

“The Origins of the Indonesian Nation: The Indonesian Revolution of 1945-49”

An Open Forum with

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March 14, 2011

On March 14th, USINDO hosted an open forum on the origins and legacies of the Indonesian Revolution with Professor Eric Tagliacozzo. Tagliacozzo outlined the prelude to the revolution, the three states of occupation, and the economic, political, and cultural effects of the revolution.

Tagliacozzo began with an overview of the organizations of prewar Indonesian nationalism. Budi Utomo, a Javanese organization established in 1908, was the first concrete example of Indonesians organizing against the Dutch. Prominent Muslim organizations also began to emerge around the same time, such as Muhammadiyah. In 1927, Sukarno founded the Indonesian National Party (PNI), and in 1920 the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) was formed.

Tensions among these groups led to four prominent cleavages in the lead up to the revolution. The first significant tension

Tagliacozzo identified was between the war time collaborationists, such as Sukarno and Hatta, and those who went underground, Syahrir and Malaka. Another distinction was between those who sought independence and those who sought a social revolution with independence. The third cleavage was a desire for modernization versus support for feudalism; many wanted modernization but some actors, such as the Princes in Aceh, still supported the feudalism system. The final significant cleavage was between those that supported nationalism and those that favored internationalism upon independence. These ingredients and tensions were starting to mix together in the lead up to the revolution.

Tagliacozzo outlined the three stages of the Japanese occupation during World War II. In 1942, the Japanese arrived and consolidated power quickly. From mid 1942 to mid 1943, their rule was

characterized by promises of 'Asia for Asians.' There was hope in the air, and Indonesians were still uncertain if the Japanese occupation was beneficial or a deleterious. The second phase of occupation from mid-1942 to mid-1943 was the high point of Japanese power. There were no more promises about independence, and the Japanese ruled with a strong hand.

The third and final period, according to Tagliacozzo, was from mid -1944 to mid- 1945. As the Japanese' position in the war deteriorated, the Japanese started promising things again, and began to try to mobilize Indonesian support by promoting image of normalcy and development under their occupation. They also promoted the Joyo Boyo Prophecy, a medieval Javanese prophecy that predicted that a white race would take over Java and then a yellow race would come to rule.

Several legacies of the Japanese occupation contributed to the nascent revolutionary movement. The Japanese institutionalized Bahasa Indonesia further as the unifying language and link between the islands which would later become an important seed of the revolution. Also, the rise of Sukarno during the occupation was significant. Sukarno utilized the radio to exert power.

The stage was also set through the unification of Islamic groups under occupation. There was a forced merger of all the Muslim parties and some 57,000 of them were trained as soldiers for the use of the Japanese. When the Japanese lost the war, these trained soldiers equipped with guns remained in Indonesia and were able to successfully

mount an opposition against the Europeans. Finally, the Japanese occupation was a time of hyper-colonialism, and hyper-extraction; it was more intense than the Dutch colonialism, and therefore caused more discontent. As a result, within days of the surrender of Japan, Indonesia declared independence.

Tagliacozzo also highlighted the economic, political, and cultural legacies of the Japanese occupation. The Japanese emphasized the export economy of oil, rice, and palm oil in Indonesia during occupation, which would continue to an extent after the revolution.

Politically, as the Japanese began to lose the war, ties were cut with the rest of the world, and Indonesians felt an increasing isolation that gave rise to feelings of unity. Also, The Japanese forced the unity of all Muslim parties, and all of the non-Muslim parties, further enforcing a collective identity.

During occupation, these circumstances contributed to the emergence of a political elite that was charismatic and passionate and began to question 300 years of colonialism. The Japanese occupation was stunningly quick – Japan took over Indonesia in three short months when it took the Dutch three centuries to consolidate control over the colony.

This swift capture of Indonesia illustrated to Indonesians that anything was possible. Furthermore, mass mobilizations and rallies furthered this atmosphere of chaos and possibility. Rapid change was also enforced by high inflation, scarcity, and privation.

These rapid changes led to the undermining of institutions and the emergence of alternate authorities, as well as a vibrant black market. Finally, mass urban migration occurred. For the first time, people were able to freely exchange ideas freely and easily in these new urban centers with their new standardized language. These economic, political, and cultural legacies of occupation would help spark the revolution and survive throughout the 20th Century.

After Sukarno and Hatta declared independence, the Europeans attempted to re-colonize Indonesia. The first allied troops to arrive were not actually Dutch, but British, and for the most part ethnically Indian. They arrived after the Indonesian government had been functioning for some time, and the Indonesians did not accept their return. Several battles ensued, many in and around Surabaya.

