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THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION IN ASIA

FROM BAKU TO BATAVIA

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7 (Un)preparing a revolution

The Comintern in the prelude to the 1926–1927 uprisings in Indonesia

Xie Kankan

Introduction

From November 1926 to January 1927, a series of revolts broke out in multiple places across the Dutch colony of Indonesia.¹ Starting first in Batavia, the capital city, the revolt soon spilled over to rural areas in the nearby Banten region, and finally reached the West Coast of Sumatra by the turn of the year. Behind the movement was the Communist Party of Indonesia (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*, PKI), the first communist party in Asia. Despite its rich experience in anti-colonial struggle, the PKI was crumbling due to its crises in the months leading up to the event. Without adequate coordination, the rebellions played out in an extremely disorganised manner. The Dutch colonial authorities managed to crush each revolt within a few days. In the aftermath, the Dutch government tightened its controls against the communists to an unprecedented level. It arrested approximately 13,000 people for their direct involvement in the revolts and 5,000 more for displaying communist tendencies. Besides sentencing a handful of PKI members to death for killing officials, the authorities banished as many as 1,308 alleged communist leaders to the remote labour camp in Boven Digul, New Guinea.² This crackdown destroyed the party organisation, marking the end of the first phase of the communist movement in Indonesia.³ Despite attempts to reorganise the party throughout the long 1930s, the PKI would not rise to play a significant role in Indonesian politics again until the end of the Second World War.

Scholars have studied the 1926–1927 revolts both as a crucial episode in Indonesian communist history,⁴ and as an indispensable milestone in the country's independence movement.⁵ Some have scrutinised the local dynamics of the uprisings from a regional perspective.⁶ To provide critical background, all these works discuss the PKI's interactions with the Communist International (Third International, or Comintern), the main Moscow-based organisation in charge of coordinating communist movements across the globe. Ruth McVey's *The Rise of Indonesian Communism* is by far the most comprehensive account of the PKI's history up to 1927, and she devotes a good deal of space to discuss the PKI rebellions.⁷ In another work,

McVey argues that the 1926–1927 uprisings were primarily a home-grown movement triggered by domestic conflicts. International communism and its spokesmen in the colony played a tangential, rather than an originating or causal, role.⁸

Such an observation notwithstanding, it is essential to place PKI-Comintern connections in a global context, to make sense of how local revolutions shaped the international discourse on world revolution and vice versa. Written at the height of the Cold War, McVey based her work on Comintern and communist publications such as *Inprecorr* and *Pravda*, as well as interviews with PKI representatives at the Third International. While her account constructed a coherent narrative concerning PKI-Comintern interactions, many details remain missing: What were the original voices behind the well-crafted “resolutions” and “statements”? How did Comintern representatives, with their distinct backgrounds, sit together in Moscow and discuss the Indonesian revolution, about which many of them knew very little? In this research, I used the archives of the International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam, to fill the voids in McVey’s work. Major documents consulted include meeting minutes, personal writings and original correspondence from the *Archief Komintern-Partai Komunis Indonesia* that the IISH duplicated from the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), Moscow, after the fall of the Soviet Union.⁹ I also explored unpublished memoirs and speeches from Indonesian communist leaders in the IISH’s PKI Collection.

This chapter shows that the Comintern played an unimportant role in affecting the course of the events in Indonesia. The uprisings were primarily a home-grown movement without the direct involvement of foreign forces. While Comintern discussions about Indonesian questions were closely intertwined with significant issues, such as the Stalin-Trotsky feud, the Indonesian revolution played only a secondary role in Moscow’s ongoing theoretical and policy debates about the worldwide communist revolution. Unlike its overt enthusiasm for the Chinese Revolution, the Comintern’s attitude towards the PKI’s plan to rebel was lukewarm at most. Such a position, as I will demonstrate below, could be attributed to both the party’s lack of preparation and Moscow’s ignorance – despite the participation of four Indonesian representatives – of the changing situation on the ground under severe oppression by the Dutch colonial government.

Making sense of the Indonesian crisis in Moscow

Having endured numerous hardships since its establishment in 1920, the PKI started to face unprecedented challenges from the Dutch colonial authorities after the failed dockworkers’ strike it organised in August 1925. The Netherlands East Indies government implemented rigorous regulations to isolate the party from the masses, prohibiting it from holding public meetings. Additionally, the authorities adopted stringent measures to crack

down on PKI propaganda. They conducted mass arrests of PKI activists and crippled the distribution of PKI publications such as the party newspaper, *Red Flag*. Towards the end of 1925, a small group of PKI leaders convened in Central Java, where they decided to revolt before the colonial authorities crushed the movement in its entirety. Before pushing this so-called “Prambanan Decision” forward, the PKI Central Committee (PKI CC) sought to contact both the top party leadership – who were mostly in exile – and the Comintern in the hopes of securing much-needed strategic guidance and material support.

