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

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Conclusion

In this study, I have tried to reposition the Indonesian movement for national independence in an international context of anticolonial movements. Traditionally, the history of Indonesian politics, and the emergence of various oppositional parties and movements in the late colonial period, have been described with an ‘internal’ focus on the Indonesian political landscape itself, or with an ‘imperial’ focus on the problematic relation between Indonesian organisations and the Dutch colonial authorities. Both approaches have been indispensable to a thorough understanding of the dynamics within the Indonesian national movement, but they ignore the position of Indonesia and the empire within the wider world.

By way of contrast, this study demonstrates that Indonesian political movements did not emerge in isolation, and derived much of their inspiration and legitimacy from the international stage. Following recent insights in historiography on anticolonialism and nationalism, and trends in Indonesian studies to transgress the state as a central frame of research, I shifted the focus to the international engagements of Indonesian nationalists. To make this workable, a specific organisation on a particular stage is examined – the Indonesian student organisation Perhimpoenan Indonesia in the capitals of Western Europe – to see how an international world view, an internationalist strategy, and transnational encounters materialised in practice. As such, this dissertation is a political study, which deals with tensions between expressed unity and concealed diversity within composite political alliances.

From around 1922 onwards, the year in which a new board put the Indonesian student association – then still called Indische Vereeniging – on an explicitly nationalist and oppositional course, the international stage became more and more relevant as a platform for inspiration, propaganda and cooperation. The transformation of its journal from Hindia Poetra to Indonesia Merdeka translated into a greater awareness of foreign political struggles of colonised peoples against their oppressors. A manifesto at the end of 1925 directed ‘to the Indonesian nation’ urged political parties in the Dutch Indies to put aside their differences and to build a united front against Dutch colonialism. To support its plea the journal wrote: “Look at Egypt, look at Morocco, look at Syria! [Look at the] indomitable and unbreakable will of the nation. Look at China, which doesn’t allow foreigners to humiliate her”.751

751 NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 280, 2 July 1926 S10, Manifest van de Perhimpoenan Indonesia aan de Indonesische natie!, 25 December 1925.
The international stage was important for three reasons. First of all it was a major source of inspiration for the Indonesian students. While the political situation in the Dutch Indies at times seemed to be disheartening and desperate, the successes of Sun Yat-sen in China, the movement of Gandhi in British India or the struggle of Abd el-Krim against the Spanish and French in Northern Morocco, were stimulating sources of pride, confidence and legitimacy. It seemed that the Indonesians were part of a movement for democratisation and self-determination that pushed boundaries worldwide. The international context gave them a reason to criticise the Dutch colonial authorities because they perceived themselves to be complying with an irreversible historic tendency towards liberation. Political and personal sacrifices made by Indonesians against the Dutch were more bearable against the backdrop of those made by colonised peoples around the world.

Secondly, the students felt the need to counter Dutch government propaganda about peace and tranquillity in the archipelago under the blessings of Dutch rule. In their view, the Indonesian political parties failed to make themselves heard on the international stage, and consequently the many issues and problems in Indonesia remained unknown to the outside world. Among foreign audiences, the general impression prevailed that the Indonesian colonial subjects were content with the current political system. As Mohammad Hatta wrote in ‘Our foreign propaganda’ – the article with which this study began: “In so far as foreign attention is focused on Indonesia, this is the result of the propaganda of our rivals”. In order to counter this propaganda the students had to make their opposition manifest to the outside world, and officially announce the existence and emergence of a growing and militant nationalist movement in Indonesia. One way of doing this was by introducing and popularising the term ‘Indonesia’ at international events, as a substitute for the Dutch imposed name of ‘the Indies’. It not only served to distinguish the Indonesians from their brethren in ‘British India’, but also to express the desire to be free. “To be able to determine its own faith, a people has to show the outside world that it possesses the serious desire to be independent. A people that misses this quality is doomed to be suppressed forever”, Hatta said.

A third reason to expand the field of action of the Indonesians to the international field was the awareness that the European capitals harboured many anticolonial activists and representatives of powerful anticolonial movements. In combination with the realisation that the Perhimpoenan Indonesia was politically isolated in the Netherlands – too radical for some

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and too elitist and bourgeois for others — this led to a conscious policy of the Indonesian students to send people to Paris, Brussels and Berlin to establish contacts with various political movements, and to build an Asian and anticolonial front against imperialism.