For the United States, this was time of indecision. Roosevelt was torn between promoting ideas of progressive liberation and supporting the allies that the US had fought in the war with. He was also concerned about driving Indonesia toward Moscow and the communist bloc; he as well as Truman were well aware that Indonesia had been one of the richest and most profitable colonies in the history of colonialism, would be essential to deny to the communists, and would be important to retain U.S. influence in.

Meanwhile, tensions between the military, Islamists, secularists, nationalists, and communists began to rise. Sukarno tried to balance these forces while fighting for independence.

The Dutch were also trying to consolidate their presence in strategic locations throughout Sumatra such as Sabang, Medan, Palembang, and Padang.

In January 1948, the US and UN promoted peace talks which took place on the USS Renville. Some agreements were reached, but the Dutch continued to resist Indonesian independence. Later that year, in part as a result of US adverse reaction to Dutch “police actions” in Indonesia, the US took a strong stance in favor of Indonesian independence: the US threatened to cancel Marshall Plan economic recovery funds for the Dutch if they insisted on retaining Indonesia. This, coupled with the Indonesian continued resistance, forced the Dutch to capitulate.

Tagliacozzo shared two prominent interpretations of the revolution. Benedict Anderson argues that the Indonesian revolution is not explainable in traditionalist Marxist modes, and that instead, the central thrust in understanding the revolution is the youth, the *permuda*. They were inculcated to strive for their own country; the political leaders at the time promoted independence but cautioned against a social revolution. Anderson argues that these political moderates reinforced a moderate political reform.

A second interpretation is that of William Frederick. Frederick’s interpretation is revisionist and emphasizes continuity while deemphasizing the youth and the extraordinariness of the time. He believes it was the mobilization of the people that produced the revolution.

In closing, Tagliacozzo summarized three legacies of the revolutionary period:

- Violence was one of the lessons learned during the occupation, and Chinese, wealth, and merchants became targets. Since the revolution, there have been multiple examples of ethnic killings and targeted campaigns of hate.
- Another legacy was the use of Islam as a banner for the disaffected. This was evident with the Darul Islam movement which lasted until 1962 and had a Muslim vision of Indonesia. This concept continues today in some of the Islamist parties and in some of the splinter cells like Jemaah Islamiah.
- The last lingering legacy is the fragmented nature of the Indonesian army.

Question and answer session:

Q: My impression is that the State Department was a real impediment to the US accepting Indonesian independence and that it took quite a while for them to understand the importance of Indonesia.

A: During the revolution, there were certainly differences of opinion in the US about what to do next, and Indonesia was not the first thing on the US government's agenda in 1945. However, Indonesia was linked with domino thinking. The US felt in general in 1945 that it should let the European countries go back to their former colonies since they had endured the hardship of Hitler's occupation. The Madiun Affair in 1948 is what really changed the US government's thinking

and is what solidified the US's acceptance of Indonesian independence.

Q: It seems to me that Bahasa Indonesia as a national language was crucial to the revolution, and that although there was a push for Javanese, the fact that they did not choose Javanese in the 1920s is very important. Also, you have not mentioned the role of women in the revolution.

A: Women were very much a part of the revolution too. However, we don't have the names of those who rose to the top because they weren't really allowed to under the social structure. And about language, many people wanted Javanese but it is one of the most difficult languages to learn, and is of course Java-centric.

Q: Growing up in Indonesia, we always said that three and a half years of Japanese occupation was much worse than the entire period of Dutch rule. My question is you mentioned four factors that set the scene for the revolution, but you didn't mention the military. The debate in the Indonesia is whether the military was acting the way it was to support a revolution or to be diplomatic?

A: I think the answer is both. It wouldn't have happened without both. The US was very important, but without the US eventually deciding to take the side of Indonesia, it may not have happened the way it did. However, it took the US a while to come around to supporting Indonesia and it wavered because it did see Europe as more important at the time. But I think the army is a factor that certainly became important. Many young Indonesians

were trained to fight by the Japanese and even the Dutch. The Dutch army was also staffed by Indonesians.

Q: I thought there were three pieces missing from your lecture, but then you brought two of them together at the end. The first is the military, and the second is the tension between Java and the rest of Indonesia. However, it seems to me that a fascinating piece of the story and the third piece is the role of the United Nations, which you have not addressed.

A: If you ask Indonesians, they will say the Indonesian military won the revolution, and it is true that it would not have happened without the organized fighting of military on the ground. However, I would argue that it wouldn't have happened without the diplomatic efforts on the ground either. The UN Security Council was involved in all of the US actions but on its own it was not strong enough to exert the influence that the US could.