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Modern Japan and Indonesia; The dynamics and legacy of wartime rule

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In the autumn of 1991, the Japanese Emperor made an unprecedented visit to three countries in Southeast Asia—Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. All three countries officially welcomed this epoch-making event. However, Suara Pembaruan, an influential Indonesian newspaper, carried an editorial saying ‘Wound healed, but scar remains’. This statement symbolizes the three-and-a-half years of the ‘Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere’, which still lingers in the memories of people in Southeast Asia including Indonesia.

Before entering into a discussion of the dynamics and legacy of the Japanese military administration in Indonesia, I would like to make a brief comparison of the effects of Japanese rule in Indonesia and the Philippines, suggesting that the significance of the war and of Japanese rule in Southeast Asia differs greatly from region to region. For example, on the eve of the outbreak of hostilities in the Pacific, a relatively strong pro-Japanese sentiment was widespread among the members of the nationalist movement in Indonesia, then the Netherlands East Indies. This ensured that, when the Japanese forces terminated Dutch rule after fighting against Dutch troops for about three months, the prevailing mood in Indonesia was one of welcoming the Japanese troops as liberators. In contrast, in the Philippines, which had enjoyed a measure of autonomy under American rule, the Japanese troops who arrived with the slogan of the ‘liberation of Asia’ were met with hostility from both rightist and leftist guerrillas. After the Japanese surrender in August 1945, when the Netherlands sought to restore its suzerainty in Indonesia, the people seized power and ammunition from the withdrawing Japanese, and launched a war of independence against the Dutch ‘invaders’, keeping up the fight for more than four years. In the Philippines, the people cheered the returning Americans as their liberators.¹

To state my conclusion first, although Japan ruled both countries during the war, there was obvious discontinuity in one (Indonesia) before and after the war, whereas there was an unequivocal continuity in the other (the Philippines). This means that more profound changes were stimulated

¹ An interesting study demonstrating the contrast between Indonesia and the Philippines is Friend 1988.
by the advent of the Japanese military administration in Indonesia than was the case in the Philippines. Other parts of Southeast Asia occupied by Japan during the war can be described as falling somewhere in between the poles of change and continuity represented by these two cases.

**Contrasting styles of rule**

Turning to my thesis that the advent of the Japanese military administration in Indonesia set in motion a dynamic of profound social and political change, I would like to mention two statistics. One is that the Dutch colonial authorities were able to maintain peace and order before the Pacific War with a force of only 40,000 troops, but after the war the Netherlands failed to take back its former colony even though it sent in a force of 145,000. The other is the fact that 957 Japanese soldiers died in the offensive against the Netherlands East Indies, while 1,078 Japanese died in either direct or indirect clashes with Indonesian groups fighting for independence from the end of the Pacific War to June 1946 (Miyamoto 1973:363).

These two statistics suggest considerable changes occurred in Indonesia between March 1942 and August 1945. In other words, Indonesia experienced a significant political and social transformation during the three-and-a-half year 'vacuum' which corresponds to the Japanese occupation. The people, whom one Dutch historian described as 'the meekest people on the earth' (Remmelink 1978:63), roused themselves and launched an independence struggle with a revolutionary zeal that amazed all observers.

The various ways the situation under Japanese rule differed from that under the Dutch colonial rule that preceded it probably constitute the main factor behind the great change which occurred during the Japanese administration. It is important to keep in mind that the political and social realities of both Dutch and Japanese rule were not simple products of decrees issued from above but were shaped in the context of dynamic interactions among and between various interests within Indonesian society and those of the foreign rulers. In this section I will confine myself to concentrating on the ways the conscious policies of the old and the new foreign rulers of Indonesia diverged in order to set the stage for a discussion of the changes which came about and the legacy of Japan's military administration.

1.1. **Principles of rule**

'How beautiful are the goals we have been striving to achieve! In this faraway place in the East will evolve an indigenous society enjoying prosperity and a high level of culture thanks to the Netherlands and it will appreciate these gifts with a deep sense of gratitude', said C.Th. van Deventer, ardent advocate of the 'ethical policy' in the early part of the twentieth century (Suroto 1982:167). This kind of statement shows more
clearly than anything else the essence of the Dutch principle of government advocating 'association' with the ruled on the basis of the premise of the superiority of the white race.

