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Review

# Indonesia's Communists Helped Forge Its National Identity

- Reviews section -

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**After the bloody repression of the Indonesian left in the 1960s, Suharto's regime wrote it out of the history books. Indonesian communists played a crucial role in developing national consciousness among workers and peasants against Dutch colonial rule.**

In [\*Communication against Capital\*](#), Rianne Subijanto tells the story of how socialists in 1920s Indonesia mobilized against colonialism. With rallies and journals, strikes and education, their movement introduced new ways of looking at the world and helped to bring the Indonesian nation into being.

*Communication against Capital* focuses on the first half of the 1920s and what Subijanto calls the *pergerakan merah*, the “red movement” that spread across what was then called the Dutch East Indies. After the military coup of [1965](#), the crucial role of the Indonesian left was [suppressed](#) and declared taboo. Subijanto's book sheds new light on the extent of left-wing organizing, not only against Dutch colonialism but also against restrictive customs and traditional forms of exploitation.

## Red Enlightenment

Key to this is what Subijanto calls a process of “red enlightenment.” The participants in the *pergerakan merah* viewed emancipation as “coming not from the transcendental — God or mystical spirits — but rather from something that was immanent: believing in the human capacity to both understand the world and to change it.”

Theirs was an enlightenment aiming at universal emancipation — communism. A red thread running through the book is the interplay between the particular situation the *pergerakan merah* found itself in as members of a newly emerging Indonesian nation opposing Dutch colonialism and the global inspiration for their struggle.

Capitalism will create its own gravediggers, Karl Marx said. The development of capitalism creates both the possibility and the desire to overcome an economic system based on private ownership of the means of production and exploitation. Subijanto describes how, in a comparable way, Dutch colonialism helped bring about the conditions for its own demise.

Dutch colonialism in what is now Indonesia dates back to the 1600s, but it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that most of the archipelago was under the actual control of the Netherlands. In the early twentieth century, the Netherlands introduced the so-called ethical policy in the Dutch East Indies. This was essentially the Dutch version of the “white man's burden”: the idea that as a white, Western nation, it was the task of the Netherlands to “uplift” the colonized people.

One consequence of this was that the Dutch state exercised more direct control over the Indonesian people, rather than working through local representatives. Educating medical doctors and the bloody war in Aceh around the turn of the century both formed part of the “ethical policy.”

Dutch and international industrial capital also required resources such as rubber and oil. To extract such resources from the colony, new infrastructures were constructed and workers trained. Inadvertently, Dutch colonialism tied the archipelago together in what was becoming a nation and created the circuits along which new ideas circulated and

were given new content and new meaning.

# From Darkness to Light

Surprisingly perhaps in a book about Indonesian communists, Subijanto early on discusses a Dutch novel and a Javanese princess. Drawing on his experiences as a colonial official and writing under his pseudonym Multatuli, in 1859 Edward Douwes Dekker published [Max Havelaar](#), a novel condemning the misery brought about by colonialism.

Multatuli was a contradictory figure, an elitist who felt empathy with the downtrodden. He was also an enlightenment opponent of superstition and suffocating traditions. *Max Havelaar* became standard reading for socialists in the Netherlands.

It also inspired the young Javanese princess [Kartini](#). Isolated from the world during her *pingit* ("seclusion"), the tradition of Javanese nobles to keep girls at home from the age of twelve until their marriage, Kartini was passionately curious about the world. She devoured books and journals and wrote letters to Dutch and Indonesian contacts.

After her early death, a collection of those letters was published in 1911 in the original Dutch with the title *Door duisternis tot licht* ("From Darkness to Light"). "We wish to equal the Europeans in education and enlightenment, and the rights which we demand for ourselves, we must also give to others," Kartini wrote.

For Subijanto, her cosmopolitan influences and future-oriented global vision show the inadequacy of counterposing "indigenous" to "Western" or "foreign" ways of thought: "It is more accurate to think of the native's lives as global; they had been impacted by international influences for over the past century and this broader view had accelerated in the last decades of the nineteenth century."

In the 1910s, the first anti-colonial organizations were being formed. Resistance against Dutch colonialism was changing its form, shifting from the military struggle led by traditional authority-figures such as the nineteenth-century prince Diponegoro to become a mass movement.

The Dutch socialist and labor leader [Henk Sneevliet](#) played an important role in spreading revolutionary socialist ideas through labor movement bodies such as the Union for Railway and Tram Workers (VSTP). The radicals were active in the emerging anti-colonial movement as well. [Semaoen](#), a leading VSTP activist, also had a leading position in the anti-colonial mass organization Sarekat Islam.

In May 1920, the *Perserikatan Komunis di Hindia* (the Communist Union of the Indies) was founded, later changing its name to *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (PKI). Semaoen became chair of the party. Subijanto refers to the whole complex of radical trade unions and mass organizations allied with the PKI as the "red movement" to emphasize its character as distinct from the general anti-colonial movement.

The early twenties saw the emergence of anti-colonial nationalism on a mass scale, but accounts of this development often neglect the important role of socialist organizations amid the wider picture. Standing apart from movements that were often led by middle-class figures, the pergerakan merah brought into being a new vocabulary to express a more radical struggle for liberation from colonialism and capitalism.

# A Culture of Resistance

Often counterposed to *prijaji*, a term referring to educated and middle-class Javanese, the movement adopted the word *kromo*, referring to the common people and invoking the large population of landless peasants, as its unifying identity. The new forms of struggle meant new forms of organizing.

