

REVIEW

BOOK

Merdeka. De Strijd om de Indonesische Onafhankelijkheid en de Ongewisse Opkomst van de Republiek, 1945-1950 [Merdeka: The Struggle for Indonesian Independence and the Uncertain Rise of the Republic, 1945-1950]

By Henk Schulte Nordholt and Harry Poeze

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This book, authored in Dutch by historians Henk Schulte Nordholt and Harry Poeze (both formerly employed at the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, KITLV Leiden), provides an enlightening account of the political struggles that marked the Indonesian National Revolution of 1945-1949. Published in the same year as, but not part of the twelve volumes of a large, government-sponsored research project on the same history,¹ and among many other many recent additions to the growing pile of books on Indonesian decolonization and its repercussions, the authors haste to explain what “two white, Dutch researchers” might still have to say “about a Revolution that is not theirs” (13). While acknowledging the inherent violent character of the revolution (10), the book, they clarify, is not about military but political aspects of the Revolution. Thus, the book presents the Revolution as a political struggle, and attempts to provide a clear, detailed analysis of it, moving beyond separate and contrasting perspectives or priorities in the Netherlands and Indonesia or among different political groups. While Dutch scholarship has generally demonstrated growing interest in matters of the colonization and decolonization of Indonesia, Indonesian scholarship tends to focus on the birth and development of the Indonesian Republic. The book zooms in on the turbulent dynamics of the Indonesian Revolution and its internal

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1 <https://www.aup.nl/en/series/onafhankelijkheid-dekolonisatie-geweld-en-oorlog-in-indonesie-1945-1950>

complexities. In that sense, it may be one of the few Dutch books on Indonesian history in which Indonesians, rather than Dutchmen, are placed in the front seat.

The authors' core argument is that the Revolution and the rise of the Republic should be seen as a haphazard and tentative process, constantly subject to internal and external threats, of which the ultimate outcome of a unified Indonesian Republic was as uncertain as it was unlikely. To understand the Revolution properly, they claim, it is important to pay attention to alternative potential trajectories and outcomes or, in perhaps more crude terms, to both "winners" and "losers." Thus, the book provides detailed analysis of the conflicting agendas and ideologies of different nationalist movements and groups, showing how Indonesia emerged from internal conflict, with the Republic as one among multiple parties striving for political power and independence.

The book reflects both the authors' expertise and predilections, in the case of Schulte Nordholt centred on themes of the evolution of colonial and Indonesian modernity and citizenship, and in the case of Poeze the Indonesian left and communism. The book noticeably draws on Poeze's extensive three-volume study of Tan Malaka (2007), which, spanning over 2,000 pages, is not only a biography of Indonesia's perhaps most controversial communist, but also a thorough analysis of the Indonesian communist movement and the Revolution as a whole.

In *Merdeka*, the authors manage to provide a more concise, but still relatively detailed, chronological analysis of key aspects of the Revolution, set out in thirteen chapters over 400 compelling pages and based on extensive archival research and interviews. Chapter 1 discusses the modern, increasingly conservative Dutch colonial policies of the twentieth century in answer to rising Indonesian nationalism. It emphasizes how prior to World War II, the nationalist movement already became diffused with noticeable growing tensions between Islamic, socialist, nationalist, and communist factions. Chapter 2 describes the precarious and ultimately fruitless attempts of Soekarno and Hatta to navigate the Japanese occupation and secure concessions for a soon to be compromised form of independence under Japanese supervision. The third chapter discusses the chaotic and quite unexpected declaration of independence on August 17, 1945, as enforced by impatient and rather uncontrollable groups of *pemuda* (youth), and Soekarno's successes in securitizing and stabilizing the rather explosive early phase of the Revolution in light of uncertainty about the future after the collapse of Japanese power. The fourth chapter discusses the infamous *Bersiap*, the violent months between roughly October 1945 and March 1946. Instead of delving into another lengthy discussion about the complexities and tragedies of violence involving allied troops and various *pemuda* groups, the chapter zooms in on local groups and underscores how the Revolution originated as a grassroots struggle among new, splintering groups and factions. Continuous political opposition, and the precarious nature of the power and stability of the Republic, shape the core theme of these chapters.