In contrast to the Dutch stress on the gap between the ruler and the ruled founded on the principle of absolute white superiority, Japan ruled its occupied regions with an emphasis on the pan-Asianist principle of homogeneity under the slogan of Asian superiority over Europe. What was presented as Japan's basic wartime concept and post-war vision regarding the Asian region was articulated in a joint declaration adopted at the Greater East Asia Conference held in Tokyo in November 1943. Yet, although the declaration upheld the ideals of 'the construction of order to achieve co-prosperity, mutual respect for sovereign independence, and the elimination of racial discrimination', Japan's actual involvement with Asian peoples was deeply tinged with the Japanese sense of being the leader in Asia, as their regimes in Taiwan and Korea readily demonstrate.

1.2. Style of rule

In their style of rule, too, there was a marked difference between the Netherlands and Japan. Except for the First World War period, Dutch rule was a peace-time regime governed by rationalism, in what Anderson called 'a calm, businesslike, bourgeois style'. Rather than applying the apparatus of coercion, the Dutch administration dealt with the ruled through perintah halus (gentle orders). Japan's military administration presented a very different picture, partly because it was conducted in conjunction with the prosecution of the war, and it was characterized by ideological, fanatical romanticism. Therefore Japanese military men dealt with Indonesians in a kasar (rough, crude) fashion symbolized by the practice of 'face slapping'.

In both principles and styles of rule, therefore, the attitudes of the Dutch and Japanese occupiers were plainly poles apart. The tone of the former rule was static, preferring the status quo, whereas the latter was dynamic and in favour of fundamental change.

1.3. The military and politics

Civil officials predominated in the Dutch colonial administration which was supported by a solid bureaucratic organization headed by the Governor General. Japanese rule, in contrast, was dominated by military men, with army commanders at the top.

Militarily, the Netherlands Indies armed forces under Dutch rule consisted of colonial forces whose main function was the preservation of the domestic peace. Their chief objective was to restrain the nationalist movement in the political centre of Java from spreading around the Archipelago. Many Christians from Ambon and Menado, known for their pro-Dutch sympathies, were recruited as government troops. The armed forces served

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2 For differences in style of rule, see Anderson 1972:31-3.
as a means of divide-and-rule in the military realm. Under Japanese rule, a variety of military and semi-military organizations made up of local recruits, including the Peta (Pembela Tanah Air, or Patriotic Defence) in Java, were created to augment the thin ranks of Japanese troops in preparation for the Allied forces’ counter-offensive as the tides of war turned against Japan. The name of the volunteer army, ‘Patriotic Defence’, indicates the emphasis Japan placed on rousing the Indonesians in defence of their nation, and unlike the Dutch-organized Netherlands Indies armed forces, each battalion was more or less made up of locally recruited troops whose core members were young men from the region.

The Netherlands East Indies government basically tolerated the activities of political parties, although only those legally recognized parties which went along with the policy of gradual reform within the framework of ‘cooperation’ with the Netherlands. The Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) was not the only one to fall foul of the authorities, from the mid-1930s onward the Partai Indonesia (Partindo), the Pendidikan Nasional Indonesia (PNI), and other political groups which adopted a non-cooperative stance and sought national independence were virtually made illegitimate. Soekarno, Mohammad Hatta and other prominent nationalist movement leaders and proponents of the non-cooperation line were thrown into jail or exiled, thereby preventing their political and ideological influence from reaching the general public.

The policy of the Japanese military administration stood in sharp contrast to that of the Dutch, who had shunned nationalist leaders as dangerous. While they rejected Western-style party politics, the occupation authorities sought to use well-known nationalists as mouthpieces to inform the Indonesian people of Japanese intentions. This was symbolized by their liberation of Soekarno and Hatta and the request that they cooperate with Japan. The nationalists were able to obtain a certain sphere of freedom of action, albeit approved by the Japanese army, a freedom they had never expected to obtain before the outbreak of the war.

