“War Cannot Be Localized”:
Sjahrir, Cosmopolitanism, Global Visibility[1)]

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I. Introduction

In colonial settings, as Benedict Anderson rightly points out, nationalism and cosmopolitanism were inherently intertwined,[3)] with many colonial nationalists embodying this dual identity. His study of Filipino nationalism and anti-colonialism in the late nineteenth century exemplifies this dynamic, highlighting the intersections between national independence and global politics.[4)] In the early twentieth century of colonial Indonesia, many nationalists and intellectuals—both secular and religious, including journalists—emerged from Western educational institutions under the colonial system, placing them within a cosmopolitan intellectual milieu. This phenomenon was not unique to colonial

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3） Cynthia Foo, “Interview with Benedict Anderson”, *Invisible Culture* 13 (2009). https://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue_13_/foo/index.html Foo 2009.

4） Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (London: Verso, 2005).

Philippines or colonial Indonesia; the interwar period saw an expanding reading public and an increased circulation of information across major cities in Southeast Asia,[5] fostering a distinctive intellectual and nationalist landscape.

Colonial cosmopolitanism differed from the conventional notion of cosmopolitanism as either universal openness or elite privilege.[6] Instead, it referred to how colonial subjects—elites, intellectuals, religious leaders, traders, and others—engaged with diverse cultural, linguistic, and political influences beyond their immediate contexts. This perspective emphasizes that colonial territories were not isolated but interconnected through networks of migration, commerce, education, and intellectual exchange. In the political sphere, colonial cosmopolitanism often emerged as a response to colonial rule, shaped by power dynamics, racial hierarchies, and resistance. In colonial Southeast Asia, for example, multilingual newspapers, political movements, and intellectual circles facilitated the circulation of ideas not only between Dutch, British, and French colonies but also between the colonies and metropolitan centers like The Hague, London, and Paris.[7]

During the interwar period, many colonial elites embraced the multilingual and cosmopolitan nature of their environment. They were "tightly linked to the ongoing march of world history",[8] and among other influences, communist ideology gained particular traction among them. Well-versed in what Anderson describes as "a *marxisant* vocabulary," they shared a political lexicon that had

5) Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 138–180.

6) Immanuel Kant is often credited with formulating one of the foundational ideas of cosmopolitanism in his 1795 essay *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (*Zum ewigen Frieden: Ein philosophischer Entwurf*). Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, Ted Humphrey trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004).

7) Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised and New Edition (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 47–65, 113–140.

8) Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, "A Time of Darkness and a Time of Light: Transposition in Early Indonesian Nationalist Thought", in his *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 249.

"become the common property"[9] of their generation. Once a cosmopolitan milieu was established, the circulation of information and the movement of people persisted. This was driven in part by the expansion of educational systems and the growth of the publishing industry, both of which operated independently of the political regime—whether repressive or otherwise. In the 1930s, colonial Southeast Asia witnessed intensified international policing against Comintern activities, leading to the suppression of Communist movements and mass mobilization politics. At the same time, fascist ideology began to take hold in the region, subtly reshaping nationalist politics. Despite these shifting political landscapes, nationalists and activists continued to consume information both within the colony and from abroad, reading newspapers and tuning in to radio broadcasts whenever and wherever they could. Thus examining their perceptions of global political developments offers a fresh perspective on the history of nationalism in colonial Southeast Asia during the 1930s.

This article focuses on Soetan Sjahrir (1909–1966, hereafter Sjahrir), one such nationalist, though his circumstances set him apart from others who were actively engaged in politics in colonial Indonesia. Regarded as "the most Westernized of the important figures of his generation",[10] Sjahrir became a prominent Indonesian nationalist leader during the last decades of the Dutch colonial period. Alongside Soekarno (1901–1970) and Mohammad Hatta (1902–1980, hereafter Hatta), he emerged as a key political and revolutionary figure following Indonesia's declaration of independence on 17 August 1945, after three and a half years of Japanese occupation. In November 1945, he was appointed the first prime minister of the Republic of Indonesia, a position he held until July 1947. During this time, he also served as Foreign Minister, engaging in diplomatic negotiations with the Dutch and other foreign

9) Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, "Languages of Indonesian Politics", in his *Language and Power*, 137. For description of the spread and influence of Communist ideology in Asia, see Tim Harper, *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021).

10) James Siegel, 'Historie Politieque: Indonesische Overpeinzingen, Indonesian Nightmares: Rudolf Mrázek's Sutan Sjahrir", *Archipel* 48 (1994): 206.

governments.

Under Dutch rule, Sjahrir's active political career was relatively brief. While studying in the Netherlands (1929–1931), he was politically active as a member of Perhimpoenan Indonesia (Indonesian Association, hereafter PI). In late 1931, at the age of 22, he returned to Indonesia and co-founded Partai Nasional Indonesia Baroe (New Indonesian Nationalist Party, hereafter PNI-Baroe), also known as Pendidikan Nasional Indonesia (Indonesian National Education Party). His political activism during this period however lasted less than three years. In February 1934, he was arrested alongside Hatta and other activists, leading to nearly seven years of internal exile within the colony.

The reason for selecting Sjahrir as the focus of this study is straightforward. During his exile, he was prohibited from participating in political activities, yet he remained informed about global events by reading Dutch-language newspapers and listening to radio broadcasts. Throughout his exile, Sjahrir maintained an extensive correspondence with his Dutch wife, Maria Duchâteau (1907–1997, hereafter Maria), and in December 1945, these letters were compiled and published in the Netherlands in Dutch as a book titled *Indonesische Overpeinzingen* (*Indonesian Reflections*).[11)]

Indonesische Overpeinzingen offers a revealing portrait of Sjahrir—his personality, emotions, and intellectual disposition during the 1930s. An intellectual and committed nationalist with strong pro-Western inclinations, Sjahrir often grew impatient with fellow Indonesian nationalists and felt a deep sense of alienation from them.[12)] While the book reflects some of his frustrations, it is equally crucial for understanding his worldview, as his letters engage extensively with global affairs. His reflections provide valuable insights into how his nationalist strategy and ideological positioning differed from other

11) In 2021, a new book on Sjahrir was published in the Netherlands, which appears to be the most comprehensive collection of his letters to his wife Maria. Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity to consult it in preparing this article. Sjahrir, *Wissel op de toekomst: brieven van de Indonesische nationalist aan zijn Hollandse geliefde*. Kees Snoek ed. (Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 2021).

12) Amry Vandenbosch, "Review: INDONESISCHE OVERPEINZINGEN. *By Sjahrazad. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij. 1946. pp. 182*", *Pacific Affairs* 19–4 (1946): 429.

leading Indonesian nationalists, such as Soekarno and Hatta, the future first president and vice president of Indonesia, who were also exiled between 1933 and 1942, and 1934 and 1942 respectively. As far as I know, no letters from Soekarno and Hatta from their exile period—if any existed—were preserved or published, making Sjahrir's letters particularly significant from a historical perspective.

While *Indonesische Overpeinzingen* is a rich source of Sjahrir's reflections on nationalism, Indonesian society, his places of exile Boven Digoel and Banda Neira, education, and Western philosophical and intellectual thoughts, this article does not seek to analyze these aspects in depth—a task already undertaken by Rudolf Mrázek in his biography of Sjahrir,[13] widely regarded as the most comprehensive study of him. Instead, this article focuses on Sjahrir's perceptions of contemporary world affairs, emerging ideologies, ongoing warfare, and the instability of colonial rule—an aspect that Mrázek does not explore in depth.

By examining Sjahrir's writings, this article sheds light on how he perceived global events and sought to warn his potential readers through his letters. I argue that Sjahrir's worldview was shaped by a continuous stance of resistance and a keen awareness of global affairs—both in opposition to dominant colonial powers and in response to the emerging forces of the time. This study has two main objectives: first, to historicize *Indonesische Overpeinzingen* by situating Sjahrir and his intellectual life in exile within the broader context of Indonesian history; and second, to examine how he perceived contemporary world affairs and the issues that most concerned him. Despite both visible and invisible restrictions, his writings from exile reveal how he navigated political engagement on his own terms.

