

Indonesian Perspectives on British Occupation Forces and Their Withdrawal from Indonesia in Late 1946

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This study explores the perspectives of Indonesian nationalists on the withdrawal of British forces from Indonesia (September–November 1946). By examining scarcely used Indonesian media, this study argues that the withdrawal was momentous for Indonesians. Indonesian nationalists criticized the British troops for violating Indonesian sovereignty, attacking Indonesian fighters and committing crimes against Indonesian civilians. When the British troops finally withdrew, Indonesian nationalists remembered the British occupation in terms of British atrocities, the contribution of Indonesians in helping the British disarm the Japanese and free prisoners of war, and the heroism of Indonesian fighters against the British.

Keywords: British occupation, Indonesian independence, decolonization, media usage, post-war Asia.

The British occupation of Indonesia (September 1945 – November 1946) was a major event for post-war Indonesia (formerly the Dutch East Indies) and Britain, although historiography in each of the two countries treats it differently. British historian John Newsinger (1989, p. 51) emphasizes that the armed conflict that broke out between Allied soldiers (British and Indian troops) and Indonesian freedom fighters was “one of the fiercest of post-war colonial conflicts”. He also adds, however, that the British intervention in Indonesia “is virtually unheard of” compared with what happened in Greece and Indochina. The British troops faced strong resistance from Indonesian fighters who wanted to defend their newly proclaimed independence.

Newsinger recounts that, by the time the British ceded authority over Indonesia to the Dutch in November 1946, more than 600 British and Indian soldiers had been killed, 1,400 wounded and 300 reported missing. Richard McMillan (2005) underlines that the British post-war mission in Indonesia pushed the British forces to be involved in a conflict between Indonesian nationalists and Dutch troops who wanted to re-establish their colonial authority.

Responses by Indonesians to the British at the beginning of the occupation and in the period of conflicts between the two, especially between September and December 1945, have been studied both briefly and more comprehensively (Kahin 1952; Smail 1964; Anderson 1972; Frederick 1978; Newsinger 1989, 2018; Cribb 1991; McMillan 2005; Palmos 2011; and Muhammad Yuanda 2015, 2016, 2022). This article focuses on how Indonesian nationalists viewed the withdrawal of the British army from Indonesia, especially in the last three months of British occupation. Indonesian nationalists initially welcomed the British troops, who had come to Indonesia to disarm the Japanese and free Allied prisoners of war and internees (APWI). But that attitude of acceptance turned into antipathy when the British did not recognize Indonesian sovereignty and instead showed support for the Dutch attempt at recolonizing Indonesia. Indonesian studies of the British occupation of Indonesia have generally focused on the resistance and heroism of Indonesian fighters in facing the British forces, especially between September and December 1945, including during the bloody Battle of Surabaya, which erupted on 10 November 1945 (Osman 1953; Nugroho 1985; Barlan 1992; Moehkardi 2021). The Battle of Surabaya was an important moment for the struggle for Indonesian independence because it served as a symbol of the heroism and sacrifice of Indonesian nationalists against foreign occupying forces. For the British, the battle made them aware of the huge cost to be paid if they continued to engage in armed conflict with Indonesia and of the need to negotiate with the Indonesian revolutionaries (Leifer 2001, p. 266). Up until today, the Indonesian government and people celebrate 10 November yearly as Heroes' Day.

The extant studies suggest that the withdrawal was only important for the British because it marked the end of their involvement in a bloody conflict that they did not expect; they ignored the significance of the withdrawal for the Indonesians. This study is an elucidation of Indonesian perspectives on the occupation and withdrawal of British troops in relation to post-war Indonesia and the impact of the occupation and withdrawal on Indonesia's struggle for independence or the recognition of its independence. Scholars have helped us understand the various aspects of the British occupation of Indonesia, which, although brief, left a deep mark on the history of both countries (Newsinger 1989; McMillan 2005). Nevertheless, there are still important questions that need to be answered, including how the end of the British occupation was perceived by Indonesian nationalists.