From the point of view of nationalism, the period of Japanese rule also stimulated the politicization of the Indonesians in general, which led to the spread of nationalism. Whereas pre-war Indonesian nationalism had been more or less monopolized by intellectuals who had enjoyed a Western education, under the Japanese various popular political organizations were founded, though firmly under the guidance of the occupation authorities. The raising of popular consciousness, which could be called ‘nationalistic’, although not of a refined form, was achieved mainly among young people of various strata in society who involved themselves in politics through participation in these organizations as middle-echelon leaders. But perhaps an even more important development (though one hardly intended by the Japanese themselves) was the political and nationalistic awakening of many Indonesians as a negative response to Japan’s policies and Japanese behaviour.
1.4 Society and culture

Striking differences between Dutch and Japanese rule are found in policies propagated in the social and cultural spheres towards Islam. In the face of intense resistance from Muslim political forces to the establishment of the colonial system as epitomized by the Aceh War, the Netherlands followed the advice of C. Snouck Hurgronje and other scholars of Islam and tried to undermine the political power of this faith. Conversely Japan, quick to note the pervasive political and social influence Islam exerted on Indonesian society, notably in rural areas, pursued a policy of utilizing the latent energy of Islam to buttress the military administration.³

One policy which was closely allied to this was their encouragement of young people. Whereas the Netherlands patronized the traditional nobility and cultivated their children as the elite of colonial society, Japan sought to educate young people from rural areas who had had little to do with Dutch-style education and were ardent followers of Islam. They helped these young people become middle-echelon leaders in various segments of society as members of the Peta, the Hizbullah (Muslim volunteer corps), young men’s groups, or local militias.

Short-sightedly in contrast to the Dutch who had recognized Islamic social and cultural values and followed a policy of non-interference, the Japanese tried to thrust Japanese values upon Muslims. Especially its attempt to force Muslims to bow in the direction of Tokyo, where the imperial palace was located, led to the welling up of intense anti-Japanese sentiment among this segment of the population. The well-known Sumatra Muslim leader, Hamka, made no bones about the detrimental effects of this practice, calling the date 29 April 1942, when he and his followers were ordered to bow to the imperial palace in Tokyo, ‘the day of the severest trial for Muslims’ (Hamka 1982:208).

There was also a sharp difference in the way the Dutch and the Japanese treated the Indonesian people themselves. Convinced of their absolute superiority the Dutch stood aloof from the people of the colony. They made no attempt to approach the local masses directly. The Japanese military administration made a 180-degree turn and stressed the ‘placation’ of Indonesians, demonstrated by the fact that it set up a propaganda organ at the outset of the occupation and, when the Military Administration Headquarters was founded, established a propaganda section within it. In the basic policy of Japan’s military administration in Southeast Asia it was spelled out that ‘the native people should be guided in such a way as to promote their trust in and dependence upon the Imperial Army’.⁴

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³ A classical study of the Japanese military administration’s Islam policy is Benda 1958.
⁴ ‘Nanpo senryochi jissi yoryo’ [Outline of the execution of administration in the occupied Southern Areas], Policy 1, no. 8, Waseda University Tokyo, Institute of Social Sciences, Nishijima Collection.
and newspapers as well as the theatres, cinemas, and literary publications were all mobilized to advertise the Japanese goals in the war and seek cooperation for the military government.  

1.5. Economy

The Indonesian economy prior to the Pacific War was incorporated into and dependent on the world trade structure centring on its suzerain, the Netherlands, and other Western powers. Meanwhile, in the latter half of 1930s, the Netherlands East Indies government policy of industrial development through the active introduction of Western capital and technology had begun to bear fruit.

The Japanese military administration put an end to these Western-dependent economic relations and industrial policies and began to reorganize Indonesia into its autarchic ‘new economic order’ focusing on Japan. Attempts to bring about a quick shift from a plantation-based, export-oriented economy to one concentrating on the production of foodstuffs to meet wartime needs caused all kinds of economic confusion. From 1943 the compulsory delivery of rice (to the government at low prices) was more strictly enforced, exerting direct pressure on the daily lives of the peasants and provoking frequent rural revolts in various parts of Indonesia.

Viewing Java as a ‘repository of abundant labour’, Japan sent huge numbers of Javanese to other parts of the Archipelago as well as to areas near the Thai and Burmese borders and elsewhere in Southeast Asia as romusha.  

