI and the usefulness of the communists for the national struggle of India, he embraced the Kongress gegen

475 Gibarti, Das Flammenzeichen vom Palais Egmont, 234.
476 Louro, “India and the League against Imperialism,” 31; Barooah, Chatto, 248.
477 Petersson, We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers, 100; Gopal, Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography, vol. 1, 1889-1947 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), 105.
478 Nehru, Selected works of Jawaharlal Nehru, 2:251; Gopal, Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography, 100.
Imperialismus as a means to spread foreign propaganda and to establish contacts with colonial movements elsewhere. As his biographer Sarvepalli Gopal quotes from a letter to Gandhi:

I do not expect much from it and indeed I am quite sure that none of the members of the so-called imperialist or oppressing nations will help us in the least whenever their interests conflict with ours. I have no illusions about their altruism. But I welcome all legitimate methods of getting into touch with other countries and peoples so that we may be able to understand their viewpoint and world politics generally.  

The involvement of the Indian National Congress with the LAI was therefore minimal, and mainly consisted of Nehru’s personal involvement.

Other delegations included Syrian, Persian, Algerian and Egyptian revolutionaries, black activists from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean – including members of the South African ANC – many Southern American delegations, and Japanese, Indochinese and Korean activists. An old acquaintance of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia at the congress was the Indochinese Duong Van Giao of the Parti Constitutionaliste, who was a friend of Mononutu and had joined Hatta at the pacifist conference in Bierville. As described in the previous chapter, Duong Van Giao was far from a hard-line anticolonial nationalist pleading for immediate independence, and held rather moderate views on French republican values and development under colonial rule. He would soon conclude that cooperation with the LAI was no longer possible. Another friend of the Indonesians was Kavalam Madhava Panikkar, who had been active in the Parisian Association pour l’Étude des Civilisations Orientales and had published an article in *Indonesia Merdeka*. Panikkar was on the list of representatives, but he did not show up [“nicht rechtzeitig eingetroffen”]. According to his autobiography, he had been in Berlin concurrently with Nehru and was also invited by Chattopadhyaya. However, he decided not to go to the Kongress gegen Imperialismus, because he did not want to get involved in the political quarrels between communists around Chattopadhyaya and “conservatives” around Champakaraman Pillai in the German capital.

In short, this overview of colonial delegations demonstrates that each of these had a prehistory of its own, and was subject to power dynamics and strategic considerations within

their respective national movements. Often, their presence was expedited by communist intermediaries, such as Liao Huanxing, Chattopadhyaya and Semaoen himself, and many of the colonial delegations acted with a weak mandate from their home parties. The mandate of the Indonesian delegation was equally vague.

The Indonesian mandate
Among historians there is much confusion about the Indonesian group, in particular with regard to its mandate and its relation with the communist uprisings of 1926-1927. Babette Gross, the biographer of Willi Münzenberg, described Mohammad Hatta as the leader of the Sarekat Islam, while Vijay Prashad argued that Soekarno had been present at the Kongress gegen Imperialismus. The revolt in the Dutch Indies was summarised by Fredrik Petersson as a move of the PKI against the “nationalist Sarekat Rakjat”, while this latter organisation was actually a communist organisation itself. Many of these inaccuracies are most likely due to unfamiliarity with the Indonesian political landscape. However, inconsistencies in contemporary sources and an overstatement of their mandate by the Indonesians themselves also create confusion.

The conference papers that were published after the congress, for example, indicate under the heading of ‘Indonesien’ – already a fundamental achievement for the Indonesian students – that Hatta, Semaoen and Gatot Taroenomihardjo were representing the “Perhimpoenan Indonesia (a union of national parties in Indonesia)”. “Abdul Manaf and Mohammed Nazir Pamondjah” were said to work for the Sarekat Rakjat, while “Achmad Subardja” was present on behalf of the Sarekat Islam. This name list is highly inaccurate. In reality, Abdul Manaf was an assumed name of Achmad Soebardjo. Together with Hatta, Gatot Taroenomihardjo and Pamontjak, Soebardjo was representing the Perhimpoenan Indonesia, which was not a union of national parties in Indonesia but, as we know, a Dutch student organisation. It was also mentioned that Soebardjo acted on behalf of a branch of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia in Cairo. The latter organisation was most likely the Djam’iat al Chairijah, with which the PI maintained relations.