This study, therefore, fills the gap in the literature by examining how Indonesian nationalists viewed the withdrawal of the British army from Indonesia, especially in the last three months of the occupation (September–November 1946). The primary sources I use are two Indonesian-language nationalist media published in Java—namely, *Antara* and *Kedaulatan Rakjat*.¹

A few Indonesian nationalist journalists, including R.M. Sumanang, A.M. Sipahutar and Adam Malik, founded the *Antara* (literally, *between*) news agency in Batavia (present-day Jakarta) on 17 December 1937. Its initial activity was to publish excerpts from editorials carried in various newspapers in the Dutch East Indies (Soebagijo 1980, p. 49). At a congress in Jakarta in 1939, the Indonesian nationalist parties that were members of *Gabungan Politik Indonesia* (Political Union of Indonesia, GAPI), such as *Partai Indonesia Raja* (Great Indonesia Party) and *Partai Sarekat Islam Indonesia* (Islamic Union of Indonesia Party), recognized *Antara* as the only national news agency in Indonesia (*Jajasan Lembaga Pers dan Opini Umum* 1955, p. 169). Having joined the Japanese news agency *Domei* during the Japanese occupation, *Antara* transformed itself into Indonesia's official news agency soon after Indonesia's independence (Kahin 2015, p. 36); in other words, *Antara* was the

spokesperson of the Indonesian government. So it fully supported Indonesian independence and rejected the return of the Dutch to Indonesia. It was among the first Indonesian media to broadcast news of Indonesian independence abroad in 1945. It published news about events that occurred in Indonesia, including the British-Indonesian conflict, from Indonesian perspectives. In 1946 Antara moved from British-controlled Jakarta to Yogyakarta, the capital of the Republic of Indonesia (although, officially, the capital of Indonesia was still Jakarta until 1948, when the Renville Agreement was signed between Indonesia and the Netherlands), and it continued to publish pro-Indonesian news and to counter pro-Dutch news from the Dutch news agency Aneta (Jajasan Lembaga Pers dan Opini Umum 1955, p. 169).

Meanwhile, the newspaper *Kedaulatan Rakjat* (People's Sovereignty, henceforth *KR*) was first published in Yogyakarta on 27 September 1945. *KR* transformed itself from the pro-Japanese *Sinar Matahari* newspaper during the occupation into an Indonesian nationalist newspaper after Indonesian independence (Marwati and Nugroho 2019, pp. 99–101). Cooperation between the Indonesian state and *KR* journalists started right from the naming of the newspaper, which was done by Soedarisman Poerwokoesoemo, the chairman of the semi-parliamentary body at the Yogyakarta level, Komite Nasional Indonesia Daerah Yogyakarta (Regional Indonesian National Committee of Yogyakarta, KNID Yogyakarta) (Mahtisa 2007, p. 525). At times, however, *KR* journalists were critical of the Indonesian government, including by giving significant space to news about, and the thoughts of, Tan Malaka, a senior leftist-oriented nationalist who rejected the Indonesian government's policy of diplomacy with the Dutch. The paper carried news about the latest political and military developments in Indonesia and various edicts and instructions from the Indonesian government to the people, especially those in Yogyakarta (Sutrisno 1997, p. 306). Noriaki Oshikawa underlines that *KR* "was among the leading Indonesian newspapers during the period of the independence movement" (Oshikawa 1990, p. 9)

The three research questions raised in this study are: (1) Why was the withdrawal of British troops from Indonesia important for Indonesian nationalists? (2) What were the views of Indonesian nationalists on the withdrawal of British troops from Indonesia? And (3) how did Indonesian nationalists characterize the British occupation of Indonesia after the British finally withdrew from Indonesia?

The British Occupation of Independent Indonesia

The Second World War was an important event that changed the history of Indonesia. In 1940, Nazi Germany occupied the Netherlands, colonizer of the Indies. Subsequently, from March 1942, Germany's Asian ally, Japan, occupied the Indies. On 15 August 1945, Japan surrendered to the Allies. As part of the ending of the war, British troops were tasked with disarming Japanese soldiers in Indonesia and liberating APWI. Meanwhile, Indonesian nationalists declared Indonesia's independence on 17 August 1945. Within weeks, a number of Dutch and Indo-European prisoners were out of custody and were attempting to re-establish Dutch authority in Indonesia. This development triggered Indonesian nationalists to resist, and bloody conflicts occurred in many places in Indonesia (Ricklefs 2001, pp. 261–67).