6 Under Dutch rule, the issue of contract coolies had been taken up by the nationalist movement, but the economic and political implications of the romusha problem under Japanese rule were far greater in terms of both quality and quantity.

The dynamics and legacy of wartime rule

With the contrasts between Dutch colonial rule and the Japanese military rule in mind, I would now like to discuss the dynamics of the Japanese military administration in Indonesian society and what the legacy of that impact has been down to the present day in each specific field.

2.1. Psychological transformation

It hardly needs to be said that what aroused the apparently docile Indonesians, whom the Dutch had thought ‘the meekest people on earth’, to launch an armed struggle against the Netherlands and successfully win their independence was their ardent nationalism. The nationalist leader

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5 These aspects are explained in detail by S.T. Alisjahbana in his novel Kalah dan menang. Here I refer to the Japanese translation. See Alisjahbana 1983.

Mohammad Hatta, who in terms of political thought belonged to the Western European school of socialist democracy but had been forced for strategic reasons to cooperate with Japan during the Pacific War, remarked in a speech toward the end of the war:

‘What matters above all other values is that the people’s minds have been liberated from their sense of inferiority. In contrast to the Dutch, the Imperial Japanese army has taught us to be brave and to recognize ourselves on our own merits.’ (Hatta 1981:40.)

This remark sheds light on one aspect of Japanese military rule during the occupation.

Even though it should be realized that this passage is from a radio speech broadcast by Hatta after it had passed the Japanese military censors, the fact remains that the Japanese emphasis on values that were unthinkable under the Dutch – the mythified idea of Asian supremacy, as well as self-sacrifice, spiritual strength, and personal discipline – had made a deep impression on Indonesian society. Not only did Indonesians undergo the militaristic education and submit to the discipline imposed by the Japanese during the war, they were witnesses as Japanese military forces destroyed the existing apparatus of European rule within a short period of time, something Indonesians themselves had been unable to do. The dismantling of Dutch rule came as a great shock not only to Europeans; Indonesians, too, realized it signalled a change in the tide of history. The following passage from the memoirs of the late Adam Malik, former vice-president of Indonesia, suggests something about the spiritual foundation of struggle for independence. He said:

‘When they controlled the whole colony from their capital in Batavia, the Dutch were proud, arrogant and coldhearted. But in Cilacap I saw Dutch men crawling in the garbage begging for mercy before sword-carrying Japanese. That scene from the collapse of the Dutch empire in the East Indies is forever imprinted on my mind.’ (Malik 1981:121.)

We must recognize, none the less, that the ‘psychological transformation’ is by no means always interpreted as a positive legacy of the Japanese military administration. A well-known intellectual Y.B. Mangunwijaya, for example, views the Japanese military administration as a kind of catalyst that produced a throwback effect:

‘The chauvinistic and fascist education provided (to Indonesians) by Japan for three and a half years brought to perfection the indigenous fascism and the inferiority complex embedded in our genes by generations of subjugation’ (Mangunwijaya 1978).
2.2. Military and politics

The changes that occurred in the military and political spheres are extremely important in connection with the war of independence and the creation of the pivotal bodies that were to lead Indonesian politics after independence. In the autumn of 1943, the Japanese authorities founded the Peta in compliance with the wish of Indonesian nationalists to have their own army. It so happened that at the time the central government in Tokyo was concretizing its plans for an ‘absolute national defence sphere’ as the war situation worsened for Japan, so the Peta was also expected to help make up for the lack of strength of the Japanese armed forces faced with the Allied counter-offensive. However convenient the establishment of the Peta was for Tokyo, it was the Indonesians themselves who benefited. During the subsequent twenty months until the end of the Pacific War, 37,000 young men in Java alone received a strict military training and ideological education under the banner of ‘defence of the fatherland,’ a programme that would have been unimaginable under Dutch rule (Notosusanto 1979:129). At the risk of being misunderstood, I believe that there is a very close link – mediated by former members of the Peta – between the view of the superiority of the national armed forces held today and the ‘the-army-is-everything’ idea that prevailed during the Japanese occupation. It was in 1979 that T.B. Simatupang, former chief-of-staff of the Indonesian armed forces and one of the few high-ranking officers of non-Peta origin (a former member of the KNIL), said: ‘Since liberation from the control of the Japanese military, the national armed forces, whose members were influenced by the education and training these provided, show the same dangerous militarist tendencies as the Japanese army’ (Indoneshia Tsushin, 5 December 1979).