II. Young Sjahrir

Born on 5 March 1909, in Padang Panjang, West Sumatra, Sjahrir came from a

13） Rudolf Mrázek, *Sjahrir: Politics and Exile in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1994).

respected Minangkabau family. His father was a colonial government official, and his mother was from a family of scholars. Sjahrir attended the Europeesche Lagere School (European Primary School), a Dutch-language elementary school in Medan, East Coast of Sumatra, and later continued his studies at the prestigious Meer Uitgebreid Lager Onderwijs (More Extended Primary Education) and Algemene Middelbare School (General Secondary School) in Bandoeng, West Java. It was here that he began to develop his intellectual interests and political consciousness.[14)]

In 1929, Sjahrir traveled to the Netherlands to pursue higher education. He initially studied law at the University of Amsterdam before transferring to Leiden University. While in the Netherlands, he joined Perhimpoenan Indonesia (PI), a student organization advocating for Indonesia's independence, and later served as its secretary. It was through the PI that he met Hatta, who had been the association's chairperson since 1927. The PI introduced Sjahrir to socialist and leftist ideologies, and he became deeply engaged in debates on colonialism and nationalism. However, an internal struggle emerged within the PI, and in 1931 it became a front organization for the Communist Party of the Netherlands and subsequently expelled several prominent nationalists, including Hatta and Sjahrir.[15)]

This period was crucial in shaping Sjahrir's political thinking. His expulsion from the PI reinforced his skepticism toward communist orthodoxy and deepened his commitment to a democratic, non-communist path to independence. Unlike a number of nationalists who aligned with Soviet-backed movements, Sjahrir gravitated toward a more moderate socialist framework, emphasizing political education and grassroots mobilization. His experiences in

14) For Sjahrir's journey during the colonial period, I primarily rely on Mrázek, *Sjahrir* for a detailed analysis of his political thought and activities. See also J.D. Legge, *Intellectuals and Nationalism in Indonesia: A Study of the Following Recruited by Sutan Sjahrir in Occupied Jakarta* (Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1988), 25–38; John Ingleson, *Road to Exile: The Indonesian Nationalist Movement 1927–1934* (Singapore: Heinemann, 1979).

15) Klaas Stutje, *Campaigning in Europe for a Free Indonesia: Indonesian Nationalists and the Worldwide Anticolonial Movement, 1917–1931* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2019), passim.

the Netherlands not only exposed him to European leftist thought but also deepened his understanding of global political currents, sharpening his critique of both colonialism and authoritarianism.

Without completing his law degree, Sjahrir returned to Indonesia in December 1931 and initially joined Soekarno's Partai Nasional Indonesia (Indonesian National Party, PNI). Coincidentally, Soekarno was released from the Soekamiskin Prison in Bandoeng, West Java, on 31 December 1931 due to mounting public pressure, despite having been sentenced in December 1930 to four years of incarceration. His trial had attracted widespread press coverage, elevating him to the status of a nationalist hero across the archipelago. But the mood surrounding nationalist politics had begun to shift. By the time Soekarno rejoined the movement, PNI had nearly collapsed due to internal struggles and increasing repression by the colonial authorities. In its wake, two new parties emerged: Partindo (Partai Indonesia), led by Soekarno, which focused on mass agitation and mobilization, and the new PNI or PNI-Baroe, led by Sjahrir and Hatta, which adopted a long-term, cadre-based approach emphasizing education, youth activism, intellectual development, and socialist ideas. Sjahrir actively organized workers and young activists, championing a modern, progressive, and inclusive nationalist movement. He also played a key role in editing and contributing to *Daulat Rakyat* (*Sovereignty of the People*), PNI-Baoe's political organ.

On 1 August 1933, Soekarno was rearrested for his political speeches and writings, and was subsequently exiled to Ende, Flores, a remote island in eastern Indonesia. Less than seven months later, in late February 1934, Sjahrir and Hatta were also arrested by Dutch authorities for their anti-colonial activities. These arrests signaled the decline of mass mobilization politics and the retreat of radical nationalism into underground networks. As the Dutch intensified colonial control, police surveillance expanded, and nationalist movements increasingly shifted toward a more cooperative stance with the Indies administration.[16)]

For the period of eleven months, Sjahrir and Hatta were detained without

16) Shiraishi, *The Phantom World of Digul*, 162–241.

trial in Tjipinang Prison, Batavia. Thereafter, after more than three weeks of travel, they were exiled to Boven-Digoel, a notorious detention camp in distant Papua, where they stayed for eight months,[17] before being transferred again to Banda Neira in the Maluku Islands for nearly three years. Sjahrir spent this time reading and rereading the Bible, and the works of Plato, Dante, Kant, Hegel, Goethe, Marx, Engels, Nietzsche, Hume, Comte, Mill, Spencer, Bertrand Russel, Huizinga, Ter Braak, Ortega y Gasset, and the likes. He used his time in exile to reflect and write on Indonesia's future, further strengthening his resolve for independence. His letters demonstrate that he wanted to write a biography of Engels, harshly criticized Huizinga, and was deeply impressed by Ortega y Gasset.[18]

During his exile and incarceration from March 1934 to March 1938, despite the inevitable constraints of strict censorship, Sjahrir meticulously wrote at least 111 letters in Dutch to his wife, Maria. These letters can be categorized as follows: 20 from Tjipinang (20 March 1934–6 January 1935), 4 during his transfer to Boven Digoel (30 January 1935–21 February 1935), 17 from Boven Digoel (7 March 1935–24 November 1935), and 70 from Banda Neira (11 February 1936–25 March 1938). Notably, over 60 percent of these letters were written in Banda Neira.[19]

In mid-February 1942, shortly before the Japanese invasion of Indonesia,

17) Boven Digoel was established as a concentration camp for political prisoners in 1927 following the Communist revolts in West Sumatra and West Java. It became a key site in the Dutch colonial project to suppress, reeducate, and contain communist influence; see Takashi Shiraishi, *The Phantom World of Digul: Policing as Politics in Colonial Indonesia, 1926–1941* (Singapore: NUS Press; Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2021), 29–62. The existence and function of Boven Digoel were regularly reported by both Dutch and Indonesian newspapers, making it well known among Indonesian nationalists, intellectuals, and the general public; see Yamamoto Nobuto, "Boven Digoel: Projecting a New Society", *Southeast Asian Studies* 14–1 (2025): 87–107.

18) Soetan Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1945), passim. I refer to the first edition of *Indonesische Overpeinzingen* that is available at https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/sjah001indo01_01/index.php.

19) *Indonesische Overpeinzingen* provides no explanation for the absence of letters Sjahrir may have written to Maria after April 1938, despite his continued exile in Banda Neira.

Sjahrir and Hatta were transferred from Banda Neira to Soekaboemi, which was deemed a "safer place" (*dipandang lebih aman*).[20] They were eventually released from exile by the Japanese military in April.[21] Upon their return to activism in the limited spaces accorded by the Japanese, Sjahrir and Hatta faced a rapidly shifting political landscape as the Asia-Pacific War escalated. In response to Japanese rule, they adopted complementary strategies, maintaining close communication throughout the occupation period despite their differing approaches. Hatta chose to cooperate with the Japanese, seeking to mitigate the severity of their rule while subtly maneuvering events in favor of Indonesian interests. Sjahrir, on the other hand, remained detached, focusing on building an underground resistance network. Sjahrir's refusal to cooperate was deeply rooted in his socialist and anti-fascist principles. Skeptical of Japan's intentions, he saw their "Asia for Asians" propaganda as a mere façade for imperial domination. While he recognized the occupation as an opportunity to advance Indonesia's independence, he firmly rejected the authoritarian and militaristic model Japan sought to impose.[22]

Unlike Soekarno and Hatta, who openly cooperated with the Japanese military government, Sjahrir withdrew to the mountainous region of Tjipanas, West Java, where he remained under periodic surveillance by the Japanese secret police. However, the military authorities did not view him as a significant threat, allowing him to operate with relative freedom in the underground resistance. Although his influence and political network were limited, he leveraged his PNI-Baroe connections to clandestinely organize youth groups, intellectuals, and nationalists in preparation for Indonesia's independence. He also maintained

20） *Pemandangan* (19 February 1942).