While the international stage as a source of inspiration essentially presupposed a global historical consciousness, with a predominant focus on an imagined community of colonised but rebellious people in Asia and Africa, the latter two reasons translated into extending activities to the European imperial capitals, as gateways to the wider world. As the students were well aware, they were uniquely positioned in Europe to establish contacts with other anticolonial activists and to represent the Indonesian movement abroad. In *Indonesia Merdeka*, we could read: “[T]he Asian students in Europe need to establish that [Asian] unity, because in the European capitals it is possible to meet each other and to find common ground. Also because these Asian students will later become leaders of their suppressed peoples.”754 It is very symbolic that this article was not written by an Indonesian student, but by the Indian journalist Kavalam Madhava Panikkar, with whom the PI collaborated in Paris and Bierville.

The long road to political integration

The dissertation is structured around the experiences of a few individuals of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia in a foreign environment. The applied micro-historical approach makes it possible to examine the complex reality of movement building, and to get beyond superficial suggestions of contact and collaboration, and propagandistic claims of unity and solidarity.

It appears that the character of transnational cooperation differed from context to context. After an introductory chapter in which the reader is introduced to the Indonesian student community in the Netherlands, the second chapter follows the activities of Samuel Ratu Langie in Zürich. Although his journey to the Swiss city, from 1917 to 1919 predated the nationalist turn of the Indonesian association in 1922, it was important because later students would refer to Ratu Langie’s work, and especially the establishment of the Société des Étudiants Asiatiques in 1917, as a stimulating example of international politics. The chapter has a few functions. It discusses the ideological relation between regionalism, nationalism, and internationalism, and argues that nationalism was not only reacting with regionalism, but also emerged in relation to internationalism. Ratu Langie shows that the first two identifications did not necessarily contradict each other. As a life-long advocate of the

Minahasan cause, he referred to the importance of an independent ‘Indonesia’ in an international context of students coming from all over the Asian continent. Furthermore, I use the Ratu Langie case to explore two other identifications that became relevant on the international stage: a vaguely defined ‘New Asiatic’ identity that wanted to bring Asian cultural and Western technological elements in equilibrium, as well as a student identity that was based on the experience that colonial students in Europe were perfectly positioned to make common cause. As became clear from the quote of Panikkar, the Asian students expected to play an important role in the future politics of their respective countries.

Nevertheless, the Indonesian engagements within the SDEA came to a premature end when Ratu Langie returned home. He had failed to firmly root his foreign activities in the Indische Vereeniging, and to build enduring contacts for the association, which was in a state of inactivity during the First World War.

The contrast with Mononutu’s journey to Paris, from the summer of 1925 until the summer of 1927 is interesting. In chapter three is described how his appointment as an informal ‘ambassador’ was carefully prepared and facilitated by the Perhimpoenan Indonesia. In a letter to a fellow student, Mononutu wrote that he aimed to reach out to Indian nationalists, communist activists around the journal *Le Paria*, and editors of the large communist daily *L’Humanité*, to make them aware of the Indonesian struggle. It gives an insight into the persons who Mononutu considered to be useful contacts for the association. In the end, it seems that he had to adjust his initial plans to the realities of the already existing Parisian anticolonial scene. He indeed established relations but not in the circles he envisioned. Instead, Mononutu seemed to have fruitful contacts in culturalist and orientalist Asian academic circles, and smaller semi-political organisations such as the Association pour l’Étude des Civilisations Orientales. This organisation, which would form the bedrock of the Asian bloc of Mohammad Hatta in Bierville in 1926, was of a very mixed political composition, comprising anti-Bolshevik Francophiles, as well as orientalist students and anticolonial nationalists. Although the students regarded their engagements in Paris and Bierville as the positive results of their integration in the anticolonial networks in Paris, it seems that the Asian anticolonial unity they displayed was much more performative than actually grounded in a common political agenda with other Asian activists. The fact that the Indonesians were represented and recognised on the international stage was more important than actual political results.