The following chapters discuss specific mechanisms that contributed to shaping Indonesia's difficult pathway to independence. This includes, of course, the Dutch return to Indonesia and their military interventions (Chapters 5 and 11). However, the authors clearly prioritize the constant internal disagreements and crises within the first Republican cabinets in finding balance between compromise and resistance to the Dutch and rivalling nationalist groups without losing internal and external support of the public, the army and the international community in trying to take control of the process of establishing the new nation (Chapters 6, 7, and 8).

At various instances, the Republic balanced on a fragile thread as different factions in politics and the army plotted to overthrow its government, often resulting from local initiatives and circumstances. Some of these groups united under the idea of "Federalism" (Chapter 9), which was orchestrated by the Dutch, aimed to temper Republican ambitions, and gain a measure of influence in the decolonization process by engaging in diplomatic negotiations with the Dutch.

The most prominent opposition came from the left, which, unsurprisingly, given particularly Poeze's expertise, is analysed in detail. Various left, socialist, and communist parties united into a "Left Wing" (Sajap Kiri) in 1946, restyled Front Demokrasi Rakyat (Democratic Popular Front; FDR) from February 1947 onward under leadership of former Prime Minister Amir Syarifuddin. It propagated not just a national, but also a social revolution, and rejected cooperation with the Dutch. The signing of the Renville Agreement in January 1948 marked a turning point, triggering the FDR to stage a revolt in Madiun with the aim of overthrowing the Republican government leading to what the authors reveal to be a full-blown civil war (Chapter 10). The authors reject previous interpretations that dismissed the revolt as merely a local uprising, emphasizing the profound divisions within Indonesia's nationalist movement and the Republic itself, illustrated for instance by the presence of "local pro FDR-civil servants" within the Republic's ministry of foreign affairs (292). While the Republic ultimately emerged victorious, having suppressed the left wing movement (and murdered its leaders) and having secured international support against the Dutch and their unreasonable demands (such as takeover of the colonial state debt which encompassed the costs of the revolutionary war) its victory remained far from assured; even after 1950 it remained fragile facing local violence, regionalist separatist movements, economic downfall, and internal opposition within the army (Chapter 13). The Revolution, hence, the authors conclude, depended much on personal charisma and authority, and was as much an internal political struggle of individuals to secure leadership over the nationalist movement as an external, diplomatic, and military struggle against the colonizer.

As such, principal "losers," they argue in the epilogue, included not just the former colonizers, but equally the Indonesian left and its leaders and their attempts

at social reform. In a repetition of the events of 1948, the left was ultimately defeated in an anti-communist “counterrevolution” from 1965 to 1966, led by the army under Suharto’s command. Suharto went on to establish an authoritarian state, which would later transition to democracy after his downfall in 1997, perhaps marking the final completion of the Revolution, even if not according to Sukarno’s original vision of a united nationalism, Islam, and communism (401).

The book primarily targets a general audience in the Netherlands, and rather than contributing directly to broader academic discussions on decolonization, revolutions, and regime changes, its value lies in the informative and compelling narrative account it provides to such audiences of the Indonesian National Revolution, revealing many details that may not yet be known to Dutch, Indonesian, and international readers. For this reason, an English translation of the book would be timely and relevant. To some uninformed readers, this level of detail may be daunting, and especially given the large number of persons, groups, and parties (each with its own acronym or initials) may get confusing. The explanative “biographical sketches” of main characters of the revolution is helpful, but perhaps equally useful would have been an overview of these parties and organizations. Ultimately, the presence of so many different groups itself may perhaps indeed reflect the complexity of the Indonesian National Revolution.

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