21） In late March 1942, as the Japanese occupation began to take hold, Batavia's newspaper *Pemandangan* published an editorial reminding readers that prominent Indonesian nationalist leaders were still in custody under the Dutch colonial authorities. The names cited include "Jahja Nasoetion, Moerad, Harjono, Achmad Soemadi in Digoel, Ir. Soekarno in Padang (?), Mohammad Hatta, Soetan Sjahrir and Dr. Amarulah in Soekaboemi (?), Mr. Iwa Koesoema Soemantri in Makassar and many others". "Pengampoenan Politiek Oemoem", *Pemandangan* (21 Maret 1942).

22） M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c.1200*. Third Edition (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), 251.

secret contact with international and regional actors, seeking to gauge potential support for an independent Indonesia in the postwar world.[23)]

III. A Translated Book

In December 1945, *Indonesische Overpeinzingen* was published by De Bezige Bij (*Busy Bee*) in Amsterdam. The author was listed as "Sjahrazad", a name unfamiliar to readers. When it later became known as a pseudonym, the publication process was revealed to have been fraught with challenges.

More than just Sjahrir's spouse, Maria was also his comrade in the resistance movement, contributing in her own way. While in the occupied Netherlands after May 1940, she carefully preserved Sjahrir's letters, intending to publish them in support of his clandestine activities in Java. After compiling, editing, and modifying sections of the letters, she arranged for the publication. In July 1944, around the time of the Battle of Normandy, De Bezige Bij—the largest underground publisher in the occupied Netherlands—received a collection of Sjahrir's letters.[24)] As the tide of war in Europe began to turn, the publisher noted that the book had been prepared as gallery proofs during the Nazi occupation as part of the celebrated anti-fascist underground series *Het Zwarte Schaap* (*The Black Sheep*). The series never materialized,[25)] but De Bezige Bij finally published Sjahrir's letters in December 1945, months after the liberation of the Netherlands.

Sjahrir must have been aware of the background behind the book's creation. In the introduction to the first edition of *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*,[26)]

23) Mrázek, *Sjahrir*, 209–268.

24) Joeroen Dewulf, "The Many Meanings of Freedom: The Debate on the Legitimacy of Colonialism in the Dutch Resistance, 1940–1949", *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 12–1 (2011), doi:10.1353/cch.2011.0002. I would like to thank Joss Wibisono for introducing this article.

25) Mrázek, *Sjahrir*, 291.

26) Notably, the publisher removed Sjahrir's original introduction and replaced it with different prefaces in the third through fifth editions. Soetan Sjahrir, *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*. Derde druk (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1950); Soetan Sjahrir, *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*. Vierde druk (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1966); Soetan

he directly addresses the readers, emphasizing the significance of history and his experiences for the Indonesian people while positioning the book within the broader context of decolonization. It reads as follows:

> This work is being published at a time when Indonesia and the events currently unfolding there are at the forefront of global attention—an entirely understandable focus, as the issue now confronting the Netherlands is perhaps the most complex and significant one it has faced in the past century.
>
> In light of the general lack of awareness in this country regarding the conditions and relationships shaping the lives of millions of Indonesians, any voice offering fresh insights into this matter is certainly worth hearing. However, the value of these *Indonesian Reflections* lies not solely in their timeliness.
>
> What resonates here is a timeless voice—the voice of a cultivated human being, a voice that transcends national boundaries and feels familiar to all of humanity. At the same time, it brings us closer to the atmosphere and intellectual landscape of the Indonesian people, enabling us to better understand the backdrop against which current events are unfolding.
>
> The book recounts the experiences and challenges of a young Indonesian man who served as a leader of a democratic popular party in Java, the P.N.I. (Pendidikan Nasional Indonesia, or Indonesian National Education Party). As its name suggests, the party's primary goal was the education and development of its members. It deliberately avoided direct political action, recognizing the futility of such efforts in the face of staunch government opposition.
>
> From its inception in 1930, the party faced relentless persecution by the colonial authorities. In 1934, the entire leadership was arrested. After enduring eleven months of pretrial detention without ever being formally charged, they were exiled to Boven-Digoel.
>
> Apart from two leaders who, as detailed later in this text, were

Sjahrir, *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*. Vijfde druk (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1987).

> transferred to a more "suitable" place of exile a year later due to their intellectual stature, the rest remained in Digoel until mid-1943. It was only with the advance of Japanese forces that the Digoel camp was eventually disbanded, and some of the internees were sent to Australia.[27)]

At the time of publication, Sjahrir recognized that a new era was emerging for both Indonesia and the Netherlands. He anticipated that Indonesia might soon gain sovereignty and emphasized the importance of ensuring that every Indonesian voice was heard. What stands out in his introduction is his effort to connect the role of the PNI-Baroe[28)] and its young members to contemporary challenges. In the 1930s, Indonesian nationalists aimed to educate and train PNI-Baroe members, but their efforts were thwarted by colonial authorities. Sjahrir himself was arrested and exiled without trial.

What is particularly striking, however, is how he concludes his introduction. In the final paragraph, Sjahrir mentions his fellow internees in Digoel, who remained behind when he and Hatta were transferred to Banda Neira. Yet the ending is abrupt, as he suddenly notes that the camp at Digoel was closed in mid-1943,[29)] leaving the reader puzzled. The introduction ends without providing closure, leaving an air of uncertainty as to how Sjahrir intended to wrap up his reflections.

The original publication was signed under the pseudonym "Sjahrazad", a fusion of Sjahrir and Maria. The author's identity was soon revealed and recognized as Sjahrir's. Maria selected, rearranged, and partially rewrote Sjahrir's writings for publication.[30)] Although the book originated from personal letters, it came to be regarded as Sjahrir's "diary".[31)] This perception

27) Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 5.

28) I corrected the original text of "PNI" to PNI-Baroe, in which Sjahrir was the co-founder.

29) For an account of those who were released from Boven Digoel and transferred to Australia, see Harry A. Poeze, "From Foe to Partner to Foe Again: The Strange Alliance of the Dutch Authorities and Digoel Exiles in Australia, 1943–1945", *Indonesia* 94 (2012): 57–84.

30) Paul Bijl, "Human Rights and Anticolonial Nationalism in Sjahrir's Indonesian Contemplations", *Law and Literature* 29–2 (2017): 248.

31) Vandenbosch, "Review", 428; Anderson, "A Time of Darkness and a Time of Light", 249.

arose partly from Maria's editorial influence and partly from the letters' introspective and reflective nature. In this sense, the book offers valuable insight into Sjahrir's thoughts and concerns in the 1930s.

The book was intended for a broader audience beyond Dutch readers, with translations soon followed. As early as 1947, *Indonesische Overpeinzingen* was first translated into Indonesian by H.B. Jassin as *Renungan Indonesia* (*Indonesian Reflections*), published by Poestaka Rakjat in Jakarta.[32] The book was widely circulated among Indonesians during the "Revolution", the term used by Indonesians to describe their struggle against Dutch colonial rule between 1945 and 1949. The English translation was widely circulated and read among those who were concerned with Indonesian contemporary politics. In 1949, the Amsterdam edition of *Indonesische Overpeinzingen* was partially translated into English by Charles Wolf, Jr., under the title *Out of Exile*, and published by John Day in New York, the United States.[33] Wolf's translation appears to have been widely read and favorably reviewed in the U.S., where it contributed to fostering greater understanding and support for Indonesia's struggle for independence.[34]

Almost twenty years later, in 1968, political scientist and Indonesianist Benedict Anderson provided a new translation of *Onze Strijd*,[35] based on the

32） Mrázek, *Sjahrir*, 26, fn117.

33） Mrázek, *Sjahrir*, 26, fn117.