755 NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 301, 9 August 1927 G13, Cb.
The rocky road to integration in European anticolonial networks is also evident in chapter four, where the breakthrough of the Indonesian students on the international stage is examined. Although it is tempting to interpret the presence and prominence of the Indonesian students at the Kongress gegen Imperialismus in Brussels in February 1927 as the outcome of international work of the students themselves – the impression you get from reading *Indonesia Merdeka* – it is important to recognise that it was primarily related to the recent communist revolts in Java and Sumatra between November 1926 and January 1927, and to the confusion on the side of the Comintern about the state of the PKI. To make this clear, this chapter follows a circumstantial approach and not only follows Mohammad Hatta, but also describes the activities of the communist exile Semaoen. It was clear by the time of the Brussels Kongress gegen Imperialismus that the failure of the revolts was due to chaotic preparations of the communist PKI, and that the communist movement was being destroyed by the Dutch colonial authorities. But the Indonesian students did not mention this at the Kongress gegen Imperialismus, and presented the revolt as a national reaction of an impoverished population against Dutch exploitation and repression. Again, there was a difference in the propaganda of solidarity and unity of the anticolonial movement, and a reality which was much more diverse and confusing.

In relation to this, chapter four follows the characterisation of Fredrik Petersson of the League against Imperialism as a sympathising organisation, which not only implied, at least cosmetically, a certain distance from Moscow and the Comintern, but also left space for alternative political tendencies to organise and to pursue their own interests. Hatta and his fellow PI students used the Kongress gegen Imperialismus to actually build connections with anticolonial Asian factions, and to initiate the establishment of a new Asian bloc within the movement to strengthen the colonised voice within the larger European left. This initiative was fruitless, but combined with their nationalist speech, it demonstrates that the participation of the PI in the LAI was motivated by an autonomous nationalist agenda and an independent estimation of the benefits of involvement. This conclusion goes against the grain of more traditional studies to the European left and anticolonialism on a European stage. Too often, the autonomous interests of colonial delegations to engage in larger structures such as the LAI are ignored, or simply equated with sympathy for the Soviet Union. The Indonesians show otherwise.

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756 Petersson, *We are neither Visionaries, nor Utopian Dreamers*, 47-50 and 109.
Chapter five and six describe different aspects of the aftermath of the Kongress gegen Imperialismus in Brussels, and the Indonesian involvement with the League against Imperialism. Chapter five demonstrates that the Indonesians students were not alone in extending their work beyond the Dutch borders, with the Dutch authorities following in their wake. When the police raided the homes of Indonesian students, as a reaction to their involvement in the League against Imperialism, they also sent a police inspector to Paris to monitor Indonesian activists there. This was a severe setback to the relative freedom of the students in Paris, and many of them returned to the Netherlands or the Dutch Indies. One student, Achmad Soebardjo, chose to move to Berlin and to manage the PI from a distance as long as it remained under repression of the authorities in the Netherlands. He was facilitated by communist organisers around the League against Imperialism, which implicitly also set the PI on a communist course. Among other things, his hosts, Willi Münzenberg and Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, provided him with a ticket to the celebrations of the tenth anniversary of the Russian Revolution in Moscow.

Chapter six, finally, reintroduces the Dutch political landscape, and asks how the foreign and ‘domestic’ Dutch policy of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia interacted. While the association had been politically isolated before 1927, the students gained new political contacts with Dutch leftist political parties and individuals via their international work in the League against Imperialism. Moreover, the international involvement and subsequent Dutch repression also put the students of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia on the map in the Dutch Indies. The PI was even appointed as the official representative in Europe by some Indonesian organisations, such as the PNI, PPPKI and SKBI. The students were, again, keen to protect their own political interests vis-à-vis other political forces in the Netherlands and Europe, but they found it difficult to cope with a diminished political space on the international stage. After all, this stage provided much of their legitimacy as an organisation. In the end, their dependence on the international LAI proved to be fatal for the Indonesian nationalist students, both in Europe and in the Netherlands.

Negotiating space behind the banner of unity
Together, the chapters show that the Indonesian students were constantly negotiating their space amidst other Dutch, leftist or anticolonial political forces in Europe. They illustrate the difficulties of small pressure groups to find their place amidst dominant political movements
on the international stage. Two variables co-determined the character of Indonesian nationalist politics in interwar Europe.