Meanwhile, in Moscow, the Comintern had limited access to up-to-date information about Indonesia and had to rely on two Indonesian communists – Semaoen and Darsono – to make sense of the situation on the ground. As the PKI’s first chairman, Semaoen started working for the Comintern after his deportation following the 1923 PKI-led general strike of railway workers. Darsono, another co-founder of the party also in exile, joined Semaoen in Moscow in early 1926. In the meetings of the Comintern’s Indian Sub-Secretariat, the two participated in a series of discussions on PKI-related issues. By reading Dutch newspapers available in Moscow, they learnt about the worsening situation facing the PKI and realised that the party could no longer get any of its papers out.¹⁰

In early May 1926, Darsono submitted a report in which he discussed how the PKI should overcome its current difficulties. He suggested that the party should lead a mass movement by including the petty bourgeoisie, such as local intellectuals and the Chinese population in Indonesia, “without letting it become apparent that it is under communist leadership”.¹¹ Although the Sub-Secretariat found Darsono’s plans inadequate, they agreed to send a representative to Java and ordered Semaoen and Darsono to draft a more detailed programme of action before the agent’s departure.¹² The drafting process, however, met with unexpected delays due to the divergent views between the Sub-Secretariat’s Indonesian members and non-Indonesian advisors, such as John Pepper, Grigorii Voitinskii and M.N. Roy.¹³ Despite their limited knowledge about the colony, the higher-ranking advisors often suppressed the two Indonesians’ voices by referring to *supposedly* more effective approaches developed in the Russian Revolution.

In the name of the Sub-Secretariat, the non-Indonesian advisors criticised the PKI leaders for making a series of mistakes concerning the party’s role in national liberation, the relationship with sympathetic mass organisations and the so-called “leftist deviation” of the PKI CC.¹⁴ One of the most dangerous errors, John Pepper pointed out, was that the PKI prematurely exposed itself as the bellwether of the nationalist movement when the party was still young but enjoyed legal status. Such an error led to the colonial government’s ruthless suppression of the nationalist movement, which ultimately drove the PKI underground: “If the communist party is weak then the communist party ought to strengthen itself and not to drive back the nationalist movement”.¹⁵ Pepper concluded that the conditions in

Indonesia were not ripe for a radical revolution to establish a Soviet system. Instead, the party should work on demanding that the Dutch recall the Governor-General and elect an Indonesian through the "National Assembly".¹⁶ Roy added that, at the present stage, the PKI should regard changing the head of the central government as its "minimum programme"; as long as the Dutch remained in control of the centre, changes at a local level were meaningless. He also insisted that the PKI must consider what form of government to adopt after achieving independence. It should make clear to its members now whether a parliamentary system was the ultimate goal.¹⁷ Finally, Roy warned that "petty bourgeoisie and little sympathetic elements" throughout Asia tended to call themselves communists. Therefore, the final resolution must also address this issue seriously.¹⁸

In Semaoen's opinion, Indonesia should pursue neither the Russian model nor a parliamentary system but a middle road. While acknowledging that the PKI's close connections with poorly organised nationalist groups (especially *Sarekat Islam*) could undermine it, he still maintained that the party must continue its painful struggle inside the nationalist movement and eventually take it over. Semaoen suggested that the PKI leadership should first seize control of the party from its ultra-left elements and then try to win over the masses to fight against the oppressors. Although the political situation in the colony might not be ripe for a Soviet-style revolution – nor was it feasible to establish a Soviet-style dictatorship of the proletariat overnight – he believed that "such ripeness will find its expression in a proper form of democracy". The party must lead Indonesia to fight for a kind of "national democracy with indirect universal suffrage". By rallying the Indonesian masses around this middle road, "pure national democracy" could be achieved even without a world revolutionary situation. Eventually, if circumstances permitted, the national democracy could be transformed into a Soviet-style government. Semaoen pointed out further that widespread discontent across the colony had forced the government to reform. The PKI's new programme for national democracy would be timely and have great potential to take centre stage in the colony's political thinking and activities.¹⁹

The most heated debate between the two groups centred on whether the PKI should support the establishment of a parliamentary system in its present struggle against the colonial government. The non-Indonesian advisors accused the PKI leadership's anti-parliamentarian attitude of being naïve and ultra-leftist. Referring to the fact that Lenin supported the Duma before the October Revolution, Roy and Pepper believed that the PKI should emulate the Russian experience. In response, Semaoen fought back by demonstrating the distinct circumstances facing the PKI. First, he argued that the Russian Revolution enjoyed a favourable foundation laid by a revolutionary national bourgeoisie and intellectuals. In Indonesia, by contrast, there was virtually no national bourgeoisie that strove for a parliamentary system – but this by no means indicated that the colony was not ripe for a proper form of democracy. Second, Semaoen suggested that the parliamentary

system had proved unsuitable in many countries after their respective revolutions. In Italy, for instance, the fascist party seized the parliament, which vividly reflected how the parliamentary system could go wrong. The establishment of Soviet Russia, however, showed that “it is not necessary that the democratism [*sic*] should have its form in a parliaments [*sic*] system”. Third, Russia was a nation free from foreign domination. The nationalist struggles of the bourgeoisie against foreign powers in Russia were not as intense as that of a colony. In sum, Semaoen pointed out that fighting for a parliament in Indonesia would be “a theoretical, political, tactical and organisational impossibility”. He concluded by quoting one of Lenin’s other famous doctrines: “Do not forget the concrete situation in determining your tactics and policy”.²⁰