34） Foster Hailey, "An Indonesian Patriot's Story; OUT OF EXILE. By Soetan Sjahrir. Translated from the Dutch and with a foreword by Charles Wolf Jr. 265 pp. New York: The John Day Company. $3", *The New York Times* (Feb. 27, 1949), Section BR, Page 3 (1949); Charles Roger Hicks, "Book Reviews and Notices: Out of Exile. By Soetan Sjahrir. (New York: John Day. 1949. Pp.xxxii, 265, $3.00)", *The Western Political Quarterly* 2–3 (1949): 453; Paul M. Kattenburg, "Review: Out of Exile, by Soetan Sjahrir and Charles Wolf, Jr.", *Far Eastern Survey* 18–2 (1949): 130; A.E. Sokol, "Review: Out of Exile by Soetan Sjahrir, Charles Wolf, Jr.", *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 9–1 (1949): 101–102. While most reviews by Americans were based on the English translation, Vandenbosch reviewed *Indonesische Overpeinzingen* by reading the original Dutch version (Vandenbosch, "Review").

35） *Onze Strijd* was published in 1945. Soetan Sjahrir, *Onze Strijd* (Amsterdam: Vrij Nederland, 1945).

Indonesian version titled *Perdjoeangan Kita* (*Our Struggle*) (Kahin, 1968: iii).[36] In the preface to the translation, George McT. Kahin writes:

> Charles Wolf's excellent translation of Sjahrir's *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, which appeared under the title of *Out of Exile*, has already given Western readers a superb picture of Sjahrir's intellectual maturation as a nationalist intellectual-politician during his years of exile in West Irian and Banda, and during the period of the Japanese Occupation".[37]

As mentioned above, when *Indonesische Overpeinzingen* was published in December 1945, Sjahrir was serving as Indonesia's first prime minister (November 1945–July 1947). Since 1948, he had chaired the Partai Sosialis Indonesia (Indonesian Socialist Party, hereafter PSI) until its dissolution by President Soekarno in 1960. In other words, the English translation was published at the peak of Sjahrir's political career, drawing significant international attention.

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36) *Perdjoeangan Kita* was written by Sjahrir around mid-October 1945 and published on 10 November 1945 by Pertjetakan Repoeblik Indonesia in Jakarta as a political pamphlet to Indonesian audience. See Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, "Introduction" to Sutan Sjahrir. *Our Struggle*. (Translation Series. Modern Indonesia Project. Southeast Asia Program. Cornell University, 1968), 8. The timing of the publication was significant because Sjahrir became the first prime minister of the Republic of Indonesia on 14 November 1945. See Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution: Occupation and Resistance, 1944-1946* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 178. In his extensive introduction, Anderson explicitly emphasizes that *Perdjoeangan Kita* is "an effective piece of political writing in support of Sjahrir's bid for power", "a polemic against political rivals", and "a clear statement of the strategy and tactics which the Sjahrir governments subsequently adopted, and which indeed were followed without serious disagreement by their successors". Anderson, "Introduction", 9. Anderson's analysis clarifies that *Perdjoeangan Kita* was written during the revolutionary period of Indonesian history, making it distinct from *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*.

37) George McT. Kahin, "Preface" to Sutan Sjahrir. *Our Struggle*. (Translation Series. Modern Indonesia Project. Southeast Asia Program. Cornell University, 1968), iii. Kahin's preface requires a small correction, as the Amsterdam edition of *Indonesische Overpeinzingen* only includes Sjahrir's letters up to March 1938, excluding the period of the Japanese occupation.

IV. Banda Neira

On 11 February 1936, Sjahrir and Hatta arrived in Banda Neira from Boven Digoel. Before being transferred from Boven-Digoel, they were made to sign a document stating, "as long as we are interned on Banda Neira, we will not engage in any political activities".[38] Compared to harsh environments in Boven Digoel, in Banda Neira Sjahrir experienced a relatively comfortable intellectual life. "The house itself has six rooms with front and back galleries, and the outbuildings have about eight additional rooms. The back gallery alone is almost as big as a tennis court".[39] And Sjahrir continues:

> we have gained quite a bit of "living space" and a great deal of natural beauty. The scenery here is indescribably stunning.
>
> In other ways, too, this transfer represents progress: we are now closer to the world and to my loved ones, if only through airmail. There is no longer any censorship of my letters, at least no overt censorship. Financially, it is an improvement as well, as I will receive a proper allowance here.
>
> [...]
>
> There is a social club here and a remarkably high percentage of Europeans and Indo-Europeans in the Moluccas. Banda Neira is a very old Dutch settlement.[40]

In Banda Neira, both Sjahrir and Hatta experienced a cultural and social life that was absent in Boven Digoel. Additionally, they seemed to relish engaging in "political" discussions with two prominent nationalist leaders who had also been exiled there: Tjipto Mangoenkoesomo (1896–1943, hereafter Tjipto) and Iwa Koesoemasoemantri (1899–1971, hereafter Soemantri). Along with Hatta, Sjahrir had numerous opportunities to engage in discussions with Tjipto and

38） Sjahrir, "11 Febr. 1936", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 71–72.
39） Sjahrir, "26 Febr. 1936", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 74–75.
40） Sjahrir, "11 Febr. 1936", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 71.

Soemantri. Both were older and more experienced in nationalist politics and the movement, as well as in understanding how the Indies state operated against them, and Sjahrir learned a great deal from them. At the same time, he reconfirmed about Hatta: "After all, he is practically the father of the non-cooperation movement for Indonesia; at the very least, he is one of its most prominent champions".[41] However, this did not mean that Hatta and Sjahrir rigidly maintained a stance of non-cooperation. Through their conversations with Tjipto and Soemantri, as well as their analysis of information from newspapers and radio broadcasts, they began to adopt more pragmatic approaches to sustaining their resistance while in exile. What emerged from these discussions was the realization that international politics played a crucial role in shaping Indonesia's future.

As mentioned earlier, when *Indonesische Overpeinzingen* was published in December 1945, Maria chose the pseudonym "Sjahrazad" for the author's name. Not only did this conceal Sjahrir's identity, but in his letters, he also used pseudonyms for those close to him and for prominent nationalist leaders who were exiled alongside him. For example, he referred to Hatta as "Hafil", Tjipto as "Dr. Soeribno", and Soemantri (1899–1971) as "Mr. Soebana". This was not unusual practice for Sjahrir. In the 1930s the Indies state institutionalized political censorship, which was a routine part of colonial policing.[42] Under such conditions, the use of pseudonyms became common practice among writers and journalists seeking to evade surveillance. It was therefore unsurprising that before his arrest, Sjahrir frequently contributed articles under various pseudonyms to *Daulat Raj'at*.[43] In any case, his letters written in exile could not contain overtly political statements—but that did not make his writing apolitical. In a letter dated 22 July 1934, Sjahrir wrote, "Here in my imprisonment, I cannot express myself politically, but morally; yet everything I

41) Sjahrir, "16 Maart 1936", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 76.

42) For a discussion of censorship in colonial Indonesia, see Nobuto Yamamoto, *Censorship in Colonial Indonesia, 1901–1942* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019). For an analysis of political policing in the 1930s, see Shiraishi, *The Phantom World of Digul*.

43) Mrázek, *Sjahrir*, passim.

say here also touches on politics".[44)]

His exile in Banda Neira had a significant impact on Sjahrir's way of thinking, particularly in how he understood nationalist—or rather, colonial—politics. His dialogues with Tjipto especially broadened his perspective on both colonial and global affairs. Notably, despite being exiled since 1929, Tjipto remained well-informed about nationalist politics in Indonesia as well as global political developments, allowing him to serve as an intellectual influence on Sjahrir. After brief meetings with Tjipto, Sjahrir drew important insights, becoming convinced that the shifting nature of nationalist politics would be shaped not only by developments within Indonesia but also by changes in the Netherlands and the policies of the colonial government. In his letter dated 21 February 1936, Sjahrir writes:

> I am genuinely curious whether the colonial government will gradually begin to change its course. I have the impression that they could now, at the very least, incorporate part of the nationalist movement into their broader (foreign) policy.
>
> Of one thing I am certain: this colonial government—and even more so, the colonizing Dutch—will one day regret that they never pursued a policy of grand vision, of far-reaching perspectives, adapted to the modern and changing world order. Never, not even for a moment, did they consider a deliberate cultural policy for the people of Indonesia! I am convinced that this short-sightedness, this so-called Dutch "reliability" ('degelijkheid'), and their lack of imagination and courage will soon begin to backfire.[45)]

Sjahrir is frustrated by the colonial government's persistence in authoritarian rule and its continued suppression of the nationalist movement. He foresees that nationalist politics is undergoing a transformation—one not initiated in Indonesia but in the Netherlands, where the rapidly shifting political landscape

44） Sjahrir, "22 Juli 1934", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 18.