The British South East Asia Command under Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten was responsible for handling post-war Indonesia. The Dutch hoped that the defeat of Japan and the presence of the Allies in Indonesia could help them resume colonial order and punish the Indonesian nationalists who had collaborated with the Japanese. The first British troops arrived in Jakarta in the second half of September 1945. The next groups arrived the following month in Medan (North Sumatra), Padang (West Sumatra), Palembang (South Sumatra), Semarang (Central Java) and Surabaya (East Java). Conflicts broke out between Indonesian freedom fighters and British forces because the Indonesians believed the latter were supporting the return of Dutch colonialism and undermining the sovereignty of the Republic of Indonesia. The commanding officer of the 49th Indian Infantry

Brigade, Brigadier A.W.S. Mallaby, was shot dead in Surabaya on 30 October 1945. The British accused the Indonesian fighters of being the culprits of the shooting, while the Indonesians stressed that it was the British who had provoked the skirmish which then left Mallaby caught in the crossfire and eventually killed (Parrott 1975, pp. 94–99). The British urged the Indonesian fighters to surrender their weapons. When the latter refused, the British launched massive bombardments on 10 November 1945 in Surabaya, which cost many lives on the Indonesian side (Ricklefs 2001, pp. 266–67).

According to McMillan (2005, p. 165), the British occupation of Indonesia was largely characterized by confusion, given the sudden assignment to the British of the task of dealing with Indonesia (initially, US forces were to have handled Indonesia, but, preferring to focus on handling Japan, the United States soon urged the British to take care of Indonesia), the lack of accurate intelligence about Indonesia, personnel limitations, and the insistence of their allies, the Dutch, that the British support the continuation of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia. With all these challenges, the British had to compete with Indonesian nationalists to control key areas in Indonesia. The British even used Japanese soldiers and weaponry to assist them in facing Indonesian nationalists. The British army used cruel methods against Indonesians, including executing prisoners and burning villages (p. 166). Despite the British and the Dutch being allies during the Second World War, their relationship during the British occupation was sometimes uneasy. Although they cooperated with each other often, there were also instances where they showed dislike and suspicion of each other (p. 167).

After spending months in Indonesia to carry out their post-war duties with some degree of success, the British began to consider withdrawal of their troops from Indonesia in May 1946. At almost the same time, the Dutch grip on Indonesia was becoming stronger, which was marked by the efforts of the lieutenant governor-general of the Indies, H.J. van Mook, to form a federal state in Indonesia controlled by the Dutch. On 25 May 1946, van Mook was in Singapore to discuss with the British the disarmament of Japan and

the return of Japanese troops to their country, the release of APWI, the withdrawal of British troops from Indonesia, and the handover of power from the British to the Dutch in Borneo, Eastern Indonesia, Bangka and Belitung (Reid 1974, p. 108; Pramoedya, Koesalah and Ediati 1999, pp. 214–15). The British envoy assigned to assist in the Indonesian-Dutch negotiations, Lord Killearn, met Indonesia's vice-president Mohamad Hatta and prime minister Sjahrir in Yogyakarta on 29 August 1946. The two sides spoke about the British position as mediator in the Dutch-Indonesian negotiations, the ceasefire between Indonesia and the Allies/the Dutch, the transport of APWI, and the protection of minorities—in this case Indians and Chinese. Lord Killearn also spoke about the withdrawal of British troops from Indonesia, which was planned to be completed on 30 November 1946 (Pramoedya, Koesalah and Ediati 1999, pp. 362–64, 531).

In September 1946, there were about 45,000 British troops in Indonesia (Newsinger 1989, pp. 63–64). At the end of November 1946, the British announced that the headquarters of the Allied Land Forces in Southeast Asia (ALFSEA) would be abolished. This was a consequence of the withdrawal of British troops (Pramoedya, Koesalah and Ediati 1999, p. 531). The last Allied soldiers left Indonesia on 30 November 1946. At the same time, about 150,000 Japanese troops in Java and Sumatra were repatriated to Japan. Thus, power in Indonesia was handed over from the British to the Dutch (Pramoedya, Koesalah and Ediati 1999, p. 531).