It is unclear why the Sarekat Islam appeared on the list, but probably this was due to confusion created by the students themselves. In a report on the conference of Mohammad Hatta in Indonesia Merdeka, he wrote that the Indonesian students acted with a mandate of

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484 Petersson, We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers, 123.
the “National Concentration”. This organisation should not be confused with the well-known federation of nationalist organisations Permufakatan Perhimpunan-Perhimpunan Politik Kebangsaan Indonesia (‘Political Consensus of Indonesian National Organisations’, PPPKI) which was established in December 1927, and which indeed included the Sarekat Islam. From Hatta’s interrogations by the police, it appears that the National Concentration was in fact the Comité Persatoean Indonesia (‘Indonesian Unity Committee’) which was established in August 1926. This working committee was established on the initiative of Mohammad Hatta by former PI members and activists within the nationalist Algemeene Studieclub in Bandung and the Indonesische Studieclub in Surabaya, among whom was a certain Soekarno. It was supposed to establish a nationalist mass party. This initiative indeed led to the establishment of the PNI of Soekarno, but only after July 1927. In February 1927, the Comité Persatoean Indonesia was nothing more than a very young initiative of a few former PI students in the colony.

The Sarekat Islam was not involved in the Comité, although it would join the above-mentioned federation PPPKI in December 1927. In general, the Sarekat Islam, which in the early twenties had given birth to the PKI and by this time was reorganised as a the Partai Sarekat Islam (‘Islamic Association Party’, PSI), was only a shadow of the mass organisation it once was, and had come under the socio-religious influence of traditionalist Islamist forces. At the end of 1926, the ex-PI member Soekiman Wirjosandjojo joined the PSI, but it was not before April 1927 that he got permission to establish contacts with the nationalists. It is therefore unlikely that the PSI had indeed given an official mandate to the students of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia to act on its behalf at the Kongress gegen Imperialismus in Brussels.

Also the mandate of fifth Indonesian representative, Semaoen, was far from clear. To the outside world, Semaoen introduced himself as a representative of the Sarekat Rakjat, the locally rooted communist mass base of the PKI and the rival organisation of the Sarekat Islam. However, Semaoen was not only detached from communist activists in the Dutch Indies after he was banished in July 1923, but the PKI and the SR were also largely destroyed after the failed uprisings of November 1926. This makes it hard to believe that Semaoen actually represented the Sarekat Rakjat at the Kongress gegen Imperialismus. Probably, in

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486 Ingleson, Perhimpunan Indonesia, 34; Hatta, “Het Brusselse Congres tegen Imperialisme en koloniale onderdrukking en onze buitenlandse propaganda,” in Verspreide Geschriften, ed. Mononutu et al., 177.
487 Poeze, Politieke-Politioneele Overzichten, 1:lxx, 34; NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 310, 16 February 1928 A3, transcription interrogation Mohammad Hatta, 8 November 1927, p. 23.
488 Poeze, Politieke-Politioneele Overzichten, 1:lxx.
line with the character of the LAI as a sympathising organisation, Semaoen used the Sarekat Rakjat to conceal the fact that he was a member of the presidium of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, and that he belonged to the small faction of communists on key positions that had to ensure support for the USSR. This group of six Comintern functionaries under the leadership of the Japanese Sen Katayama, was subdivided and distributed over the other parties and organisations, and was instructed to keep a low profile at the congress.489

