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

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Epilogue

To conclude this dissertation with the events of November 1931, and not for example with the Second World War, is a deliberate choice. Of course, neither the Perhimpoenan Indonesia, nor the international networks in which it was active, evaporated after 1931, but the political character of both changed decisively and Indonesian anticolonial nationalism lost its institutional basis in Europe. In many ways, the PI of 1932 was completely alien to the PI of 1929, and, as a tiny communist organisation, it lost relevance to Indonesian political parties in the Dutch Indies. The next pages describe the epilogue of this dissertation: the history of the PI and of its international networks in the later 1930s.

The Perhimpoenan Indonesia after November 1931

The expulsion of Hatta and Sjahrir from the association was the confirmation of a new distinctly communist course for the Perhimpoenan Indonesia, which it continued to follow throughout the 1930s. Its attitude towards other organisations and ideologies was to a large extent determined by the political evolution of communist parties and organisations in general. From 1928 onwards Communist Parties that were orientated towards Moscow adopted a very militant and hostile stance towards ‘social-fascists’ and other non-communists. This so-called Third Period in the policy of the Comintern, which proved fatal to Hatta and other nationalists in the League against Imperialism, translated into an aggressive attitude of the communist PI towards nationalists and social democrats. Similarly, as soon as the Comintern began to advocate the establishment of a ‘Popular Front against Fascism’ from 1935 onwards, which advocated broad cooperation between all democratic political forces against the rise of fascism and nazism, the PI began to sing a different, more moderate tune as well.

Prominent in realising the shift from nationalism to communism were Abdulmadjid Djojoadhiningrat, Achmad Soebardjo and Roestam Effendi. The first two were experienced PI members who had lived through all the periods described in this study. Roestam Effendi arrived in 1927 after the anti-communist repression in the Dutch Indies forced him to end his activities as a teacher and as a communist propagandist, and led to his decision to obtain a teacher’s certificate in the Netherlands. Soon political activities consumed most of his time. Other PI members that pushed the association on a communist path included Soedario Moewaladi, Setiadjit Soegondo, Mohammad Ilderem, and Moehamad Tamzil. In the first
years, the Perhimpoenan Indonesia closely followed the CPH and became estranged from other progressive forces with whom Hatta and Sjahrir had maintained good contacts, such as leftist social democrats, independent socialists, and antimilitarists.  

Abdulmadjid Djojoadhiningrat appeared regularly at meetings of the CPH or affiliated organisations throughout the Netherlands. Introduced as “our Indonesian comrade”, he attacked Dutch capitalism which exploited the Indonesian and Dutch masses alike, and he saluted the Soviet Union as the foremost ally against imperialism. It is in this period that the Indonesian students also began to collaborate with Anton de Kom. This Surinamese communist had arrived in the Netherlands already in 1921, but only in 1929 he first appeared at a PI meeting in The Hague. After a short interlude in which De Kom returned to Surinam and was expelled within months by the colonial authorities, he became chairman of the LAI-NL section of The Hague in 1934. Often, Anton de Kom and PI propagandists appeared at the same meetings of the Communist Party.

In *Indonesia Merdeka*, social democratic parties and unions such as SDAP and NVV were strongly attacked as “reformist”, and “reactionary” opportunists that had to be “kicked out” of the anti-imperialist camp. In a similar fashion, nationalist organisations in the Dutch Indies were denounced. Illustrative, both in tone and in content, is the lengthy ‘open letter to the Indonesian people’, which the PI issued in November 1931. About the Indonesian political landscape, it stated:

Reformist politics and highly dangerous opportunism in the bourgeois, liberal and narrowly nationalist ranks rise to large proportions. The [nationalist] Partai Bangsa Indonesia, the Boedi Oetomo, Pasoendan, and other petty-bourgeois parties [...] in which aspiring capitalists and industrials, and complacent intellectuals and cultural nationalists in the making [...] find shelter, are essentially hostile to revolutionary action. [...] These organisations and groups have persistently played an obstructive and treacherous role in the massive national liberation movement, [...] because they have a direct or indirect interest in preserving the colonial order, and perpetuating capitalist ‘peace and stability’.