Despite the lively discussions, the two groups failed to reach a consensus on what to do next. Semaoen’s critique that the Comintern’s non-Indonesian advisors lacked proper understanding of the Indonesian situation was reasonable. Without clearly identifying the differences between Imperial Russia and colonial Indonesia, the Comintern advisors appeared to be excessively dogmatic about the utility of Leninist theories and, as a result, were obsessed with transplanting Bolshevik revolutionary practices to other societies. However, it is also questionable how much the Indonesian representatives knew about the latest circumstances on the ground. Having been in exile for years, both Semaoen and Darsono had limited access to information on the ongoing PKI movement. They had no option but to base their analyses on outdated Dutch newspapers and intermittent correspondence with party members. Consequently, while the Comintern made considerable efforts to make sense of the Indonesian crisis, neither the Indonesian nor non-Indonesian participants had sufficient knowledge about the rapidly changing political situation. Their discussions were too theory-oriented and mostly irrelevant to the movement on the ground. Given the poor communications between Moscow and Indonesia, the Comintern discussions failed to provide the PKI with any meaningful help in tackling colonial oppression.

The emergence of a revolutionary situation

Meanwhile, PKI members in Indonesia also sought to push forward their plan to revolt by gaining support from both the Comintern and party leaders in exile. Tan Malaka, the PKI’s former chairman and most senior Comintern agent for Southeast Asia, heard about the Prambanan Decision in the Philippines. He strongly opposed the idea of an insurrection, as he believed that such a reckless move would trigger even more intense oppression from the colonial government. He met PKI leader Alimin in Manila and asked the latter to deliver his message to the PKI CC in Indonesia, via a group of exiled members in Singapore. It was unclear whether Alimin actually followed Tan Malaka’s instructions, but when Tan Malaka arrived in Singapore himself, Alimin had already left for Moscow with another PKI

leader, Musso, in the hopes of securing approval from higher-level authorities.²¹ The two PKI representatives finally arrived in Moscow in July 1926, due to unexpected delays in Singapore and China. They reported to the Comintern with updated information about Indonesia, and requested Moscow to authorise the PKI CC's plan to revolt. The Sub-Secretariat thus convened again on 22 July to discuss issues surrounding the PKI's preparations for an upcoming revolution.

The colonial authorities' harsh suppression aside, Alimin seemed very optimistic about the party's strength. He was especially confident about the PKI's leadership over the *Sarekat Rakyat*, the biggest mass organisation in the colony with more than 100,000 members.²² Besides, Alimin claimed that the party had significant influence over trade unions, among which the organisations of railway and harbour workers were the strongest. Additionally, the party enjoyed the sympathies of indigenous police and military personnel, who accounted for the overwhelming majority of the colonial armed forces but were often dissatisfied with the poor treatment from their Dutch superiors.²³ The PKI CC planned to encourage workers to demand higher wages through trade unions under its control. Based on past experiences, Dutch business owners and government authorities would immediately reject such requests. Should this happen again, the PKI and its mass organisations would react by launching a general strike across major industries in Java. The CC anticipated the strike to cause even more violent repression from the government, resulting in inevitable damage to the party and its mass organisations. It believed, however, that the government clampdown could also create a favourable revolutionary situation, ultimately leading to uprisings of workers, peasants and indigenous soldiers across the whole of the colony: "When the general strike begins it is a sure sign of the general uprising [*sic*"]".²⁴

Despite such optimism, the Sub-Secretariat's non-Indonesian representatives showed serious concerns over the party's readiness in organising the revolution. Unable to receive intelligence through reliable channels, the Comintern's evaluation of political circumstances had to rely on a handful of PKI members' selective reports, such as Alimin's.²⁵ While Alimin tried to convince the Sub-Secretariat that the situation was favourable, he was fully aware that the party's influence over the armed forces was confined to only a handful of indigenous soldiers. Others were apparently not organised under the party leadership. Moreover, it was increasingly difficult for propaganda to reach the targeted groups, as the authorities took more stringent measures against communism. Nevertheless, Alimin's confidence stemmed partly from the assumption that discontent was widespread among local police and soldiers, who had experienced substantial wage cuts. He held that they might join the revolt voluntarily once the general strike had broken out, as "that they are only willing to fight for their own country".²⁶