45） Sjahrir, "21 Febr. 1936", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 74. The text inside square brackets are my own addition.

in Europe is bound to influence the colonial administration's approach to Indonesia. He criticizes, even ridicules, the Dutch notion of "reliability" (*degelijkheid*)—the self-image of the Netherlands as a stable, neutral, and financially sound country with a solid colonial administration and steady economic production, particularly in oil, rubber, and sugar from the Indies. At the same time, he speculates on whether the colonial government would eventually be forced to change its course. He then continues:

> In my view, they [colonial government] could make excellent use of him [people like Tjipto]—after all, he is Western-synthetic. Yet, even now, they likely do not dare to take that "risk"! In the end, they will inevitably have to take that path, but by then, it will be too late. As an exile, I can only say: we shall see.[46)]

Here, Sjahrir envisions an inevitable future where both Indonesians and the colonial government would need to cooperate to navigate a new environment. However, he questions whether the colonial authorities could bring themselves to collaborate with Indonesian intellectuals like Tjipto, who possess both deep local knowledge and extensive Western education. He argues that such cooperation is essential for adapting to the evolving political and international climate. Yet, he observes that the government hesitates to take this bold step, as it posed a "risk" ('*risico*')—specifically, the potential for Indonesians to gain political leverage and further their struggle for independence. Nonetheless, Sjahrir predicts that they would ultimately have no choice but to take this course—though by then, it would have been too late. The rationale behind his decision to write this will be explored in the next section.

V. War Cannot Be Localized

During his imprisonment, Sjahrir stayed informed about current events primarily through Dutch-language newspapers from the Netherlands,

46) Sjahrir, "21 Febr. 1936", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 74.

particularly the liberal *De Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (The New Rotterdam Newspaper), a publication he highly praised, even for its reporting on Indies affairs. He also regularly read Indies Dutch newspapers such as *De Indische Courant* (The Indies Newspaper) from Soerabaja and *De Locomotief* (The Locomotive) from Semarang, while also following radio broadcasts.[47] Given the Netherlands' neutrality since World War I and the political landscape of interwar Europe, *De Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* provided relatively balanced coverage of global affairs, closely tracking political developments and military escalations—particularly Nazi Germany's expansionist movements in Europe and beyond.

From the mid-1930s, the rise of fascist powers became increasingly evident in both Europe and Asia. In Italy, Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) had seized power in 1925, establishing a dictatorship rooted in fascist ideology, while in Germany Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) rose to power in 1933, founding the Nazi regime. By 1935, both nations had begun pursuing expansionist ambitions. Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935 marked the beginning of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (October 1935–February 1937). On 7 March 1936, Germany violated the Treaty of Versailles by deploying troops into the demilitarized Rhineland. In July 1936, the Spanish Civil War (July 1936–April 1939) erupted, further strengthening Italy's ties with Nazi Germany as both supported Franco's regime. In July 1937, the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out, marking the start of a prolonged conflict between China and Japan that lasted until 1945. Amid the growing global warfare, Germany and Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact in November 1936, with Italy joining in 1937. This agreement paved the way for the Tripartite Pact in 1940, formally uniting Germany, Italy, and Japan in a military alliance.

Through these global reports, Sjahrir frequently expressed his concerns about international events. For instance, his letters included the wars in Ethiopia (6 May 1936) and Spain (27 July 1936, 6 August 1937), the struggle in Palestine (28 October 1937), the awakenings of Turkey, China, and India (20 June 1935),[48] and,

47） Sjahrir, "17 Juni 1936", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 99.

48） These are the dates when Sjahrir mentioned the names of those countries in his letters. Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, passim.

most notably, the rise of fascism in Europe and Asia.[49] His writings also reflect a deep concern about political developments in Europe and their inevitable impact on colonial affairs. As anxiety spread across the world, he sought to warn those willing to listen that wars were inherently interconnected on a global scale.

Power became a central theme in Sjahrir's perception of both global and local politics. However, it was not power in the conventional sense, but rather the form of power that had been emerging on a global scale in the 1930s. By the time he settled in Banda Neira, Sjahrir understood that European politics had begun to undergo structural shifts. His assessment of contemporary affairs naturally focused on the influence of fascism and Nazism, which he viewed as accompanied by "deliberate irrationalism" (*het bewuste irrationalisme*).[50] He observed that power had come to dominate the world in this era and argued that "the concept and ideology of power" (*de machtsgedachte en de machtsleer*) would "never disappear as long as their underlying causes persist". He maintained that power struggles—rooted in clashes of interests and wills among large groups, whether national or class-based—would ensure that the brutal aspects of power continued to shape the world.[51]

Sjahrir paid particular attention to the developments of the Spanish Civil War.[52] Despite his close reading of *De Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, he lamented, "I don't understand the situation at all", finding that the news he

49) For an analysis of the rise of fascism in the Netherlands, Japan, and Indonesia, and their interconnectedness, see Ethan Mark, "Fascisms Seen and Unseen: The Netherlands, Japan, Indonesia, and the Relationalities of Imperial Crisis", in Julia Adeney Thomas and Geoff Eley. Eds. *Visualizing Fascism: The Twentieth-Century Rise of the Global Right* (Durhram and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 183–210.

50) Sjahrir, "9 Mei 1936", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 90.

51) Sjahrir, "9 Mei 1936", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 90–91.

52) Newspaper coverage of the Spanish Civil War was extensive and deeply influenced public opinion. For an analysis of how the conflict was reported in the Netherlands and Britain, see Samuël Kruizinga and Miriam van der Veen, "Sketches of Spain: The Role of the Left-Wing Press in Britain, the Netherlands, and amongst Exiled Germans in Recruiting Volunteers for Republican Spain during the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939", *Contemporary European History* 33–2 (2024): 428–444.

received made little sense.[53] Nevertheless, he saw the Spanish Civil War as a critical turning point for the future of democracies in Europe, even asserting that it surpassed all the issues discussed by the League of Nations and the rearmament of Germany. Concerned that a reactionary victory in Spain would accelerate the global rise of fascism, he feared it would inevitably lead to the downfall of democracies in France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

> There is a great deal of tension in the world at the moment. [...] war cannot be localized. Wherever it breaks out—whether in Europe or here—it will become one great global conflagration.[54]

If war were to escalate into a major global conflagration, it was only natural that his concerns would extend beyond Europe, increasingly focusing on Asia. This was precisely because he knew that "war cannot be localized" (*de oorlog is niet te lokaliseren*). It was not the war itself that troubled him, but rather the kind of war driven by fascism. He understood that the conflicts in Spain and Ethiopia were direct consequences of the rise of fascism in Europe. And when he turned his gaze to Asia, he saw the same phenomenon unfolding, fascism was rising there as well, embodied by Japan.

> here in the East, we hold the great reserves of cannon fodder, and because we already have a form of supra-nationalism: Japan's fascism.[55]

By mid-1936, just five months after the 26 February Incident in Tokyo, Sjahrir could already foresee the dangerous rise of Japanese fascism. On that day, a group of young Japanese Army officers staged a coup d'état but failed, marking the beginning of a distinct form of military fascism in which the army consolidated its grip on state power. Sjahrir clearly understood the trajectory Japan was taking and the implications it could have for Indonesia and the wider

53） Sjahrir, "27 Juli 1936", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 103.
54） Sjahrir, "6 Mei 1936", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 84.
55） Sjahrir, "27 Juli 1936", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 103.

region.