In place of roving guerrilla bands came public meetings, newspapers, books, and schools popularizing communist ideas about the shared interest of the *kromo* in a struggle against colonialism and capitalism. As Djoeinah, the first female editor of the communist newspaper *Api* ("Fire") wrote, "The organization of our class is the weapon to fight the enemy."

Unionized workers in transport and communication played a crucial part in the *pergerakan merah*. Semarang, a trade and port hub in Central Java, was an important center of the early socialist movement. Their education and work brought such workers into contact with each other and gave them the chance to convince others.

Similarly, sailors had an essential role in transmitting information and ideas, establishing international networks that reached into the Soviet Union, often via China and Mecca. When the movement was repressed in the late 1920s, sailors and international travelers such as pilgrims attempted to keep it alive. Quite a few works of the legendary Indonesian revolutionary [Tan Malaka](#) literally went to Mecca before being brought into Indonesia by *hajjis*, Muslim pilgrims.

This combination of Islam and communism occurred across the whole *pergerakan merah* but seems to have been especially pronounced in the wing led by Tan Malaka. As Subijanto points out, this was not a matter of "Islamic communism" — it was Islam and communism, the two being compatible in the struggle of the *kromo*. The two international movements came together in the ideas of people like [Haji Misbach](#). Not caring for others was a sin, and those working for capitalism were "devils."

Public meetings, *openbare vergaderingen* (OVs) in Dutch, were central to the movement. Such meetings had different functions. They were opportunities for education, with speakers discussing national and international events and explaining the meaning of communism. But they were also opportunities to debate the meaning of religion and family roles.

The OVs changed practically how people related to another. Rather than traditional gatherings in which authority figures addressed the crowd, the OVs were opportunities for discussion and exchange. The fact that women could chair the meetings was another break with tradition. The festive character of larger OVs, with decorations and songs, brought people together, creating a sense of collective identity.

Newspapers such as *Api* complemented the OVs. Subijanto shows how, despite possessing limited means and facing repression, writers carried on what they called "the war of pens and words." Papers were more influential than mere subscription numbers would indicate. People read newspapers aloud to groups of listeners and articles served as a basis of discussion in the OVs.

While the public meetings served as educational events, the movement also arranged for education on a more permanent basis. By 1926, thousands of people had completed a ten-month course on communism that the PKI organized.

Nor was it simply a question of circulating political ideas. Despite the claims of the "ethical policy" about uplifting the

Indonesian population, some three-quarters of children remained without any education in the late 1920s. Activists set up people's schools in which children received a basic education in reading, writing, and math, while also being introduced to socialist ideas.

# Repression

The spread of communist ideas and organization led to a mushrooming of trade unions in the early 1920s. Not much later, the number of strikes started to increase dramatically. Faced with rising resistance, the colonial authorities drew back from the "liberal" rhetoric of the ethical policy.

It was one thing to talk about freedom and progress as something to be handed down by the colonial authorities to the colonized people at some point in the future. But when the colonized began to mobilize and fight for such goals, the Netherlands cracked down.

A 1922 strike by pawnshop workers led to the arrest and exiling of Asser Baars, a Dutch socialist, and Tan Malaka. In response to a 1923 strike of railway workers, Semaoen was exiled. Dutch colonial policy became increasingly repressive in the 1920s. Public meetings were banned, and limitations were placed on the movement's "wild schools."

By the middle of the decade, repression had made it impossible for the pergerakan merah to continue as before. With important leaders in exile and a ban on public meetings, anger and frustration led to a series of PKI-led [revolts](#) in 1926 and 1927. The uprisings took place months after repression had effectively stopped the pergerakan merah and did not involve the mass of the population. Consequently, the colonial authorities were able to crush them quickly.

In the aftermath of the revolts, the Dutch authorities deported thousands of alleged communists and pergerakan merah activists to [Digoel](#), a concentration camp in a remote area in Papoea. The uprisings were not unanimously supported by PKI leaders — the exiled Tan Malaka had rejected the plans as premature and broke with the party.

Historians usually consider the 1926–27 revolts to mark the end of significant PKI activity in this period. Subijanto shows how, even after the revolts and subsequent repression, supporters of the PKI and Tan Malaka's PARI (Partai Republik Indonesia) tried to maintain international networks. However, their efforts to rebuild the movement had little success.

Although defeated, the pergerakan merah left an important legacy. Strategies oriented to the formation of mass movements and left-wing ideas would continue to have a strong influence on the anti-colonial movement. Indonesian communism, both in the form of the PKI and among the followers of Tan Malaka, would reemerge as a mass movement years later, during the independence struggle after 1945.

The history of Indonesian communism in the early twenties has been the topic of several other books, such as Ruth T. McVey's magisterial *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, originally published in 1965. *Communication against Capital* adds to this literature by focusing on how the movement spread its ideas. By discussing the functioning of meetings, schools, and journals, Subijanto shows not only what the movement thought but also what it concretely did to realize its goals.

This perspective draws attention to the rank-and-file leaders of the movement. Coming from the ranks of the kromo, they emerged as the activists who chaired meetings, wrote, edited journals, and challenged colonialism and

capitalism. For them, the struggle for a free Indonesia was part of a struggle for global emancipation. The best way to remember them is to continue their work for red enlightenment.

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Source: [Jacobin](#).

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