British communist leader J.T. Murphy responded that the PKI CC had taken many things for granted.²⁷ The party should measure its influence

based on the actual strength of the organisations under its command, rather than speculate about unreliable resolutions expressed in different circumstances. Sub-Secretariat representatives raised further questions as to whether the PKI CC had devised a detailed plan for the potential political consequences after instigating a general strike; whether the party was ready to carry out protracted guerilla warfare; whether the PKI leadership had considered the question of obtaining power from the Dutch and what form of government Indonesia would ultimately adopt. Semaoen admitted that the party had not thoroughly discussed these issues, but maintained that an uprising would be a viable path to consolidate the party:

The question of the power is not combined with the question of the form [*sic*]. And in connection with this, many comrades have not discussed this clearly. They think the Comintern is powerful enough to do anything. If there is a revolt, the Comintern will help and everything will be all right... The question is this – the comrades are in favour of a decision as soon as possible.²⁸

Musso, identified as an “Indonesian comrade” in the minutes, added that the PKI CC had already decided to start a general strike in June 1926. He and Alimin departed from Java right after the “Prambanan Conference” in December 1925 and were only able to arrive in Moscow in July 1926, due to Tan Malaka’s fault.²⁹ According to Musso, the PKI CC sent them to Moscow only to ask for a definitive answer. If the Comintern approved the plan to revolt, he and Alimin would bring a new programme of action back to Java and launch a revolution. Should the Comintern disagree, they would surely still deliver the message, but “there will be terror [in Indonesia]”.³⁰

Before the Sub-Secretariat meeting, Semaoen and Darsono had consulted with Alimin and Musso just after the latter’s arrival. Although the four PKI representatives did not reach any meaningful agreement among themselves, they wanted to put forward a joint programme approved by the Comintern. Semaoen was well aware that PKI members in Java had not carefully considered the political consequences of an uprising and lacked a sufficient analysis of the international situation. However, he admitted that Comintern colleagues had underestimated the Indonesian situation: “The spirit in Indonesia [was] warmer than [we] thought”. He warned that even if the Comintern disapproved of the PKI plan, there would still be a revolt independently of the party’s control. Needless to say, disorganised uprisings would significantly weaken the PKI and undermine the Comintern’s prestige. Roy and Murphy reacted with caution and said that what the Indonesian communists proposed at the meeting was an extremely serious matter. The Comintern could not merely accept or reject a programme without careful study of the circumstances. Besides a yes-or-no answer, it must also give the PKI a clear political direction.³¹

Such discussions indicated a mismatch between the PKI CC's expectations for the Comintern and Moscow's capacity for, and practice in, supporting a local movement. The PKI hoped that Comintern approval would help them bypass Tan Malaka's objections and, more importantly, rescue the crumbling party from increasingly harsh oppression by the colonial authorities. In reality, however, the Comintern was not in a position to properly evaluate the situation in Indonesia, due to its limited access to current information – to say nothing of useful guidance and material assistance, which the party desperately needed. The PKI representatives were overly confident about the omnipotence of the Comintern; in fact, the Comintern only learned about Indonesia's revolutionary situation half a year after the PKI CC had decided to revolt. Despite Alimin's and Musso's optimism about the prospects of an imminent insurrection, both Tan Malaka and the Comintern were reluctant to sanction such a plan, worried that a reckless move might result in severe consequences. The PKI representatives also overestimated the party's strength and popularity. They were perhaps right in stating that a revolution was on the verge of breaking out with or without Comintern's approval, but what they did not realise was that the PKI was losing control of the movement it had initiated. The PKI failed to tame the elements of anarchism in its struggle, and the resulting chaos only expedited its demise.

Differences between Indonesia and Russia

Having realised the urgency of the Indonesian situation, the Sub-Secretariat held more frequent meetings in July to address issues facing the PKI. With the participation of senior Comintern Executive Committee (ECCI) members such as Osip Piatnitskii and John Pepper, the Comintern hoped to pass a resolution based on more thorough analyses of both local and international circumstances.³² The Russian Revolution often served as a natural framework of reference in such discussions.