The political characteristics of the Japanese military administration, stressing the leadership of the central government in Jakarta and placing an emphasis on mass mobilization, are demonstrated most clearly in the Djawa Hokokai (Java Public Service Association). This association was not a purely political group but ‘a practical service movement’ aimed at ‘promoting Japan’s military administration policies and its friendship with all the inhabitants (of Java)’. It was closely linked to neighbourhood units as the lowest units of organization. This principle of organization was an obvious import from the Imperial Rule Assistance Association and neighbourhood associations formed in Japan during the war. According to one theory, the Imperial Rule Assistance Association was founded upon the

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7 Jawa nenkan (1944:42). Here the Hokokai is described as ‘different in nature from the Imperial Rule Assistance Association in Japan, the Concordia Society in Manchuria, or the Shinminkai [New People’s Society] in North China’. The Jawa nenkan referred to the Concordia Society and others, though it said ‘the Hokokai was the first of its sort’, which may suggest some degree of continuity between these organizations.
General test for an Indonesian candidate hoping to join the PETA (Pradjoerit 3 (1944-1945), p. 15)
model of the Concordia Society (Kyowakai) introduced into Manchuria by the Japanese occupiers (Mitani 1992:193) and, if this is so, it may not be too far-fetched to suggest a loose continuity of political organization extending from Manchuria to Indonesia (especially Java) under the Japanese occupation, and then to Indonesia after independence, at least as far as the maintenance of elements of its system has suited the interests of Indonesian post-war ruling elites.

2.3. Society and culture

Turning to the 'legacy' of Japan's military administration in the sphere of culture, one remnant was particularly conspicuous in Indonesia in comparison with the other parts of Southeast Asia. This was the rapid spread of a new national language and the lowered status of the old suzerain state language which is not a 'world language'.

The relatively rapid spread of the language may have been one incidental result of the language policy enforced under the occupation to replace Dutch as the official language. There is some truth in this, but considering the fact that Bahasa Melayu had been used under the Dutch colonial administration as dienst-Maleisch since the end of nineteenth century, and considering the nationalist struggles since the 'Youth Pledge' of 1928 to have Bahasa Indonesia recognized as the national language, it seems a bit hasty to overemphasize the role of the Japanese military administration by asserting, as did one author, that 'if the Japanese divided Indonesia administratively, they at least united it linguistically' (Kanahele 1977:348). A more accurate appraisal, I believe, is that 'the spread of Bahasa Indonesia between 1928 and about 1945 had an enormously significant impact in helping to prevent the development of separatist movements based on linguistic or ethnic affiliations' (Mackie 1980:679).

Discussion of the discontinuity in Indonesia between the pre-war period and the post-independence period often call attention to the rise of a new, post-war elite consisting of young people trained by the Japanese military during the occupation period. Typical examples are Josef Silverstein's portrayal of the Japanese-trained new elite as the 'many young, energetic, and patriotic local leaders' and Joyce C. Lebra's description of 'the potential leadership which had been excluded by Western colonial regimes' (Silverstein 1966:7; Lebra 1977:167).

These views seem to presume that because the large number of young people mobilized by Peta and other military and semi-military organizations received intensive military and ideological education and training, they formed the source of supply for the leadership of the Republic of Indonesia after the war. As Benedict Anderson describes it, their presence during the war could be likened to 'a gigantic engine accelerated ever more furiously, but not yet put into gear' (Anderson 1972:31). And certainly, without this leadership elite the revolution for independence would have been difficult to achieve.
PETA soldiers marching to the parade ground (Pradjoerit 3 (1944-1945), p. 16)
In that sense, the politicization of Indonesian youth can be regarded as a positive result of the Japanese rule. However, as suggested in an assertion made by S. Takdir Alisjahbana that 'narrow sensibilities and thinking [the Japanese cult of spiritual power-GK] is a remnant of the Japanese occupation period', the emergence of politicized youth is widely thought of as a pernicious legacy of those times (Alisjahbana 1983, II:233).