First of all, there was a gradual shift in the course of the 1920s in the degree to which the Indonesians managed to create their own political network and determine their own political fate. Throughout the period, the students wrote proudly in *Indonesia Merdeka* that their transnational engagements were the result of conscious efforts of Indonesians themselves, a fact often repeated in later scholarship. This may have been largely the case with Ratu Langie, who went to Zürich and established the Société des Étudiants Asiatiques on his own initiative. But from Paris 1925 to Brussels 1927, Berlin 1928, and Frankfurt 1929, the political position of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia was increasingly co-determined by dynamics within pre-existing political networks. Although the Indonesians continuously protected their own political agenda, their success depended to a large extent upon larger political forces and the power relations between them. Examples are developments in the PCF, the feud between the Second and the Third International, the antagonism between nationalists and communists in China, and repressive actions by the Dutch authorities in Java, in Leiden and in Paris. The eventual result was that the shape of the Indonesian political networks was as much coincidental as intentional. For this reason, the accounts of the Indonesian students themselves cannot simply be followed, as they framed everything in a positive spirit. Instead, we have to combine a micro-historical analysis of the praxis of solidarity, with a broader awareness of developments in adjacent political networks and groups.

A second variable was the extent to which propaganda about unity and solidarity corresponded with real political unity within movements. Inconsistencies between external displays of unity and internal divisions are not uncommon in larger and composite political movements. A strategic political alliance around one shared issue, such as the struggle against colonial oppression, does not necessitate agreement on other topics, for example around questions of ownership in the economic sphere or cultural rights of minorities. It is striking, however, that with the Indonesians these differences of opinion included crucial ideological issues. While Mononutu, for instance, urged to expel Noto Soeroto from the Perhimpoenan Indonesia, because the latter had not conformed to the principle of immediate and absolute independence and stressed the importance of Dutch colonial guidance, he happily cooperated with the Indochinese student Duong Van Giao in Paris, who held similar opinions in the Indochinese context. Similarly, Hatta did not intervene at the pacifist conference in Bierville when he heard Panikkar praising “[t]he spirit of Asia [which] is
essentially pacifist” and “the great doctrine of Ahimsa, or non-violence, of which Mahatma Gandhi is the Apostle”. But in an editorial remark a few weeks later he contended that:

“Superficial readings of Gandhi have put too much emphasis on passivity, which in essence is only a provisional policy, and they overlook the fact that when Gandhi considers that the time has come he does not reject violence as well.”758 Towards the international League against Imperialism, finally, the PI students adopted a more flexible attitude than to the national LAI-NL. While Hatta abandoned the LAI-NL twice because of dissatisfaction with the dominance of Dutch political parties, he had to be forcefully expelled from the LAI and the PI before he turned away from international politics. Representation and connection were what mattered to the Indonesian nationalists on the European stage, and ideological orthodoxy was less important.

The inconsistencies between the rhetoric of unity and the reality of difference raise the question of whether the Indonesians really found a political home in Europe, or if their cooperation in the broader anticolonial left remained a marriage of convenience under the veil of unity. The fact that international cooperation and Indonesian nationalist presence on the European stage largely ended with the expulsion of non-communists from the League against Imperialism reveals that they had not succeeded in building lasting and autonomous political networks. In some cases, personal contacts between Indonesians and foreign anticolonial activists seemed to have survived the 1930s and 1940s, for instance Ratu Langie’s relations with Filipino politicians.759 But structural collaboration in an Asian bloc did not occur until after the Second World War under fundamentally new circumstances.

The fragility of the non-communist anticolonial network, and the ultimate collapse of transnational engagements of Indonesian students in the Netherlands connects to Frederick Cooper’s remarks against the conception of globalisation as an ever increasing and irreversible trend.760 On first sight, one can clearly distinguish an intensification of political interactions across national and ideological borders in the course of the 1920s. In Europe, the Indonesian students fundamentally ‘globalised’ their self-perception as they began to interpret their own struggle in the context of similar struggles elsewhere. Making use of the structures of empire, they expanded their network, first to small communities in Zürich and Paris, and later to large anticolonial movements and European political parties. Thus, they

759 Van Klinken, Minorities, Modernity and the Emerging Nation, 106.
760 Cooper, Colonialism in Question, 91-112.
became part of an extremely mobile cosmopolitan elite that transcended the borders of states, empires and ideological powers. The Indonesian engagements abroad not only resulted in contacts with various political streams in Paris, Berlin and elsewhere, but also increased their esteem in the Netherlands and the Dutch Indies. For various reasons, the SDAP and the CPH became more receptive to the Indonesian students after the latter had proven their relevance on the international stage. Also in the Dutch Indies, the popularity of people like Hatta and Pamontjak rocketed after their performances in Brussels and the subsequent crackdown of the Dutch authorities.