In another article in 1933, Mohammad Hatta was iconoclastically portrayed as an “agent of Japanese Imperialism”:

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728 Published in Van Leeuwen, “Perhimpoenan Indonesia,” 83; my translation, original in the appendix.
We have known Mister Hatta as a politicaster who, although he wallows in reformist mud, from time to time makes a ‘leftist’ move to conceal his petit bourgeois reformist face for the toiling masses of the Netherlands and Indonesia. […] The result of his reformist manipulations was that the national-revolutionary PI kicked him out of its ranks, and pilloried him in all his petit-bourgeois nakedness.\(^{729}\)

The apex of the Indonesian integration in communist circles was undoubtedly the election of its chair, Roestam Effendi, in the Dutch parliament as member for the CPH. The CPH had nominated him, along with three other Indonesian candidates, as an anticolonial statement, and as a response to a quelled mutiny on the Dutch warship ‘De Zeven Provinciën’ off the Sumatran coast. But as the other Indonesian communists either refused or were declared unfit by the Dutch authorities, Roestam Effendi became the first Indonesian in the Dutch parliament. As such, he constituted a direct link between the PI and the leadership of the Dutch Communist Party. Another clear indication of the alignment of the PI to the Communist Party was the fact that at the celebration of the 25\(^{th}\) anniversary of the PI in January 1934, there were no representatives and speakers present other than communists.\(^{730}\)

The reverse side of the medal was that the organisation became estranged from its constituency and the Indonesian political landscape, and that the membership of the organisation itself dwindled to a few active individuals. Many of the students did not share the communist beliefs of the leadership, or were afraid to join the association openly. The nomination of Roestam Effendi in the Dutch parliament could not conceal the fact that it was difficult to attract new members, to organise events and to issue *Indonesia Merdeka* on a regular basis. The journal, once a widely read monthly, appeared only five times between April 1931 and November 1933, after which it came to a complete stop. The fact that the PI was declared a forbidden organisation for civil servants in 1933 isolated the Indonesian students even further.\(^{731}\)

Not surprisingly, the new Raadsman voor Studeerenden, G.J. Goedhart, concluded that the PI was effectively eliminated as a subversive organisation by the end of the 1930s. In a report he wrote:

> The association as such radiates no power anymore; the revolutionary fire (perhaps still smouldering) doesn’t spread any light, although it is true that it is connected to so-called communist front

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\(^{729}\) “Mohammad Hatta als agent van het Japansche Imperialisme,” *Indonesia Merdeka* 11.1 (November 1933): 21; my translation, original in the appendix.


\(^{731}\) Poeze, *Politiek-Politioneele Overzichten*, 4:lxxiv.
Around 1935, the PI changed its attitude and adopted a more open approach towards non-communist organisations, paradoxically reaffirming its loyalty to Comintern directives. The Comintern had changed its position at the Seventh World Congress, which took place in Moscow in July and August 1935, because the Third Period had not resulted in strengthening the communist movement and reinforcing the foreign position of the Soviet Union. The capitalist system seemed to have survived the most severe economic blows of the Great Depression, and communist parties and unions had not managed to profit from the hardships of workers and urban poor. Germany was an exception as aggressive campaigning led to a considerable growth of the KPD, but animosity towards the German social democrats, which was mutual, had also thwarted effective opposition against the Nazi Party. In 1933, soon after Hitler had assumed power, the KPD, traditionally the largest Communist Party in Europe, was abolished and forbidden. Fascism was also on the rise in other European countries, while in Asia tensions rose between Japan and the Soviet Union. Therefore, in 1935 the Comintern issued a new directive to communist organisations around the world, to drop their attacks on social democrats and other “reformists”, and to build a Popular Front against fascism.\(^{733}\)

In the Netherlands, this implied that both the CPH and the PI moderated their political tone considerably, and began to target fascism and nazism instead. First of all, the PI abandoned one of its most defining principles, that of non-cooperation with Dutch institutions and democratic bodies. It argued that representative bodies such as the Volksraad were valuable platforms for revolutionary propaganda, and that the radical movement marginalised itself by abstention from participation. Furthermore, the PI began to advocate a broad cooperation with all democratic and nationalist political forces against fascism in the Netherlands and the Dutch Indies. A policy of anticolonial confrontation was replaced by a strategy to prepare Indonesia for a possible invasion by Japan. Symbolically, when in 1936 the PI resumed the publication of its journal after three years of silence, it changed the name from *Indonesia Merdeka* to *Indonesia*, dropping the immediate demand for freedom. It also spoke out in favour of the Soetardjo petition. This moderate request of Volksraad member Soetardjo called on the Dutch colonial authorities to create a road map to autonomy for the Indies within a Dutch commonwealth system. The PI justified this departure from the demand

\(^{732}\) NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 531, 14 November 1938 F37; my translation, original in the appendix.

\(^{733}\) Chase, *Enemies within the Gates?*, 13-16.
for unconditional independence by arguing that it wanted to reflect the desires of the Indonesian national movement as a whole. The association wanted full equality between Indonesia and the Netherlands “within the borders of the constitution”, because a rupture of the ties, in the context of a fascist quest for colonial territories, was not in the interest of either people. This political stance also made it possible to renew relations with the SDAP and the NVV, and with the Chinese Indonesian Chung Hwa Hui. As Harry Poeze characterised this shift: “In less than a year the PI replaced its radical leftist position for a position that was more moderate than the mainstream of nationalism in Indonesia itself.”