Outside exile spaces in colonial Indonesia, Sjahrir's concerns did not halt political developments within the Indonesian nationalist movement. After Sjahrir and Hatta were arrested in February 1934, radical leftist nationalist parties were eventually crushed. A new wave of modernist and conservative nationalism emerged in the mid-1930s. In late December 1935, Soetomo (1888–1938) founded Partai Indonesia Raja (Great Indonesia Party, hereafter Parindra). As part of the broader movement of cooperative nationalism, Parindra sought to secure seats in the Volksraad, the Dutch-established representative council, aligning itself with other cooperative nationalist organizations. It eventually became the most influential Indonesian group in the Volksraad. Its senior members included prominent nationalists and politicians such as Mohammad Husni Thamrin (1894–1941), Susanto Tirtoprodjo (1900–1969), Sukarjo Wiryopranoto (1903–1962), and Woerjaningrat (1894–1962).[56] Soetomo promoted modernist ideals and invoked powerful imagery of a "glorious Indonesia" (Indonesia Moelia) to sustain the nationalist movement. His political vision was shaped by his admiration for Mussolini, Hitler, and Japanese imperialism, significantly influencing Parindra's direction.[57] Alongside his formal political activities, Soetomo regularly hosted discussions at his home and at the homes of his friends in Soerabaja, bringing together Indonesians as well

56) Susan Abeyasekere, "Partain Indonesia Raja, 1936–1942: A Study in Cooperative Nationalism", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 3–2 (1972); Susan Abeyasekere, *One Hand Clapping: Indonesian Nationalists and the Dutch, 1939–1942* (Monash Papers on Southeast Asia, No. 5, Clayton: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1976).

57) Yannick Lengkeek, "Staged Glory: The Impact of Fascism on 'Cooperative' Nationalist Circles in Late Colonial Indonesia, 1935–1942", *Fascism* 7 (2018): 109–131. Colonial Indonesia was not the only place in Southeast Asia where fascism influenced nationalist movements. In 1938 Siam became the second fascist state in Asia after Japan. Inspired by Mussolini, Phibun Songkhram (1897–1964) seized power in 1938 and ruled until 1944 in his first term, establishing a de facto military dictatorship. His government incorporated fascist ideology to advance its nationalist agenda—one example being the renaming of Siam to Thailand in 1939—while also promoting Sinophobia. Bruce Reynolds, "Phibun Songkhram and Thai Nationalism in the Fascist Era", *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 3–1 (2004): 99–134.

as Chinese and Japanese associates to exchange ideas on various matters.[58]

Beyond political developments, Sjahrir felt deeply troubled by both the coverage of fascism in Indonesia and the reactions of the Indonesian people. From newspaper reports, he observed that "Japan is very popular among us" (*Japan is bij ons heel populair*),[59] a perception largely shaped by how the press framed events. In fact, since the early 1930s, Japan had strategically established its own publishing houses and newspapers in the Indonesian, Japanese, and even Chinese languages in major Javanese cities as part of its propaganda efforts.[60] While it is uncertain whether Sjahrir was aware of this, he was certainly concerned that Japan's propaganda was effectively cultivating popularity and garnering sympathy among many Indonesians. At the same time, he noted that local newspapers in the Dutch colony provided "very different information about Germany compared to what is reported in Europe", as the European press in Indonesia was "openly fascist" (*openlijk fascistisch*). As a result, the average newspaper reader perceived fascists as "the saviors of the world" (*de redders van de wereld*).[61] To many Indonesians, Japan appeared to be a potential liberator from colonial rule.

Japan's ambitions were not confined to Java and Sumatra but extended significantly into the far eastern part of the Indonesian archipelago. While living in Banda Neira, Sjahrir observed subtle yet notable changes at sea. He saw hundreds of small Japanese fishing boats navigating the waters and heard whispers of sightings of larger vessels as well. The Dutch press remained silent on these developments, but Sjahrir keenly sensed the shifting dynamics,

58） Nobuto Yamamoto, *Print Power and Censorship in Colonial Indonesia, 1914–1942* (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 2011), 285.

59） Sjahrir, "16 Nov. 1936", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 120.

60） Yamamoto, *Censorship in Colonial Indonesia*, 215–226.

61） Sjahrir, "16 Nov. 1936", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 120.

remarking that he could "feel what is happening at this far end of the world".[62]

Beyond Indonesia—and Southeast Asia more broadly—Japan's aggressive expansion was most evident in China. What was even more alarming was that reports on Japan's actions had not regularly appeared in newspapers before the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in July 1937. The main exceptions were Chinese-owned newspapers, particularly Sino-Indonesian publications such as *Sin Po* (Malay edition, Batavia), *Keng Po* (Batavia), and *Sin Tit Po* (Soerabaja), as well as Chinese-language newspapers like *Sin Po* (Chinese edition, Batavia), *Thien Sung Yit Po* (Batavia), *Tay Kong Siang Po* (Soerabaja), and *Sumatra Bin Poh* (Medan, East Coast of Sumatra).[63] These newspapers had begun reporting on Japan's aggression in China as early as 1936, recognizing that Japanese fascism, as an expansionist force, had long been following a path similar to its European counterparts.

By January 1937, Japan was openly engaged in military operations in China, no longer acting in secrecy. However, its opponents were constrained from responding in kind, as they were not yet prepared for war. This was particularly true for the British, who maintained influence over southern China, including Canton and Hong Kong.[64] Sjahrir recognized that a gradual power shift was underway in Asia, with Japan steadily overtaking British influence. Meanwhile, China faced internal struggles that further complicated its resistance to Japanese aggression. The ongoing power struggle between Chiang Kai-shek's

62) Sjahrir, "2 Febr. 1937", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 136. The influence of fascist propaganda spread throughout the archipelago. Even in Boven Digoel, an isolated internment camp in Papua, fascist groups were actively spreading their ideology. Sjahrir, "24 December 1936", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 123–124. Among them was a German assistant preacher who, in Sjahrir's words, was "a straight-up full-blooded fascist" (*direct volbloed fascist*). He openly boasted about his collaboration with the local police inspector, who, he claimed, knew how to handle the interned people. Sjahrir, "28 Maart 1937", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 151.

63) Yamamoto, *Censorship in Colonial Indonesia*, 227–255.

64) Sjahrir, "14 Jan. 1937", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 129–132.

Kuomintang and Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party,[65] along with complex relations among local warlords, communist guerrillas, and segments of the Chinese bourgeoisie, weakened the country's ability to mount a unified defense against the Japanese military.[66]

While Japan was actively expanding its military campaigns in mainland China—or rather, precisely because of its expansionism against China and the global power of Britain—many Indonesians placed their hopes in Japan, believing it could liberate them from Dutch rule. Compared to "the Light of Asia" that Japan represented,[67] the Netherlands was seen as a small European country, not powerful enough to resist Japan's assertion that it would free colonized nations. Thus, many Indonesians trusted Japan, assuming it sympathized with their plight and understood their suffering under colonialism. Sjahrir, however, was deeply troubled by this naïve optimism and the misplaced expectations it fostered.

> As far as I can tell, the entire Islamic population of our country is now pro-Japanese. Japan is becoming increasingly popular here, just as Germany once was. I constantly try to make the people on this island understand that the Japanese are by no means angels and that their actions are nothing more than large-scale plundering. However, I have no doubt that Japan will eventually take advantage of the deep sympathy our people have for them.
>
> Not only here on the island but throughout Indonesia, even in the most remote villages, people are convinced of Japan's strength and that the

65) When the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out in July 1937, the Second United Front was formed as the Nationalist and Communist forces temporarily set aside their differences to resist Japanese aggression. However, when Sjahrir wrote this letter dated 14 January 1937, the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party were still engaged in fierce rivalry and sporadic clashes. Therefore, as Sjahrir explains in the letter, internal conflicts in China remained chaotic and quite complex.

66) Sjahrir, "14 Jan. 1937", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 129–132.

67) For a detailed analysis of the Japanese propaganda concept of "the Light of Asia", particularly in the context of Japan's occupation of Indonesia, see B.R. O'G. Anderson, "Japan: 'The Light of Asia'", in Josef Silverstein ed. *Southeast Asia in World War II: Four Essays* (Monograph Series No. 7, Southeast Asia Studies, Yale University, 1966), 13–51.