In other words, the Indonesians suggested a larger mandate than they actually had, and proclaimed themselves as representatives of the Indonesian people. The mandate they claimed reveals more about the political aspirations of both the PI and Semaoen than about the official support in the Dutch Indies for their activities. Moreover, the overrepresentation of Semaoen and the students in PI fitted the agendas of both the Comintern and the organising committee of the Kongress gegen Imperialismus around Münzenberg. For the Comintern, it was in line with its inclination to present the revolt in Indonesia as a broad and spontaneous national uprising, instead of the work of a few dissenting PKI branches. For Münzenberg and the LACO, the uprising in Indonesia provided a much-needed propaganda opportunity. Initially, the Kongress gegen Imperialismus was scheduled to take place in November 1926. However, due to difficulties with the Belgian authorities the conference was delayed a few months, and Münzenberg was afraid that the event would lose momentum and relevance, especially among intellectuals and non-colonial delegations. The public outrage over the repression of the Chinese and Syrians was past its peak, and the organisers were looking for a new focal point to mobilise support for the anticolonial struggle. As Petersson mentions, the uprising in the Dutch Indies was taken as an opportunity by Münzenberg to revive the anticolonial propaganda, and to convince German parties and intellectuals to speak out against colonialism and barbarity.490 The fact that the Perhimpoenan Indonesia had never been part of the uprising itself, and that they did not have a mass base was not seen as problematic. The Indonesians even received 500 dollars from Münzenberg and the IAH to cover their expenses, while most of the other delegations had to bear the costs themselves.491

The Indonesian students were well aware of their unique situation. As Hatta wrote in *Indonesia Merdeka*: “At first, [the world] did not want to believe us. But the recent

490 Petersson, *We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers*, 123-124.
491 Petersson, *We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers*, 133; NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 287, 22 December 1926 V19; NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 289, 4 February 1927 R2.
developments in Indonesia have opened the eyes of the outside world for the wrongs over there. It is primarily due to the recent uprising in our Fatherland that the Indonesian problem was an important topic at the Congress in Brussels”.492

The Indonesian contribution: nationalising the revolt

The speech of the Indonesian delegation on the second day of the congress reflected the ambition of both the PI and the communists to present the revolt not as a failure of the PKI but as the result of repression of Dutch authorities against the Indonesian population. In line with the character of the Kongress gegen Imperialismus, Pamontjak, who was the spokesperson of the PI, described the colonial state as a loyal servant of the interests of international capitalism:

The Dutchmen make propaganda abroad in various ways to make believe that the Dutch colonisation is beneficial for Indonesia. What is the reality? The Dutch domination over Indonesia results in the proletarianisation of the Indonesian society. The social and national structure is degenerated by the domination of Capital, which has the colonial government as its natural guard.493

Pamontjak then gave an overview of the genesis of the nationalist movement and the suffocating repression of the colonial government, as an unavoidable consequence of this double oppression. This finally culminated in the latest developments in the colony: the uprisings of November 1926. As such, the Indonesian students described the popular unrest as a natural reaction against state policies and police repression. Although they were careful not to call for armed revolt themselves, they placed the responsibility with the authorities. This was a conscious move, as becomes clear from intercepted notes from Hatta to Pamontjak, in which the former advised the latter to ascribed the revolt to “[Governor General] Fock’s policy of terror”.494 The notes never reached Pamontjak, but in his speech he used the same argumentation. Discussing bomb throwing incidents, for example, Pamontjak said:

493 Gibarti, Das Flammenzeichen vom Palais Egmont, 134-135; my translation, original in the appendix.
494 NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 291, 8 March 1927 G4.
Needless to say that under these circumstances the national movement is forced to go underground. The government knows this. Bombings and liquidations of government accomplices are the order of the day. It is the government itself, which is responsible for it, because of its despotic regime.\footnote{Gibarti, \textit{Das Flammenzeichen vom Palais Egmont}, 139; my translation, original in the appendix.}