These political manoeuvres reflect the turbulence of the immediate pre-war years, but cannot conceal the fact that the PI operated from an extremely marginal position. Despite changes in course, the Centrale Inlichtingendienst continued to regard the PI as a communist and subversive organisation that was trying to “camouflage” its political character. The Minister of Justice refused to remove the PI from the list of forbidden organisations for civil servants, and thus for students it remained dangerous to be associated with this group. Furthermore, several other non-political student organisations appeared in the second half of the 1930s that made use of the vacuum left behind by the PI and the weakness of the latter organisation in enforcing an organisational monopoly on the Indonesian student community. At the end of 1935, the Studentenvereeniging ter Bevordering der Indonesische Kunst (‘Student Association for the Advancement of Indonesian Art’, SVIK) was established as a cultural association that organised musical performances and lectures about culture and art, followed in 1936 by the Roekoen Peladjar Indonesia (‘Union/Pillar of Indonesian Students’, ROEPI) that functioned as an explicitly a-political social club. Moreover, a few smaller organisations were founded on the basis of religion or study discipline. Finally, at the end of 1936, an Indonesian community centre ‘Clubhuis Indonesia’ was established in Leiden

734 Poeze, Politiek-Politioneele Overzichten, 4:lxiv-lxvi; Poeze, In het land van de overheerser, 1:259-262, 270-273; NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 531, 14 November 1938 F37.
736 Poeze, Politiek-Politioneele Overzichten, 4:lxv: “In nauwelijks een jaar was de PI dus van zijn extreem-linkse positie beland in een opstelling die gematigder was dan de hoofdstroom van het nationalisme in Indonesië zelf.”
737 NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 531, 14 November 1938 F37.
738 NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 587, 30 December 1940 Y31; Poeze, In het land van de overheerser, 1:262-265.
with donations from the Dutch Indies. It provided a meeting space for many of the Indonesian organisations, but also facilitated a library, a student restaurant, and a printing press.  

**International engagements after November 1931**

In other words, although the history of the PI did not end in 1932, it lost its prominent position in the Indonesian political landscape, and its central status for Indonesian students in the Netherlands. Likewise, on the European stage, the PI could no longer occupy the symbolic position of the advanced post of the Indonesian national movement in Europe. Instead, it was embedded into communist networks and campaigns, and did not attempt to claim autonomous political space as it had done before in the LAI.

As described in the previous chapter, in May 1931 Hatta was replaced in the Executive Committee of the LAI by Abdulmadjid Djojoadhiningrat, whose political profile fitted the desired loyal political line of the organisation. The meeting was supposed to signal a new beginning for the LAI. However, a rapidly deteriorating political climate in Germany – the unofficial home base of the organisation – and a lack of support from the Comintern made a successful restart impossible. In December 1931, the German Schutzpolizei raided and ransacked the offices of the International Secretariat of the LAI in Berlin, and arrested 16 of its employees and members. In September 1932, they did the same with the offices of the IAH, making it overtly clear that Berlin was no longer a safe haven for the international communist movement. When Hitler assumed power in January 1933, he prohibited the KPD, IAH and the LAI within a few weeks. With a long history of internal political quarrels, the LAI was unable to decide from where, and in what way operations could be continued. Although, as Frederick Petterson demonstrated, remnants of the LAI continued to function until 1937, it could no longer provide a platform for the renewed Perhimpoenan Indonesia.

Instead, the PI profited from new antiwar and antifascist campaigns in the communist orbit from the summer of 1932 onwards. From 27 to 29 August 1932, a large international congress was organised in Amsterdam against the pending threat of a new world war, as a reaction to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in the fall of 1931. Prominent organisers of the LAI were involved in this new initiative, such as Rolland, Barbusse, Duchène and above all Münzenberg, but this time the Comintern assumed a more direct and active role in

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739 NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 587, 30 December 1940 Y31.
740 Petersson, *We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers*, 433-450.
741 Petersson, *We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers*, 451, 475-480.
preparing the conference and monitoring its proceedings. In June 1933, the Amsterdam
antiwar initiative – which also attracted non-communist actors – joined forces with the
organisers of a more univocally communist antifascist congress at the Salle Pleyel in Paris. This new ‘International Committee against War and Fascism’, or ‘Amsterdam-Pleyel
movement’, can be regarded as the onset of the communist antiwar movement in Western
Europe in the 1930s.  

It was at the root of establishing several sub-organisations and
campaigns aimed at uniting, for instance, student associations (‘Rassemblement Mondial des
Étudiants pour la Paix, la Liberté et la Culture’, RME) and women’s organisations
(‘Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes Contre la Guerre et le Fascisme’), and to coordinate
escape routes for German communists and antifascists. For the PI, these initiatives provided
the possibility to continue its foreign work.