> Dutch have absolutely nothing to counter it. Periodically, stories circulate about Japanese boldness and Dutch absurdity. The government is surely aware of this, but it is so widespread that nothing can be done about it.[68)]

Sjahrir's letters conveyed warnings and reminders to the Indies government about how Indonesians perceived the situation as "Japanese bravery and Dutch incompetence" (*Japanse durf en Hollandse belachelijkheid*). This perception was a result of the Japanese's aggressive propaganda campaign in Indonesia since the early 1930s, which the Indies government had never seriously countered.

Nearly seven months after acknowledging Japan's growing supranationalism in Asia and its rising popularity in Indonesia, Sjahrir foresaw an impending global crisis. By March 1938, the Spanish Civil War was still raging in Europe, while the Second Sino-Japanese War had become increasingly entrenched in a stalemate. In his last letter to Maria dated 25 March 1938 that was compiled in *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, Sjahrir reveals a tough choice for his struggle against fascism (Japan) that shaped how he should deal with the Indies state or Dutch empire for that matter.

> I no longer believe in a separate resolution for either the Spanish or Pacific crisis. Both will only find their resolution within a broader global crisis. When that crisis will reach its climax, and the global conflagration will break out, is now only a matter of time. That depends on the fascists.[69)]

Sjahrir's statement reveals a sense of helplessness in the face of fascism's growing influence. His perspective reflected a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of global conflicts. As he predicted in May 1936, writing that "war cannot be localized", the wars in Spain and China were not isolated events but part of a broader historical trajectory shaped by the rise of fascism. By late March 1938, he had sensed that the Second World War was imminent, seeing it as an inevitable consequence of the unchecked expansionism of fascist powers.

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68) Sjahrir, "19 Aug. 1937", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 160.
69) Sjahrir, "25 Maart 1938", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 177.

Although he still believed that non-cooperative movement was the purest expression of colonial nationalism, the global situation had changed so significantly that nationalist propaganda opposing Dutch domination could no longer remain the primary focus of the movement. In a letter dated 25 March 1938, he goes on to say:

> A genuine basis for cooperation between the Netherlands and Indonesia is beginning to emerge. The current global situation poses a threat not only to the Dutch empire but also to any future independent Indonesia. It is now clear that we must take a firm stance in the coming struggle and align ourselves unequivocally with Holland, as greater ideological and geopolitical oppositions have emerged—ones that overshadow and diminish the significance of the Dutch-Indonesian divide.
>
> Collaboration with the Dutch thus becomes an obvious political task for the nationalist movement. There is now urgent and practical political work to be done, presenting far greater opportunities than many proponents of the slogan "Indonesia free from Holland now!" could have ever imagined. More than ever, Indonesia's independence cannot be viewed as an isolated issue between Indonesia and the Netherlands. That independence is now entangled in the complexities of global politics—particularly in the evolving geopolitical struggles over the Pacific. Indonesia has become a stake in the larger power game that is unfolding once again.
>
> The fate of the Dutch East Indies has always depended on the balance of power in the Pacific. In the past, this was ensured by the Open Door Policy of neutral Netherlands. However, there is no longer balance in the Pacific or anywhere else in the world. The mere idea of "balance" provokes so-called dynamic states as a red flag does a bull. The existence of the Dutch East Indies—and even of the Netherlands itself—is under threat.
>
> At the core of all my recent reflections is this: an independent Indonesia would find itself in precisely the same precarious position as the Netherlands—perhaps even more vulnerable. The Netherlands at least has England as its natural ally due to its geographic position in Europe. Without allies, we cannot survive. We are defenseless—even more so than

> the Netherlands would be without England as its ally. We are therefore compelled to seek or create allies. This has always been necessary, but now it is the most pressing and crucial task for the nationalist movement—more urgent and vital than any propaganda for independence or the theoretical debates surrounding it.[70)]

Recognizing the shifting global political landscape, Sjahrir adopted a more pragmatic approach, gradually moving away from his earlier stance of non-collaboration to explore the possibility of working with the Netherlands. As a nationalist, he had previously positioned his movement in direct opposition to Dutch rule. However, he came to understand that political strategies had to evolve. Sjahrir's pragmatism was not unique to him; it was a perspective increasingly shared by Indonesian nationalists who pursued a cooperative path with the Indies state. As a cosmopolitan thinker, he even argued that Indonesia's path to independence would require the Netherlands as an ally—just as the Netherlands needed Indonesian cooperation to maintain its colonial interests. Under the growing threat of fascism, both sides had to consider a partnership, acknowledging their mutual dependence. Yet Sjahrir remained cautious, fully aware that structural power dynamics had not fundamentally changed. Indonesia was still a Dutch colony—the Netherlands Indies—and any cooperation for wartime purposes remained fraught with challenges. Meanwhile, the situation was deteriorating rapidly.

Even the cosmopolitan Sjahrir did not have access to all the necessary and up-to-date global information. Living in exile and relying on news reports, he did not appear to be aware—at least, he made no mention in his letters—of key developments unfolding in the Netherlands, events that would soon have major repercussions for Indonesia. As early as 1936, the Dutch had begun preparing for war at home, gradually extending these efforts to their colony.[71)] Soon, wartime regimes would emerge in both territories as part of broader efforts to

70) Sjahrir, "25 Maart 1938", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 179–180.

71) The discussion about wartime regimes, see Yamamoto Nobuto, "Now there is no government: *Rampok* of 1942 in Indonesia", *Journal of Law, Politics, and Sociology* 97–6 (2024), 7–13.

combat fascism—yet even Sjahrir did not fully grasp the scale of what was to come.

VI. Conclusion

Indonesische Overpeinzingen concludes with Sjahrir's letter dated 25 March 1938, in which he wrote to Maria, acknowledging the worsening situation in Europe while still expressing hope that a global war could be prevented, "let us hope that miracles can still happen, as most pacifists continue to believe and hope ..."[72]

Despite his hopes, events in both Europe and Asia unfolded much as he had feared. World War II broke out in Europe in September 1939, while the Sino-Japanese War escalated into the Asia-Pacific War on 8 December 1941. That same day, Japan launched attacks on British Malaya, marking the beginning of its invasion across Southeast Asia, and struck Pearl Harbor, drawing the United States into the conflict. As fascist forces expanded their reach across both continents, global instability deepened further.

Meanwhile, Indonesian nationalist politics underwent significant transformation. Following Soetomo's passing in May 1938, Thamrin emerged as the de facto leader of Parindra and the broader nationalist coalition. In December 1938, he called not only for strengthening the Indies' defense but also for greater political autonomy. To advance a widely supported campaign for an Indonesian parliament, the Gaboengan Politik Indonesia (Indonesian Political Federation, hereafter GAPI) was formed in May 1939 as a coalition of nationalist groups. The outbreak of World War II in September and the German invasion of the Netherlands in May 1940 created an opportunity for GAPI to intensify its demands. The coalition argued that if the Dutch government expected Indonesian support against Japan, it needed to grant Indonesians greater political rights and move toward self-governance. However, the political circumstances did not turn in favor of Indonesians. As the German occupation began, The Hague transferred authority over the Netherlands Indies to the

72) Sjahrir, "25 Maart 1938", Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, 177.

Governor-General. On 14 May 1940, Governor-General Alidius Tjarda van Starkenborgh (in office 16 September 1936–8 March 1942) declared martial law in the Indies to prepare for the impending war.[73] The colonial authorities refused to meet GAPI's demands, instead offering limited administrative reforms that fell far short of meaningful political autonomy.[74] At the outset of the global war, Indonesia's future remained uncertain.

Four years after his "last" letter, in April 1942, shortly after his release from exile and subsequent retreat to Tjipanas, Sjahrir wrote an unpublished—and most likely concealed—note reflecting on the realization of an independent Indonesia.[75] By then, the Dutch had been expelled from Indonesia, and the Japanese military administration was taking shape across the archipelago. Japan's occupation extended beyond Indonesia to Malaya, the Philippines, and, effectively, Indochina and Thailand, eventually encompassing all of Southeast Asia and solidifying the Asia-Pacific War against the Allied nations. Closely following these developments, Sjahrir recognized their profound implications for Indonesia's future. His note reveals a keen awareness of Indonesia's international position and the crucial role that negotiations with major powers would play. He identified two key factors shaping Indonesia's trajectory: the outcome of the ongoing war and the state of international relations during and after the armistice.