In this reading of events, the provoked Indonesian population was consistently described as a unity. As the immediate cause of the latest uprisings, the students mentioned a cryptic lack of “discipline of a few leaders who had deviated” ["Disziplin einiger Führer die sich abgespalten hatten"], but for the rest the PKI was not considered at all. The precise political context of the uprisings of 1926 was left unmentioned. From the text, it is even unclear to what extent the unrest was still ongoing, which parties were involved, and what would be the future of the Indonesian anticolonial movement. Pamontjak gave some grim insights in the wave of repression, but did not feel or failed to mention that the PKI – and the anticolonial movement as a whole – had just experienced a devastating defeat. Therefore, the main conclusion of Pamontjak was somewhat too bold: “Es ist nicht Indonesien, das für die Unabhängigkeit nicht reif wäre, sondern es ist Holland, das nicht fähig ist, ein Volk, größer und mit einer älteren Kultur, als es selbst besitzt, zu erziehen”.\footnote{Gibarti, \textit{Das Flammenzeichen vom Palais Egmont}, 140: “It is not Indonesia which is not ready for independence, but it is Holland which is not prepared to raise a larger nation with an older culture than its own.”}

This nationalisation of the revolt of 1926 was a logical consequence of the ideological background of the Indonesian students, who depicted the political conflict in Indonesia mainly as a national cause, and not as a class struggle. However, the national interpretation frame resonated with the preferred explanation of the revolt by the Comintern and Semaoen. As a Comintern functionary, Semaoen tried to keep a low profile, and his activities at the Kongress gegen Imperialismus remain largely undocumented. However, Dutch undercover police officers noticed that Semaoen disseminated his recently published brochure on the Indonesian national movement.\footnote{Poëze, \textit{Politiek-Politioneele Overzichten}, 1:28.} In this brochure, with the title ‘Indonesien hat das Wort’, he applied the same narrative as Pamontjak. The latest uprising was clearly the result of increased Dutch police repression: “Bestialisch, unmenschlich, grausam ist der holländische Terror in Indonesien. Eine Folge davon war der Aufstand des Volkes auf West-Java im November 1926.”\footnote{Semaoen, \textit{Indonesien hat das Wort: Der Niedergang des holländischen Imperialismus} (Berlin: Carl Hoym, 1927), 32: “Beastly, inhumane, cruel is the Dutch terror in Indonesia. One of its consequences was the uprising of the people of West Java in November 1926.”} On the political basis of the revolt Semaoen was equally clear: “Der Aufstand war eine Volkserhebung, Ausdruck des aufständischen Volkswillens ganz
Indonesiens.” Semaoens analysis was even reverberated in an official Comintern instruction, in March 1927, “to bring out the fact that Indonesian revolution was really a hunger insurrection”, and not the work of specific communist branches. As such, the Indonesian revolt of November 1926 was nationalised, not only by the Indonesian nationalists but also by the international communist world.

Pamontjak’s speech was well received by the audience, and, as was common practice, he proposed a resolution expressing solidarity with the Indonesian people. The resolution lamented, among other things, the dramatic poverty of the Indonesian population, the denial of fundamental political rights, and the constant accusation of each leftist political party or movement of being communist puppets of Moscow. It declared sympathy with the Indonesian movement for independence, and demanded amnesty for all political prisoners and exiles. The resolution was adopted, and a telegram in the same vein was sent to the Dutch government. More concrete, the attendants agreed to establish a special investigative committee that would demand access to the colony on behalf of the congress. It was supposed to examine the causes of the recent uprising in Java and Sumatra and to counter the findings of previously appointed government committees.

Asian solidarity
Apart from highlighting the Indonesian cause, the Indonesian students also expressed solidarity with other colonised peoples. In a resolution, they expressed solidarity with the Chinese people and the Guomindang Party, which was generally seen as an important source of inspiration, and as the most urgent anticolonial issue of the moment. A recurrent topic of agitation in the speeches of the Kongress gegen Imperialismus, was the fact that concurrently with the conference, two large contingents of Indian troops were sent to China by the British colonial government to protect its interests in the international settlement in Shanghai. This was seen as a direct attack against the national liberation movement in China, and was

499 Semaoen, *Indonesien hat das Wort*, 33: “The uprising was a people’s revolt, an expression of the rebellious desire of all Indonesians.