Indonesian Media's Views on British-Indonesian Cooperation

In early 1946, Dutch forces intensified their efforts to reassert control over Indonesia. In the meantime, British troops began to cede the areas under their control to the Dutch. In April 1946, the British transferred the largest city in West Java, Bandung, into Dutch hands. The culmination was on 13 July 1946, when the British officially handed over all of Indonesia—except Java and Sumatra—to the Dutch. The British, however, also urged the Dutch to negotiate with the Indonesians. This was an important condition that the British emphasized before they left Indonesia (Ricklefs 2001, pp.

273, 275). The process of withdrawing British troops in mid-July 1946 and the takeover of power by the Dutch immediately triggered responses from the Dutch and Indonesians. Soon after the British withdrawal, the Dutch took over the Allied headquarters in Makassar. Lieutenant Governor-General van Mook stated that martial law would be abolished in the territories left by the British—the Great East (which referred to eastern Indonesia, with Makassar as the centre), Bangka, Belitung and Borneo—and civilian rule by the Dutch would be instituted. The Dutch takeover, however, was strongly opposed by the Indonesians, who sent their official protest to General Mansergh (*De Nederlander* 1946).

Indonesian political leaders believed that a good relationship with the British would be beneficial for Indonesia's interests, including increasing British trust in Indonesian leaders and giving Indonesia a better reputation, both at home and abroad. This calculation was part of the reason for Indonesia's constant efforts to gain diplomatic support from foreign countries, especially Western powers. Indonesian leaders stressed the importance of advocating diplomacy of this sort rather than armed struggle since the beginning of Indonesia's independence. Vice-President Mohamad Hatta, for example, called on world powers to support Indonesia, while Prime Minister Sjahrir persuaded the United States—which had a history of anti-colonial struggle—to force the Dutch to agree to the transfer of sovereignty. Simultaneously, both leaders discouraged Indonesians from supporting anti-white rhetoric (Weinstein 2007, p. 289).

On 31 August 1946, a meeting was held at the Allied headquarters in Jakarta between the Allies—represented by Major General Forman, Brigadier Lauder and British Consul General G. Mackereth—and the Indonesians, represented by the junior minister of foreign affairs, Agoes Salim; the secretary general of foreign affairs, Oetojo; and Indonesian liaison officers. As published by Antara, this meeting was a preliminary meeting for negotiations between the envoys of the Republic of Indonesia and the Allied headquarters. The meeting was reported to be “in an atmosphere of amiability between the two sides” (Antara, 3 September 1946b).

Antara used news from other media to convey developments in Indonesia in a more global context. These media included *Star Weekly* (Jakarta), a magazine founded in 1946 by peranakan (local-born) Chinese. Citing *Star Weekly*, Antara suggested that in the geopolitical context in Europe, Britain in early September 1946 was seeking allies in Western Europe, including the Netherlands, in order to contain the Soviet Union's expansion of influence. Consequently, the British increasingly sided with the Dutch and urged Indonesia and the Netherlands to hold peace talks. But *Star Weekly* believed that, judging from British policy in the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean, the British would only grant independence to regions threatened by Soviet influence, such as Egypt and India. Other regions—including Burma, Indochina, Malaya and Indonesia—were considered too immature to become independent; they would need a “transitional period” to attain independence (Antara, 3 September 1946a).

It can be argued that the Indonesians considered it necessary to cooperate with the British so that the latter's post-war tasks in Indonesia could be completed quickly. There were times when the Indonesians persuaded the British that the Dutch were a common enemy, at least with respect to the execution by the British of their tasks in Indonesia. For example, Antara stated that Indonesians felt the transportation of APWI was “hindered due to Dutch provocations” (Antara, 4 September 1946). Antara also tried to demonstrate, however, that the Indonesians and British still had good intentions and were keen to continue the process of transporting APWI. Their intentions were evident in the negotiations between representatives of the Indonesian government and their Allied counterparts on 3 September 1946 in Cirebon, West Java. Both sides agreed that APWI would be transported back to Jakarta and that the Allies would provide equipment for the transportation such as medicine and coal and would also coordinate between the two sides to prevent misunderstanding (Antara, 4 September 1946). Another instance of cooperation was in the form of efforts by the Indonesian Ministry of Information to facilitate communication between the Indians,

Chinese, Arabs and Indo-Europeans and their respective families both in their homelands and in the Allied-occupied areas of Indonesia (Antara, 5 September 1946a).