Between 1932 and 1939, the PI participated in several international meetings, but its
role was limited to giving speeches and making a symbolic appearance for Indonesia. The
first such involvement was the Amsterdam antiwar conference itself, in August 1932. This
conference took place in the RAI conference centre and attracted almost 2200 people from 27
countries. Because of its Dutch location, the Indonesians were present with no less than 11
people. This was a large group: despite the fact that the event had been organised as a
reaction to the Japanese invasion in Manchuria, there were only a handful colonial delegates.
On behalf of the PI, Achmad Soebardjo spoke under the pseudonym of Asis. Reportedly,
before Soebardjo started, Dutch CPH members took a position on both sides of the podium
and shouted “Indonesia free from Holland, now, now, now!”. The content of Soebardjo’s
speech is unknown. It is uncertain if his message made an impression on the audience at all,
because, as a British secret service officer reported, the acoustics made most of the
contributions inaudible.

Other events included a communist women’s congress in August 1934 in Paris. This
meeting, the Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes Contre la Guerre et le Fascisme was one
of the offshoots of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, and it was coordinated by the IAH and
the Comintern. Not surprisingly, its main slogans were “War to the Imperialist War!”,”Fight

743 Petersson, *We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers*, 473.
744 BLA, IOR/L/PJ, inv. nr. 457; Petersson, *We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers*, 470-476; Poeze, *Politiek-Politisionelee Overzichten*, 3:228.
745 BLA, IOR/L/PJ, inv. nr. 457.
Fascism!”, and “Fight for Worldwide Soviet Power!” The female PI members Artinah Samsoedin and Siti Soendari represented Indonesia. The latter, “slight but energetic”, spoke about the suppression of women under colonialism in the Dutch Indies and advocated the worldwide struggle of women against colonialism.

Similar anti-imperialist messages were conveyed at RME meetings, which were organised twice in Brussels and twice in Paris, and attracted a dozen Indonesian students each. They radiated the spirit of the United Front against Fascism, and tried to reach out to non-communist organisations as well. It is for the same reason that the Indonesian delegations, especially the last two in Paris, no longer exclusively consisted of PI members. The ROEPI, the CHH, as well as a joint Indonesisch Vredes Bureau (‘Indonesian Peace Bureau’) sent representatives as well. Nevertheless, the PI asserted itself as the most radical of the organisations. According to a report of the Préfecture de Police in Paris, for example, the PI chair Parlindoengan Loebis said at an RME meeting in August 1937: “Peace is threatened by the fascist states and so-called democratic states as the Netherlands, which are as much exploiters as all the rest; there is but one solution – Revolution!”

Statements like these were an extra reason for the Dutch authorities to distrust the moderate attitude of the Perhimpoaen Indonesia after 1935.

These meetings, which were sometimes larger than the 1927 Brussels Kongress gegen Imperialismus, merit elaborate historiographic attention as they were the prelude of communist antifascist resistance during the Second World War. The political atmosphere in which the PI was active in the second half of the 1930s helps to explain the remarkable engagement of 60 to 110 Indonesian students in the resistance against German occupation, in which some of them would perish. However, in a study about the praxis of solidarity and the making of Indonesian nationalism on a European stage the above-mentioned international

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748 Indonesian students were present at RME meetings in Brussels in December 1934 (12 students) and September 1936 (9 students), and in Paris in August 1937 (at least 10 students) and in August 1939 (12 students). Saville, “Bridgeman,” 45; Poeze, In het land van de overheerser, 1:258, 263, 267; Poeze, Politiek-Politioneele Overzichten, 4:144-145, 332; Dugrand and Laurent, Willi Münzenberg, 444-447; NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 587, 30 December 1940 Y31; NL-HaNA, Ambassade Frankrijk, 2.05.57, inv. nr. 1350.
749 NL-HaNA, Ambassade Frankrijk, 2.05.57, inv. nr. 1350. “De vrede wordt bedreigd door de fascistische staten en de zg. democratische staten als Nederland, die even groote uitbuiters zijn als de rest; er bestaat slechts één redmiddel – Revolutie!”
events are less interesting. Not only had the PI itself abandoned nationalism as an ideology, but they also operated in a much more uniform ideological environment, in which they were often the only colonial representatives, and in which the political supervision of the organisers was much closer. While the League against Imperialism in its initial years can be characterised as a ‘sympathising organisation’ that left considerable political space for alternative movements, the later communist platforms provided fewer possibilities for political manoeuvring. Finally, meetings like these hardly reverberated in the Dutch Indies, where the communist movement had never recovered from the state repression of 1926 and 1927. The PI was no longer the uniquely positioned organisation between Europe and the Dutch Indies that it had been.