500 IISH, Archief Komintern - Partai Komunis Indonesia, inv. nr. 3, minutes 8 March 1927. See also Semaoen’s article in the official journal of the Comintern, Inprecorr, in December 1926, in which he stressed the national character of the Sarekat Rakjat: Semaoen, “The Rebellion in the Dutch East Indies,” *International Press Correspondence* 6, December 2, 1926, 1437-1438.


explicitly condemned in three quarters of the speeches. The fact that Liao Huanxing expressed gratitude to Jawaharlal Nehru and the INC for protesting against the transportation of troops was of great symbolic value. In the Indonesian resolution, the PI students proclaimed official and public support for the Chinese nationalists in their struggle for independence. China was, according to the Indonesian delegation, the political centre “um den die Befreiungsbewegung der Unterdrückten der ganzen Welt sich entwickeln kann”.

Furthermore, the Indonesian students tried to reach out to other nationalist delegations in unofficial meetings in the corridors of the conference. Each conference day had a morning and an evening session, and the long lunch break provided ample opportunities for informal meetings and networking. In his autobiography Hatta mentions that he used all the lunch breaks to establish contacts with other activists and to convene in side meetings. Unfortunately, Hatta or the other Indonesian students did not reveal whom they met and what was being discussed, and most of the side meetings were not open for outsiders and secret police. However, in the memoirs of other colonial representatives we can read, for instance, that Hatta invited the Algerian representative of the Étoile Nord-Africaine, Messali Hadj, and Mazhar Bey el Bakri, a Syrian revolutionary from Berlin, to tea to exchange ideas and contacts. Moreover, Jawaharlal Nehru writes that the Indonesian group was among the Asian delegations that tried to formulate common goals and strategies. He describes that the smaller Asian countries Indonesia, Korea, Persia, Syria and Egypt – which for the purpose was also regarded Asian – wanted to explore the possibilities to establish an Asian anticolonial federation.

Figure 4.7: Asian delegates in Brussels. Standing from left to right Duong Van Giao, unknown, Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohammad Hatta.

Source: Nehru, Selected works of Jawaharlal Nehru, 2:305.

503 Gibarti, Das Flammenzeichen vom Palais Egmont, 142.
504 Hatta, Memoir, 213; Subardjo, Kesadaran nasional, 129-132: “around which the liberation movement of the suppressed of the earth can develop.”
The Asian delegations met once, and talked for two or three hours, without result. Nehru himself, representing the most important Asian delegation after the Chinese bloc, was not convinced of the relevance of the Asian initiative. In his view, various parts of Asia were less accessible to each other than they were to Europe. For him, Europe remained the best meeting ground for different Asian nationalities. Moreover, the general organisation of the Kongress gegen Imperialismus was rather suspicious of the Asian plan because it was not in line with their project of anticolonial and proletarian unity. In the end, Nehru and the other Asians “decided that it was premature to talk of any special Asiatic organisation and that [they] might concentrate for the present at least on strengthening the new League against Imperialism, which in effect would largely serve [their] purpose.” The Asian delegations did, however, issue a resolution, drawn up by Duong Van Giao and co-signed by the Perhimpoenan Indonesia. In this resolution the Kongress gegen Imperialismus and its sympathisers promised to do everything in their power to liberate Asia from imperialism and colonial suppression. Moreover, they agreed to send publications and invitations around, and to appoint a committee of four, with a seat in Paris. This small bureau was to continue the Asian work within the League against Imperialism, and protect the interests of the Asian countries without representation in Europe, such as Korea and Persia.

It is unclear why the Indonesians did not write about these inter-colonial or Pan-Asian interactions. Perhaps Mohammad Hatta and the others were not convinced of separate regional initiatives either, or they were afraid to lose their recently acquired position at the Executive Committee of the LAI. In any way, they were definitely aware of the attempt to establish an Asian bureau in Paris. In a letter to the Perhimpoenan Indonesia, the secretary of the peranakan Chinese student association Chung Hwa Hui asked Mohammad Hatta the home address of a certain M. Huang, who was the secretary of the ‘Liga Asiatique’ in Paris. Hatta redirected the CHH to Achmad Soebardjo who lived in Paris and who knew Huang personally.