The Dutch, however, pursued a similar strategy in seeking to convince the British that the Indonesian fighters were common enemies of the Dutch and British and that the Dutch had established effective cooperation with the British to maintain security in Indonesia. On 30 June 1946, for example, the commander-in-chief of the Netherlands East Indies Army, Lieutenant General S.H. van Spoor, in a broadcast to his soldiers, said that “our British allies” had helped the Dutch in the war in Indonesia and that when British soldiers returned home after completing their mission in Indonesia they would be “accompanied by our thanks and gratitude for all they have done in Indonesia”. To point out the failure of the Indonesian government—concentrated in the interior of the archipelago—to maintain security, Spoor described the situation in the hinterland as “worse than the Nazi terror in Europe” (*Straits Times*, 1 July 1946).

There is more evidence to suggest the Indonesian press wanted to prove that Indonesia had always had the intention of helping Britain carry out its post-war mission. In his radio address from Yogyakarta on 5 September 1946, Indonesia’s defence minister, Amir Sjarifoedin, stated that the Indonesian government had received an offer from Lord Killearn to discuss an armistice with the Allies (Antara, 6 September 1946a). Another instance of cooperation was that between the Allies and the Padang City police chief, Johnny Anwar. They agreed to provide food for Indonesians detained by the Allies. The agreement was that the families of those detained were allowed to deliver food to the Muara prison in Padang, which was under British authority (Antara, 11 September 1946a).

Indonesian Press Assessments of the British Withdrawal Plan and Process

Information about the withdrawal of British troops from Indonesia became more widely known and framed to the public through news published by Indonesian media. These media include Antara, which

reported that, from a source in London, it was known that the authorities in London had confirmed their plan to withdraw British troops from Indonesia by 30 November 1946. Military authority in Java, represented by the British on behalf of the Allies, would be handed over to the Dutch. The withdrawal had begun gradually a few months earlier, and by the end of November 1946 British interference in the Indies would end. One thing, however, remained uncertain; namely, whether a political settlement between Indonesia and the Netherlands could be reached before the withdrawal was complete (Antara, 3 September 1946b).

On 5 September 1946, Antara once more stated that all British soldiers would be withdrawn by 30 November 1946. It quoted the Dutch news agency, Aneta, which cited Reuters news agency in London. The British had prepared everything necessary for the withdrawal to proceed smoothly and according to plan. They had also officially notified the Indonesian authorities of this plan. But Antara alleged the British would leave behind a small military commission to manage their military equipment in Indonesia (Antara, 5 September 1946b). This was a minor but challenging situation for the Indonesian nationalists because it indicated that the British had not completely withdrawn from Indonesia, forcing them to think about methods to deal with the British and about potential military threats that could arise after the withdrawal. The tone of this news item was aimed at contrasting Indonesia's good attitude in helping the British with the image of the British taking actions with the potential to undermine the sovereignty and security of Indonesia.

Antara reported that, based on information from the Dutch, the spokesperson of the British Consulate General in Jakarta on 7 September 1946 confirmed that the British army would leave Indonesia by 30 November 1946. The basis for this decision was the fact that the British had completed the obligations established by the Potsdam Agreement—namely, the release of prisoners of war and the departure of Japanese troops. The spokesman was reported to have said that the withdrawal was not dependent on the holding of talks between Indonesia and the Netherlands. In addition,

there were no agreements specifically related to the deployment of Dutch soldiers in areas abandoned by the British. The deployment depended largely on the outcome of the armistice negotiations and the possibility of holding another Indonesia-Netherlands negotiation (Antara, 9 September 1946).