2.4. Economy

Even before the war Japan had viewed Indonesia as a repository of abundant human and material resources, so it was only natural that when the war began, the Archipelago should become a major object of attention in line with the three principles of military administration formulated by the Japanese government, namely: 'preservation of peace and order; the securing of vital resources; and local self-sustenance'. Colonel Ishii Akiho, who had participated in the formulation of this basic policy, boasted that 'The stipulation that the self-sustenance of the occupation forces should be achieved in occupied areas even at the cost of the deprivation of the local people was an important and resolute decision', and his remark sheds light on the cruel economic conditions suffered by the Indonesian masses during the war period (Defence Agency 1985:443).

A Japanese document from the latter half of the occupation also admits: 'In material terms, the lives of the local people can hardly be called satisfactory, and the difficulty in obtaining food and other important daily necessities has been growing more and more serious' (Jawa nenkan 1944:27). From the very start of the occupation, the Japanese realized that the economy of the occupied people would be impoverished, which is reflected in the observation that 'the effect of the war will inevitably make the lives of the local people difficult'. The argument prepared to justify such deprivation was that Japan would then 'regenerate (Indonesians) as a people of a New Asia by bestowing on them the spiritual enlightenment needed to compensate for the material difficulties they suffer' (Asahi Shimbun, 26 August 1942). Whatever logic was contrived to legitimize them, Japanese measures such as forcing peasants to supply rice at arbitrarily low prices and sending large numbers of Indonesians as romusha (reaching some four million according to post-war Indonesian estimates) (Nishihara 1976:62) to labour outside the country, were not only major negative factors for the post-war rural economy, but also central issues in shaping Indonesians' images of the Japanese military administration.

2.5. The military administration period as history

Before the war Indonesians generally had a positive image of Japan. A report drawn up by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the very eve of the outbreak of the Pacific War, with the forthcoming occupation of Indonesia in mind, stated that 'the feelings of the peoples of the East Indies
towards Japan [...] are generally favourable’, but then an important passage follows:

‘If the Japanese forces should someday advance unhindered into the East Indies, and Japan treats the East Indies high-handedly or some ill-natured Japanese behaves in ways that ignore the traditional customs of the peoples of the East Indies, thereby offending them, then their feelings towards Japan will be even more filled with hatred than that felt towards the Netherlands, their former ruler’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1941:43).

Ironically, the predictions of the Foreign Ministry came true. In Indonesia today, ‘socialization’ through school education, the mass media, and family education has made the Japanese occupation period known among the people as ‘the darkest hour’ in their history. At the same time, the historical view that had nothing but condemnation for ‘fascist Japan,’ which predominated in the 1950s, has receded, giving way to nationalism-based historical interpretation founded on the thesis that Indonesians restored their own dignity and autonomy by enduring that dark hour (Goto 1989).

What effect did the Japanese military administration have on the principles of Indonesian foreign relations after independence? This is a very difficult question, but I would like to present a hypothesis that requires further study. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere concept advocated by Japan was founded on the premise that its people would be the leaders of the other Asian peoples. In November 1943 Japan, the ‘leader’, convened the Greater East Asia Conference in Tokyo. Representatives were invited, not only from Japan, the Republic of China, and Manchuria, but also from Burma and the Philippines, which had just been granted independence. This international conference adopted a joint declaration calling for co-prosperity, mutual respect for autonomy, and the elimination of racial discrimination.

Indonesia could not send representatives to participate in the meeting because Japan had not yet approved its independence. It was ten days after the meeting that three Indonesian representatives, including Soekarno and Hatta, were invited to Japan (Goto 1991). They came to Tokyo hoping Indonesia would be granted independence, but their hope was disappointed. Worse still, they were unable to meet any of the leaders from other countries of the Co-Prosperity Sphere. No doubt a deep resentment rooted in this wartime experience of being ignored was then etched in Soekarno’s mind.