Piatnitskii related the situation in the Dutch East Indies to what had happened in Russia before the Revolution of 1905, when discontent towards the tsar was widespread in society but the opposition was relatively weak. He saw Indonesia as sharing many similarities with this, and suggested that the PKI should focus on strengthening itself. He believed that the PKI should first put forward demands for better working conditions; organise workers, soldiers and peasants; as well as fight for freedom of assembly and speech. The PKI must prioritise two tasks: first, liberating Indonesia from the Netherlands and other imperialist powers; and second, carrying out constant struggle to free the working class. The working class of Indonesia, in Piatnitskii's opinion, would not lend strong support to an armed uprising at the current stage, as not many of them fully understood the meaning of the movement:

Did we make the revolution in Russia in one day? We had many uprisings all over Russia during a long term of years [*sic*]. It was only in 1917

that the whole mass of workers was so organised that we could make an uprising... We cannot make an armed uprising before the workers [and] the masses understand why they are revolting... We cannot have a movement where in one day we can organise a general strike.³³

Alimin responded that the socio-political circumstances in Russia and Indonesia were fundamentally different. The Bolshevik-led October Revolution, as he pointed out, enjoyed the solid foundation of the bourgeois-democratic February Revolution. In other words, the class struggles of the Bolshevik Revolution were real. Instead, the anti-colonial movement in the Dutch East Indies was primarily race-based, with the absence of a local middle class.³⁴ Thus, Indonesians' hatred of the Dutch and the Russians' hatred of the tsar were not entirely comparable: "We have nothing to do with the bourgeoisie or with other elements except against the Dutch. They are not strong".³⁵ Alimin elaborated further that the PKI had nothing to lose, as 97 per cent of the employees in the state apparatus were locals and the Dutch only occupied the top 3 per cent of the leading positions.³⁶ Throughout a 29 July meeting, he repeatedly expressed his confidence in the PKI's influence over the masses. He portrayed the situation as very favourable to the party, and the impending uprising would enjoy unquestionable support from the local population:

If there is an insurrection or so-called revolution, we will be able to increase our power ten times. I have traveled all over Java just to have connections with the people. All are discontented. They all ask when we will have our revolution and become independent from the Dutch.³⁷

Optimism aside, many technical problems remained. Launching a revolution was particularly difficult as the government had paralysed many of the party newspapers in its recent crackdowns. The PKI had enjoyed relative freedom to operate up until late 1924. As we have seen, however, several strikes took place across major cities in Java in 1925. While the party saw many of these strikes as positive outcomes of the movement, the disturbances also pushed the colonial authorities to take stricter measures to calm the increasingly fraught situation. Not only were the party and its affiliated organisations banned from gathering publicly, the government also introduced Article 153, or the so-called "*muilkorfwet*" – literally the muzzle law – to prevent the press from carrying out anti-colonial propaganda. As a result, all three PKI newspapers had ceased distribution at the time of the Comintern meetings in July 1926.³⁸

The Stalin-Trotsky feud

The heated debates in Moscow produced no results. There were no records of subsequent meetings in the same folder of the Comintern Archive until

the PKI uprising in early November. It is unclear whether this was a deliberate omission, or if, for some unknown reason, the Comintern decided not to hold such meetings from early August onwards. Given the matter's urgency and seriousness, it is improbable that the Comintern put aside Indonesian issues altogether. Alimin and Musso left Moscow around October 1926, hoping to deliver directives to PKI members at home. Whatever the message may have been, it never reached the intended audience, as the Comintern had expected. Alimin and Musso heard about the uprising on their way back to Indonesia and were arrested by the British in Malaya on 18 December.³⁹

PKI members and scholars alike have offered competing interpretations as to what happened between the Comintern and the PKI in the months leading up to the revolt. On the one hand, Kroef suggested that Alimin and Musso could not, in any likelihood, get anything more than "lukewarm assent" from Moscow for the revolt. Without sufficient information and careful planning, there was no chance that the Comintern would wholeheartedly endorse the PKI's reckless plan. Even if the two PKI emissaries did carry important instructions from Moscow, the fact that the uprising broke out before their arrival, and their arrests in Malaya, made any Comintern directive meaningless.⁴⁰ On the other hand, Brackman speculated that in Moscow, Alimin and Musso "found themselves drawn inexorably into the Stalin-Trotsky vortex".⁴¹ Written in 1947, Alimin's account on his three-month stay in Moscow in 1926 is brief. In a document titled "Analysis", Alimin stated that he had tried his best to explain the political and economic situation of Indonesia to the leaders of the ECCI. The four PKI members – Alimin, Musso, Semaoen and Darsono – had good impressions (*kesan*) of the meetings. He mentioned the Stalin-Trotsky feud in a rather vague tone:

After staying at the centre of the Cold Country, we gained certain perspectives on [our] issues related to the issues facing the Great Party (the Communist Party of the Soviet Union). We were told that since 1924, there had been several streams of opposition against the party leadership. Trotsky was a well-known former party member who started an opposition faction. The opposition was quite small at the beginning... After we returned to the Cold Country again in 1927, we realised that the opposition continued to oppose the party leadership by blaming and defaming party leaders. Trotsky and his clique had been warned several times that they should not create any conflicts inside the Party. However, the opposition ignored such warnings and became increasingly active.⁴²

As an ardent advocate of the revolution, Alimin would have stated very explicitly if Moscow favoured his plan. However, he mentioned neither a Comintern institutional endorsement nor Stalin's support for a revolt in Indonesia. Instead, the new mission assigned to Alimin and Musso was to