The initiative to establish an Asian bureau did not seem to be successful, but it indicates that the Kongress gegen Imperialismus was more than just an orchestrated event of the Comintern, and fostered interaction between the colonial delegations in various

506 Nehru, Selected works of Jawaharlal Nehru, 2:290.
507 Nehru, Selected works of Jawaharlal Nehru, 2:289-290.
509 IISH, Archief Chung Hwa Hui, inv. nr. 13, note 4 April 1927, and inv. nr. 144, letter to Hatta, 26 March 1927, and letter from Hatta, 29 March 1927.
directions. Other scholars have pointed out the fact that African and African-American representatives tried to promote a common Pan-African agenda, and steps were taken to form a branch of the LAI representing Arab countries as well.\textsuperscript{510} Other alternative identifications can be discerned from later accounts of prominent anticolonial attendants. In a report Nehru wrote on the conference, he gave a culturalist Pan-Asian account of the Indonesian presence:

The Indonesians, chiefly from Java, were even more interesting [than the Chinese]. They were Moslems but even their names were partly derived from Sanskrit. Their customs, they told us, were still largely Hindu in origin, and many of them bore a striking resemblance to the higher caste Hindus.

There are many Buddhist in Indonesia and we were glad to find that the relations between the Moslems and the Buddhists were uniformly good and both of them worked together for the independence of their country.\textsuperscript{511}

The Algerian Messali Hadj, finally, clothed the relevance of the Kongress gegen Imperialismus in religious terms. After he had given his speech to the congress: “…[m]es compatriots et mes coréligionnaires syriens, indonésiens, indiens, égyptiens, sénégalais ou tunisiens m’avaient chaudement félicité, de même que d’autres congressistes non arabes en non musulmans.”\textsuperscript{512} The fact that Messali Hadj referred to the congress members as ‘coréligionnaires’, rather than fellow nationalists, communists or anticolonials, indicates that within the fringes of the congress there were alternative grounds for collaboration.

Thus, when analysing the activities of Indonesian nationalists at the Kongress gegen Imperialismus we get a double-sided impression. Other than was the case with their activities in Zürich and Paris, the introduction of the Indonesian nationalists on the international stage was clearly not just the result of their own attempts and initiatives to get in contact with foreign activists and movements. Their presence at the congress and the election of Hatta in the Executive Committee were ushered in and facilitated by developments in the Dutch Indies and in the communist world. After the communist uprisings in Java and Sumatra, the student association Perhimpomenan Indonesia was elevated to become the sole representative

\textsuperscript{510} Holger Weiss suggests that representatives of the African Atlantic also used the Kongress gegen Imperialismus as a venue point and as a stage to disseminate a strong Pan-African, rather than a leftist or communist message. He sees strong similarities between the Common Resolution on the Negro Question, adopted at the congress, and a resolution at the Fifth Annual Convention of the Negro Peoples of the World in August 1926. The latter congress was held under the auspices of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association in New York: Weiss, Framing a Radical African Atlantic, 85. For the Arab branch, see Nehru, Selected works of Jawaharlal Nehru, 2:300; Poeze, Politiek-Politioneele Overzichten, 1:74.

\textsuperscript{511} Nehru, Selected works of Jawaharlal Nehru, 2:280.

\textsuperscript{512} Messali Hadj, Mémoires, 157; my emphasis: “…[m]y compatriots and my Syrian, Indonesian, Egyptian, Senegalese or Tunisian co-religionists congratulated me, just like the other non-Arab and non-Muslim congress members.”
of the Indonesian national movement, by lack of credible political alternatives in Europe. Nevertheless, the structure of the League against Imperialism as a sympathising organisation was such that the colonial delegations had considerable space to pursue their own agendas and explore alternative ways to express intercolonial solidarity. The speech of Pamontjak intentionally ‘nationalised’ the communist uprisings as the inevitable reaction of the Indonesian population to poverty and repression, and connected the Indonesian struggle to similar anticolonial struggles elsewhere. Moreover, Hatta and the others established and renewed contacts with like-minded organisations from Asia and Africa, and engaged in attempts to create parallel and partly autonomous political structures to the League against Imperialism. In the next chapters, the complex relationship between the LAI and the PI will be examined further, in the context of Dutch police repression and increasing tensions between communists and social democrats in the late 1920s.