Perhaps this is why, twelve years later, in April 1955, Soekarno, now Indonesia’s first president, delivered a speech at the first Afro-Asian Congress held in Bandung that ignored the 1943 meeting. The Bandung Conference sponsored by Indonesia was Soekarno’s debut in international politics, and he called the conference the first international meeting ever held by the coloured race in human history (Soekarno 1962:37). Soekarno also referred to the meeting of the League Against Colonial Oppression
held in Brussels in 1927, but he made no mention of the Greater East Asia Conference during the war which Japan had described as ‘the world’s first conference solely of Asians’.

Of course, there is a difference between Japan’s self-assumed identity as leader of Asia during the war and the consciousness of Soekarno and other Indonesian political leaders who considered themselves ‘standard-bearers’ for Asian and African peoples after the war. But it would not be hard to imagine that the bitter memory of the Greater East Asia Conference festered in Soekarno’s mind as he stressed the significance of an international conference of non-white peoples and Indonesia’s leadership role as a large country.

Post-war Japanese understanding of the occupation of Southeast Asia

In this final section, I would like to consider the impact and legacy of the war from another angle, namely how the occupation of Indonesia (or Southeast Asia) has been understood in post-war Japan.

Deep-rooted, anti-Japanese movements unfolded in Malaya and Singapore even before the inception of Japanese rule, motivated by its occupation of the Philippines and Burma. In Indonesia, the Japanese were not aware of any clearly dangerous anti-Japanese movements. In no other region would a remark such as that made by first superintendent of the Japanese Military Administration in Java, Colonel Okazaki Seizaburo have been imaginable: ‘If there is a paradise in this world, it must be Java’ (Okazaki 1977:66).

By extension of such a wartime perception, soon after the Japanese surrender in 1945 one of the former Sixteenth Army leaders stated: ‘The military administration in Java went very smoothly, and achieved excellent results’ (Defence Agency 1985:499). Referring to the independence won by Southeast Asian peoples, Okazaki also recalled that their liberation would have been impossible without Japanese sacrifice. This view, which portrayed Japan practising ‘compassion through its own sacrifice’, helped create the conditions for the historical view that portrays the Greater East Asia War in a positive light.

There are other historical views prevalent in post-war Japan, including those held by people who see the war in terms of Japan’s involvement in Southeast Asia as the ‘assailant’ (ruler), or at least try to understand the war from the perspective of Southeast Asians who actually lived through the wartime period.

In August 1993, the newly nominated prime minister, Hosokawa Morihiro, officially stated that there had been acts of aggression in the past war, although this wording was a slight retreat from his former statement at the press conference that the last war was a war of aggression. This stance has been maintained by Hosokawa Morihiro’s two successors, namely Hata Tutomu and Murayama Tomiichi.
A contradictory view was expressed by a former education minister, Okuno Seisuke, who said that '[The Pacific War] was not an aggressive war but a war for the liberation of East Asia, to free Asians from the whites who had kept Asia under colonial rule'. This reflects one trend of neo-nationalist Japanese thought in the 1980s (Okuno 1989:15). And such a standpoint still prevails among wide segments of the Japanese society, as shown by the recent statements by two cabinet ministers who supported the 'liberation war' concept and were subsequently dismissed.

Finally, let me express my personal observation as a Japanese concerning this still fraught theme. There are two preconditions necessary for the Japanese in any accurate reappraisal of the effects and legacies of the war in Southeast Asia. The first is a willingness to recognize the autonomy of Southeast Asian peoples. In other words, we must strive for a correct grasp of the history and achievements of their nationalist movements which had been in action for more than thirty years before the Japanese occupation. Then we will probably see what Alfred McCoy means by his analysis of the response of the local elite to Japan's military administration. He says, for example, that Japan did not manipulate the Southeast Asia elite, but that 'it was they who manipulated the Japanese', and remained 'pragmatists about the war's outcome' (McCoy 1980:7).

The other point we must bear in mind is that Japan’s occupation of Southeast Asia was aimed mainly at obtaining raw materials and labour. The Japanese pledge to liberate Asia and other policies – even if they did lead to positive results – were no more than the pretext for achieving the real goals (obtaining oil and other natural resources as well as manpower). Therefore, the views that the independence won by Southeast Asian countries was the materialization of the ideals of the Greater East Asia War, that independence would have been impossible had the Japanese occupation not occurred, or had Japan not practised benevolence through its own sacrifice are oversimplified ideas that have confused the effects with the causes.

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