“inform the comrades in Singapore”, not those in the Dutch East Indies, about the new decisions. What remains unclear, though, is to what extent the Stalin-Trotsky feud affected the Comintern’s discussions of Indonesian issues in the “missing” three months, in which no meetings were recorded. One could imagine that the political atmosphere in Moscow was intense during this period, which ultimately led to Trotsky losing his seat in the Politburo at the end of the 15th Party Congress in October – around the same time as Alimin’s departure. Is it possible that the Comintern temporarily suspended meetings on Indonesia owing to this environment? What did Alimin mean by “gaining certain perspectives on our issues related to the issues facing the Great Party”?⁴³ Was he referring to frictions between the pro-revolt Prambanan Group and Tan Malaka, who opposed the uprising and was later accused of being a Trotskyist?

Through interviews with Semaoen and Darsono in 1959, McVey presented a more nuanced narrative on how Alimin’s and Musso’s mission to Moscow intersected with the political background at the time.⁴⁴ According to Semaoen, Zinoviev and other Trotskyists favoured the plan brought by the two PKI emissaries, as they believed that supporting the Indonesian movement was consistent with the Trotskyist theory of “permanent revolution”. They hoped that a successful revolution abroad would reverse their disadvantageous position while undermining the prestige of the Stalinist group, which maintained that the world situation was not suitable for fomenting proletarian revolutions and that the Soviet Union should focus on defending socialism on its own soil. Such support would have appealed to Alimin and Musso, who “had as little idea of what was going on in Russia as the Comintern did of events in Indonesia”.⁴⁵ However, the more experienced Semaoen and Darsono sent out timely warnings to their Indonesian comrades, which made them eventually back off from the soviets’ internal power struggles.⁴⁶

Towards the end of Alimin and Musso’s stay in Moscow, the four PKI delegates had an opportunity to meet Stalin in person. According to Semaoen and Darsono, Stalin was not against the revolution per se, but opposed the idea of starting one when the movement seemed to be disorganised and the chances of winning were slim.⁴⁷ This ambivalent assent, as McVey suggested, could partly be attributed to the changing international situation in 1926. While defending his theory of “socialism in one country”, Stalin at this point was still backing the united front between the Guomindang (GMD) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in China.⁴⁸ The GMD-CCP alliance launched the Northern Expedition against the Northern Warlords, and the military campaign was considered a big success in the second half of 1926.⁴⁹ To a certain degree, the temporary triumph of the Chinese Revolution enhanced the credibility of the Stalinist agenda, which may also help to explain the seemingly contradictory views of Stalin on the Indonesian revolution.⁵⁰

Conclusion

In their work on the 1926–1927 PKI uprisings, Benda and McVey drew the following conclusion from several Dutch documents:

The situation of the PKI was quite different from that of the only other important Asian communist movement of the time, the Chinese Communist Party. The pressures on the PKI in this period arose from conditions inside Indonesia and not from outside influences; it can thus be studied as a purely Indonesian phenomenon much more easily than can the concurrent history of Chinese Communism, which was so deeply affected by Russo-Chinese relations and the decisions laid down by the Comintern against the background of the feud between Stalin and Trotsky.⁵¹

Based on Comintern materials, this chapter confirms that the Comintern had a limited effect on the 1926–1927 PKI uprising due to distance, poor communications and the harsh crackdowns by the colonial government. The absence of the PKI's core leaders notwithstanding, a handful of party members made a desperate decision to revolt in response to the increasingly tightened control by the colonial government. Alimin and Musso went on a mission to Moscow to circumvent Tan Malaka's disapproval. The Prambanan Group hoped that Comintern authorisation would strengthen the party leadership and eventually save the collapsing communist movement. Much to their dismay, the Comintern reacted cautiously and did not sanction the plan. However, the revolt broke out before the Comintern directive could reach its intended audience. Shortly after, the arrest of Alimin and Musso in Singapore made the Comintern debates throughout 1926 irrelevant to the course of events in Indonesia.

While the Comintern discussions on Indonesia often lost touch with the situation on the ground, they became closely linked to several events during the period. The ideological debate between Stalin's "socialism in one country" and Trotsky's "permanent revolution" shaped the interpretation of the Indonesian situation, especially by comparing it to that of China. As the focal point of Comintern operations in the Far East, the GMD-CPC alliance served as a major frame of reference for analysing the PKI movement vis-à-vis other nationalist organisations. As the Chinese Revolution made good progress, the Comintern attempted not only to replicate this success story in Indonesia but also to link the two movements via the Indies Chinese community. Unfortunately, such a plan never materialised, not least because both communist parties suffered tremendous setbacks in 1927.