In his note, while Sjahrir anticipated an Allied victory, he remained cautiously optimistic. He recognized that the postwar settlement would be shaped by the interests and negotiations of the four major Allied powers—the U.S., Britain, the Soviet Union, and China—while the Netherlands was sidelined, having been under Nazi occupation since May 1940. At the same time, he closely monitored global public opinion, predicting that both major powers and smaller nations, including colonial subjects, would invoke the principles of the Atlantic Charter as a guiding framework—or at the very least, as a reference

73) Yamamoto, "Now there is no government", 8.

74) Abeyasekere, *One Hand Clapping*, passim.

75) Soetan Sjahrir, "Aantekeningen van Soetan Sjahrir uit april 1942 over het verwezenlijken van een zelfstandig Indonesië, 1942". NIOD (Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies), 400 Indische Collectie, No. 4735.

point in postwar discussions.

Sjahrir regarded Dutch colonial rule as a relic of the past and saw Japanese military rule as a temporary reality, one he did not expect to endure. By April 1942, he had already outlined a vision for Indonesia's future, shaped by the global conflict ignited by fascism in both Asia and Europe. Recognizing diplomacy as key to securing Indonesia's independence after the war, he placed his hopes in the four major Allied powers to facilitate the process in the postwar settlement. His vision was inclusive and globally oriented, prioritizing diplomacy over armed struggle and positioning Indonesia within a broader postwar global community. Unsurprisingly, his notes reflect his cosmopolitan outlook and strategic approach to independence.

Yet his stance clearly shows that Sjahrir was not a proponent of war. Despite his visionary imagination, the global spread of fascist power overwhelmed him. Even in April 1942, with his keen awareness of global affairs, he could not have fully anticipated the duration and brutality of the Japanese occupation or the profound political and social transformations it would bring to Indonesia—let alone that it would last for three and a half years.

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Abbreviations

GAPI: Gaboengan Politik Indonesia (Indonesian Political Federation)
IP: Indische Party (Indies Party)
IV: Indische Vereeniging (Indies Association)
Parindra: Partai Indonesia Raja (Great Indonesia Party)
PI: Perhimpoenan Indonesia (Indonesian Association)
PNI: Partai Nasional Indonesia (Indonesian National Party)
PNI-Baroe: Partai Nasional Indonesia Baroe (New Indonesian Nationalist Party or the Pendidikan Nasional Indonesia (Indonesian National Education Party)
PRRI: Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia (Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia)
PSI: Partai Sosialis Indonesia (Indonesian Socialist Party)

Appendix: Biographies of Key Figures

This appendix provides brief biographies of six major figures up until the Japanese occupation. Three of them—Hatta, Soemantri, and Tjipto—appear in Sjahrir's *Indonesische Overpeinzingen*, while Soekarno, Soetomo, and Thamrin are essential for understanding how Sjahrir positioned himself within the broader Indonesian nationalist movement. Sjahrir spent considerable time with Hatta, Soemantri, and Tjipto, engaging in discussions on history, contemporary nationalist movements, global affairs, and various other topics—conversations that likely influenced his thinking to some extent.

Iwa Koesoemasoemantri (1899–1971)

Born in Tjiamis, West Java, in 1899, Iwa Koesoemasoemantri studied law in Batavia and became involved with *Jong Java*, a youth organization for Javanese students. In 1921, he traveled to the Netherlands to study law at Leiden University, where he joined the Indische Vereeniging (IV). In 1925, he moved to the Soviet Union, spending a year and a half at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow, a technical college established by the Comintern to train communist cadres. After returning to Indonesia in 1927, he joined Soekarno's PNI and worked as a lawyer. Later, he moved to Medan on the East Coast of Sumatra, where he wrote extensively for the local newspaper *Matahari Terbit* (*Sunrise*), advocating for workers' rights and

attempting to organize a labor union. Arrested in 1929, he spent a year in prison in Medan before being exiled to Banda Neira with his wife and children.

Mohammad Hatta (1902–1980)

Mohammad Hatta, who would later become Indonesia's first vice president, played a crucial role in shaping Sjahrir's political outlook during their involvement with the Perhimpunan Indonesia (PI). Born in 1902 in Fort de Kock, West Sumatra, he came from a prominent and devoutly Islamic family. After attending both Malay and Dutch schools, he joined the Jong Sumatranen Bond (Youth Association of Sumatra) in Padang. In 1919, he moved to Batavia for further education at a Dutch school before traveling to the Netherlands in 1921 to study at the Netherlands School of Commerce in Rotterdam. In 1922, he joined the *Indische Vereeniging*, which was later renamed the Perhimpunan Indonesia, serving as its chairperson from 1926 to 1930. Upon returning to Indonesia in 1932, Hatta joined the *PNI-Baroe* and eventually became its leader. He increasingly criticized Soekarno, leader of the Partai Nasional Indonesia (PNI), believing Soekarno's approach to be less radical than that of PNI-Baroe. After Soekarno's arrest in December 1933, the colonial government turned its attention to PNI-Baroe, leading to Hatta's arrest. He remained in exile with Sjahrir in various locations from March 1934 until their release in April 1942.

Soekarno (1901–1970)

Soekarno, Indonesia's future first president, was born in Soerabaja, East Java, in 1901. At the age of 15, he attended a Hogere Burgerschool (HBS, higher-level secondary school) in Soerabaja, where he lived with Omar Said Tjokroaminoto, a nationalist leader and founder of Sarekat Islam (Islamic Union), who became his mentor. In 1921, Soekarno enrolled in the Technische Hoogeschool te Bandoeng (Bandung Institute of Technology), where he earned an Ingenieur degree in civil engineering. In 1927, together with members of the Algemeene Studieclub (General Study Club), he founded the Partai Nasional Indonesia (PNI, Indonesian National Party), a political party dedicated to independence. His vocal opposition to Dutch colonial rule led to his imprisonment in Bandung for two years (1929–1931) and, later, over eight years of exile (1933–1942) in Ende (Flores) and Bencoolen (Sumatra).

Soetomo (1888–1938)

Born in Soerabaja, East Java, into a noble family, Soetomo studied medicine at the STOVIA (School tot Opleiding van Inlandsche Artsen), a Dutch colonial medical

school. In 1908, he became involved with Boedi Oetomo (Noble Endeavor) in Yogyakarta, the first Indonesian political organization aimed at promoting modernization and education for the indigenous population. From 1919 to 1923, he continued his medical studies at the University of Amsterdam. After returning to Indonesia, he established several study clubs to promote nationalist ideas and improve social conditions for Indonesians. He also worked closely with key nationalist figures, including Soekarno and Hatta, in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In 1935, he co-founded Parindra (Partai Indonesia Raya, or the Greater Indonesia Party), which sought to unite the various ethnic groups, regions, and cultures across the archipelago under the vision of a unified, independent nation.

Tjipto Mangoenkoesomo (1886–1943)

Born in Pecangaan, Central Java, in 1886, Tjipto was a leading advocate of Indies-based nationalism. He deliberately used the term “Indies” at a time when “Indonesia” had yet to be coined or gain widespread use among nationalists, only becoming common in the mid-1920s. In 1912, he co-founded the Indische Party (IP), the first political party to advocate self-government for the Indies. However, after colonial authorities labeled the party subversive in 1913, he and his fellow IP leaders were exiled to the Netherlands. He was allowed to return in 1914 and resumed his political activities with Insulinde, the successor to the IP, supporting radical actions such as peasant resistance to taxation in the Solo princely lands. In 1918, he became a member of the Volksraad, a parliamentary body that included Indonesians but held little real power. In July 1927, he helped found the Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI), with Soekarno as chairman. In 1929, he was exiled (again) for allegedly inciting rebellion among Indonesians serving in the Dutch military. He remained in exile with his family until his death.