However, the story of Indonesian politics in Europe can equally be told in a much more negative tone. In a colonial environment of structural underdevelopment, students were forced to travel to the Netherlands to fully exercise the political rights that they desired in the Dutch Indies. Disturbing surveillance and political isolation forced them to shift part of their activities from the Dutch stage to other European countries, where they could organise in relative anonymity and freedom. Initially, the transnational engagements of the students resulted in stimulating encounters and prestigious conferences where they could present their national claims to an international audience, but Dutch cross-border repression and leftist polarisation destroyed this political space as well. After the students returned to the Dutch Indies, an uncertain political career was the only alternative to governmental positions that were barred to ‘radicals’ and ‘revolutionaries’. In other words, empire stimulated movement and transnational exchange in some ways, while it obstructed them in others. ‘Globalisation’ as a term obscures the many obstacles the students encountered during their trip to Europe, and does not account for the diminution of political freedom that they experienced after 1926.

A lasting source of inspiration and legitimacy

Finally, it is important to question the longer term impact of the European experiences on the students as well as on the anticolonial movement at large. First of all, the transnational activities and global imageries were not the exclusive preserve of nationalists, anticolonialists, or European students. This study hopes to give an impetus to reinterpret ‘internal’ histories of other political and social groups in the Dutch Indies as well, rather than an argument that the foreign experience of the nationalists set them apart from other Indonesian political groups. The fact that Indonesian students in the Netherlands were internationally active cannot be the sole explanation for the fact that many of them would occupy high political positions in postcolonial Indonesia.
Nevertheless, this does not alter the fact that the international experience of the Indonesian students was a transformative experience, both for themselves and for the anticolonial movement at large. The protagonists of this study returned to the Dutch Indies, not as students who had been isolated from politics in the Dutch Indies for years, but as experienced activists, who had been active in the forefront of anticolonial politics on the international stage and who knew the language of international politics. Also the fact that Hatta and the others had had the chance to meet renowned leaders of the anticolonial world provided them with authority and legitimacy once they returned home. Furthermore, the importance of foreign news in journals such as IM and of contacts with large anticolonial movements should be sought in the moral support for the Indonesian struggle that these students gained and built on. Although anticolonial opposition in the Netherlands Indies was largely suppressed after the early 1930s, the encounters with nationalist movements from other parts of the world, and their presence at highly symbolic events such as the Kongress gegen Imperialismus, made former students and Indonesians in general aware of a reality beyond that of everyday politics in the Dutch Indies.

Conversely, another fundamental result of the foreign activities of the Indonesian students was a display to the world of a substantial body of educated Indonesians who desired independence, had a coherent ideology and – as they claimed – commanded a mass following in their fatherland. The very presence of critical Indonesians in Europe, who were even prosecuted for their political beliefs, made it impossible for the Dutch authorities to maintain that the Dutch colonial approach was more benevolent than other colonial regimes. Long before actual sovereignty was transferred to an independent Indonesian state, its self-proclaimed representatives reported themselves on the international stage. Later, the former PI students could fall back on a shared set of references with other politicians and movements abroad.

This became evident already less than two weeks after the Indonesian Proklamasi of independence in August 1945. Mohammad Hatta – now the vice-president of the Indonesian Republic – called upon his “old comrades wherever they may be” to revive the spirit of unity among the colonised peoples of the world.761 In a public message he referred back to the days when he was a student in the Netherlands and met fellow activists at the pacifist congress in Bierville, and at the Kongress gegen Imperialismus in Brussels. “[D]uring all these years, I have treasured their memory in my heart, and I now look forward to getting in touch with

761 Hatta, “A personal message to my old comrades wherever they may be,” in Verspreide Geschriften, ed. Mononutu et al., 314.
them once more.”762 A decade later, president Soekarno, in his speech at the opening of the Asian–African Conference in Bandung on 18 April 1955, also recalled the spirit of the Brussels.

For me, this hall [in Bandung] is filled not only by the leaders of the nations of Asia and Africa; it also contains within its walls the undying, the indomitable, the invincible spirit of those who went before us. [...] I recall in this connection the Conference of the ‘League against Imperialism and Colonialism’ which was held in Brussels almost thirty years ago. At that Conference many distinguished Delegates who are present here today met each other and found new strength in their fight for independence.763

These quotes aptly illustrate the fact that the international engagements of the Indonesian students in the interwar era continued to play an important role in the self-image of Indonesian nationalists. They were a lasting source of inspiration and legitimacy for the political generations to follow.

762 Hatta, “A personal message to my old comrades wherever they may be,” in Verspreide Geschriften, ed. Mononatu et al., 314.