Although a few PKI members participated in the Comintern meetings, Comintern representatives almost always lacked essential information for a thorough analysis of the Indonesian movement. To make sense of

circumstances on the ground – or, perhaps more accurately, to “talk the communist talk” – many had to refer to “similar cases” in drastically different contexts. As Comintern discussions on the Indonesian question mainly took place at meetings of the Indian Sub-Secretariat, British and Indian representatives played important roles in shaping the Comintern discourse on Indonesia. Issues such as parliamentarianism and the non-cooperation movement were frequently brought up. Similarly, Soviet representatives often compared the Indonesian political situation with that of Russia before the October Revolution. In the wake of the PKI revolt, the Indonesian representatives’ attacks on nationalist collaboration were in line with the Comintern’s shift towards a more radical line against the moderate left, in the so-called “Third Period”.⁵² Despite the total defeat of the PKI, this change would significantly impact how party fugitives positioned themselves with regard to the rise of the nationalist movement in the following years. From 1928 onwards, those who stayed close to the Comintern maintained a radical and non-cooperative stance towards the new wave of nationalism. This position had its trade-offs: as the colonial administration tightened political control after the abortive uprisings, the PKI was never able to revive during the so-called “*rust en orde*” (peace and order) period before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Notes

- 1 The official name of the Dutch colony was the “Netherlands East Indies” during this period, but the term “Indonesia” had become increasingly popular among intellectuals due to rising national consciousness. The two terms are used interchangeably in this chapter.
- 2 Ruth McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), 353.
- 3 The PKI was founded as the Indies Social Democratic Association (ISDA) in 1914 and adopted the name Communist Union of the Indies (*Perserikatan Komunis di Hindia*, or PKH) in 1920. This became the PKI in 1924.
- 4 J.T. Petrus Blumberger, *De communistische beweging in Nederlandsch-Indië* (Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink, 1935); Arnold Brackman, *Indonesian Communism: A History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976); Justus M. van der Kroef, *The Communist Party of Indonesia: Its History, Program and Tactics* (Vancouver: Publications Centre, University of British Columbia, 1965); Harry Benda and Ruth McVey, *The Communist Uprisings of 1926–1927 in Indonesia: Key Documents* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1960); McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*.
- 5 George McTurnan Kahin, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1952); Partai Komunis Indonesia and Lembaga Sedjarah, *Pemberontakan nasional pertama di Indonesia (1926)* (Djakarta: Pamburuan, 1961).
- 6 Bertram Schrieke, *Indonesian Sociological Studies: Selected Writings: Part 1–2* (The Hague-Bandung: W. van Hoeve, 1955); Michael Williams, *Sickle and Crescent: The Communist Revolt of 1926 in Banten* (Jakarta: Equinox, 2010).
- 7 McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, 323–358.
- 8 Benda and McVey, *The Communist Uprisings of 1926–1927 in Indonesia*, xix.

- 9 Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI), and Komintern. *Archief Komintern - Partai Komunis Indonesia*. ARCH01744, International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
- 10 "Report of Comrade Darsono to India Sub-Secretariat", 6 May 1926, in PKI-Comintern, Folder 2, ARCH01744, IISH
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 "Minutes of the Indian Sub-Secretariat", 6 May 1926, in PKI-Comintern, Folder 2, ARCH01744, IISH.
- 13 Hungarian-Jewish communist John Pepper, also known as József Pogány, was an alternate member of the Presidium of the ECCI in first half of 1926; Grigorii Voitinskii played a critical role in the establishment of the Communist Party of China; M.N. Roy was the founder of the communist parties of Mexico and India.
- 14 "Minutes of the National Secretariat for India and Indonesia", 3 June 1926, in PKI-Comintern, Folder 2, ARCH01744, IISH.
- 15 "Draft of the Indonesian Programme", 3 June 1926, in PKI-Comintern, Folder 2, ARCH01744, IISH.
- 16 Without sufficient understanding of the real situation in Indonesia, Pepper considered the *Volksraad* (People's Council) as equivalent to a parliament or national assembly. However, its powers were limited to consultation only. Its 60 members were partly elected from various ethnic groups and partly appointed by the colonial government.
- 17 The ECCI at this point had not yet issued a resolution recommending the PKI to pursue the parliamentary path. This could be Roy's personal opinion at the meeting.
- 18 "Draft of the Indonesian Programme", 3 June 1926, in PKI-Comintern, Folder 2, ARCH01744, IISH.
- 19 Semaoen, "Something after the discussions in the British Sub-Secretariat", 3 June 1926, in PKI-Comintern, Folder 32, ARCH01744, IISH.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 See McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, 316–322.
- 22 Alimin stated that the PKI itself had more than 8,000 members. He also claimed that all eight members of the *Sarekat Rakyat* executive committee were from the PKI.
- 23 According to Alimin, the railway union (VSTP) alone had 8,000 members, in which 20 per cent were communists.
- 24 "The Indonesian Conference", 22 July 1926, PKI-Comintern, Folder 2, ARCH01744, IISH.
- 25 In 1927, the Comintern acknowledged that their main sources of information on Indonesia were British and American newspapers. See "Aktionsprogramm der K.P. Indonesiens", in PKI-Comintern, Folder 5, ARCH01744, IISH.
- 26 "The Indonesian Conference", 22 July 1926, in PKI-Comintern, Folder 2, ARCH01744, IISH.
- 27 John Thomas Murphy was a British trade union organiser, in Moscow in 1926 after his release from prison in Britain. He was convicted in 1925 for seditious libel and incitement to mutiny. See David Mayall, "John Thomas Murphy," in *Biographical Dictionary of European Labor Leaders: M-Z*, edited by A. Thomas Lane (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 683.
- 28 "The Indonesian Conference", 22 July 1926, PKI-Comintern, Folder 2, ARCH01744, IISH.
- 29 McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, 316–322. According to the PKI record of the 1960s, however, Tan Malaka refused to attend the meeting in Singapore. The Singapore group thus decided to send Alimin and Musso to the Soviet

- Union. See Partai Komunis Indonesia and Lembaga Sedjarah, *Pemberontakan Nasional Pertama di Indonesia*, 53–54.
- 30 “The Indonesian Conference”, 22 July 1926, in PKI-Comintern, Folder 2, ARCH01744, IISH.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Osip Piatnitskii was a top Comintern official in charge of the organisation’s International Liaison Department.
- 33 Piatnitskii, “Discussion at the Meeting of the Indonesian Sub-Secretariat”, 29 July 1926, in PKI-Comintern, Folder 2, ARCH01744, IISH.
- 34 Alimin, “Discussion at the Meeting of the Indonesian Sub-Secretariat”, 29 July 1926, in PKI-Comintern, Folder 2, ARCH01744, IISH.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 According to Alimin, the Dutch police numbered 1,249, as opposed to 25,000 Indonesians. Among the more than 30,000 people in the army, 7,363 were Dutch and around 26,000 were Indonesian. There were slightly more Europeans (1,633) than Indonesians (1,163) in the navy. In the colonial government, 20,000 were Dutch and 139,927 were Indonesian. Although it is unclear how Alimin came to the conclusion that Indonesians accounted for 97 per cent of the colonial apparatus, the point he tried to make was correct: the Dutch occupied all the top positions, but the overwhelming majority of colonial state employees and the armed forces were locals. Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Partai Komunis Indonesia and Lembaga Sedjarah, *Pemberontakan nasional pertama di Indonesia*, 49.
- 39 The British police arrested Alimin and Musso in Johor and transferred them to Singapore, where they were detained for four months. At their trial, the British judge rejected the Dutch colonial government’s request to extradite the two PKI members, on the grounds that they did not pose a direct threat to the British colonies. Instead, they were allowed to leave Singapore for Hong Kong. For more details, see Alimin’s autobiography, “Riwayat Hidupku”, 1955, in the *Partai Komunis Indonesia Collection (PKI Collection)*. ARCH01033, IISH, 13–14.
- 40 Kroef, *The Communist Party of Indonesia*, 18.
- 41 The feud between Josef Stalin and Leon Trotsky intensified after the death of Lenin in 1924. Trotsky advocated for permanent world revolution and criticised the Stalin regime for suppressing democracy. Stalin insisted on a theory of “socialism in one country”, in which he stressed that the Soviet Union must concentrate on defending and strengthening itself. Trotsky was removed from his positions in the Red Army in 1925, but did not fall from power completely until his final defeat in November 1927. He joined with Zinoviev and Kamenev in the “United Opposition” against Stalin during much of 1926–1927.
- 42 Alimin, “Analysis”, April 1947, in *PKI Collection*, ARCH01033, IISH, 14.
- 43 “Kami mendapat sekadar pemandangan tentang soal-soal yang berhubungan dengan soal-soal Partai Besar”. See *ibid.*, 14.
- 44 McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, 337.
- 45 According to McVey’s interview with Semaoen, Musso was initially very close to the Zinoviev group. See McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, 485.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, 338.
- 48 The Soviet Union’s foreign policy towards the Chinese Revolution was a main point of contention in the ideological debate between Stalin and Trotsky. Stalin encouraged the CCP to merge with the GMD, as he believed that the GMD was more capable of leading a bourgeois revolution, essential for a Soviet-style proletarian revolution later. Trotsky, by contrast, held that the CCP should break

away from the GMD as the latter opposed the notion of proletarian revolution. See Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-Shek and the Struggle for Modern China* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 56–57.

49 Martin Wilbur, *The Nationalist Revolution in China, 1923–1928* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 114.

50 McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, 338.

51 Benda and McVey, *The Communist Uprisings of 1926–1927 in Indonesia*, xxx.

52 After its Sixth World Congress in 1928, the Comintern adopted a more militant approach to world revolution against capitalism while rejecting collaboration with social democrats.