The Indonesian press strongly cautioned the Indonesian public against getting caught up in the euphoria of the withdrawal of the British army as there were indications that the Dutch takeover of British rule and the massive mobilization of the Dutch army to Indonesia could have been imminent. Antara, quoting a Dutch source, mentioned that the commander of the Dutch Army in Indonesia, Lieutenant General Spoor, had held a press conference on 16 September 1946 in Jakarta to announce that the First Division "7 December" would be sent to the Indies in October 1946. But he did not confirm where the division would be posted. Spoor asserted that in connection with the planned withdrawal of the British army, the Dutch troops had to take over in the various regions, and both the Royal Army (Koninklijke Landmacht, KL) and colonial army (Koninklijk Nederlands-Indische Leger, KNIL), among others, had already begun to make the necessary moves. The takeover would begin in the second half of October and in November 1946 (Antara, 18 September 1946).

The Indonesian press followed the withdrawal process. One of the developments reported was the transportation of about a thousand British and Indian soldiers on dozens of trucks to Teluk Bayur Port in Padang, West Sumatra, on 12 September 1946. There was no mention of where they would sail to from the port. But Antara revealed that it was the first time that the British and Indian armies would leave the city (Antara, 26 September 1946).

Political parties in Indonesia took part in efforts to urge the British to withdraw from Indonesia immediately. A case in point involved a mass-based Islamic party, Masyumi. On 17 September 1946, Masyumi held a rally in Sipirok, North Sumatra. At this mass meeting, which was attended by about two thousand people, several resolutions were made, including one insisting that the British leave

Indonesia soon and another emphasizing that the responsibility for various affairs previously handled by the British should be handed over not to the Dutch but to the Indonesian state. Armed militias affiliated with Masyumi and its two paramilitary wings, Hizbullah and Sabilillah, expressed their determination to defend these resolutions (Antara, 8 October 1946).

The Indonesian media were keen to alert the Indonesian public to the fact that the Dutch were taking over power as the British army was being withdrawn. Antara published news relating to the process of transferring military power from the withdrawing British army to the Dutch army. An example was on 28 October 1946, when Antara, quoting Aneta, reported that in Palembang about a thousand Dutch troops had landed to replace the British army (Antara, 29 October 1946). Antara also reported that on 25 October 1946 about five hundred heavily armed Dutch soldiers had disembarked at Medan Station at the same time that British and Indian soldiers began to leave the city. The Dutch army then took over British fortifications and military barracks in several places in Medan (Antara, 30 October 1946).

KR's satire column, *Podjok* (literally, *corner*), responded sarcastically to the handover of military authority by the retreating British to the Dutch army. In mid-November 1946, the author of the column criticized the British troops withdrawing from Palembang for handing power over to the Dutch forces, claiming that they were following the decision of the Potsdam Agreement. The author sharply condemned such transfer of authority, alleging that the British were collaborating with the Dutch:

The British with an open heart let the Dutch come in so that the Dutch seem to enter a house whose doors are open! Without the need to fire a single shot or draw a sword! It is amazingly easy! It is sweet teamwork between the Dutch and the British. But, you know it, I know it! The Dutch should not be surprised if the British later open an account to ask for payment for the "security guard" effort. (*KR*, 13 November 1946)

The Indonesian press often reported on the cooperation between the retreating British army and the Dutch army that would replace them. Examples include a report in *KR* on 22 November 1946 quoting Antara. The report alleged that the British not only cooperated with the Dutch and allowed the Dutch to take over their authority on Indonesian soil, but they also provided military assistance to the Dutch to strengthen their power. This act by the British, the report warned, meant the Dutch would increasingly become a threat to Indonesia. *KR* reported that on 18 November 1946 the British held an informal meeting with the Dutch in Padang to discuss the withdrawal of British troops from the city and the entry of Dutch troops to replace them. The British not only agreed to the Dutch taking over the territories under their control but also at the same meeting handed over a large quantity of arms to the Dutch, the numbers of which were obviously devastating for the Indonesian side. The munitions comprised 3,200 rifles, 46 cannons, several hundred machine guns, and dozens of crates of ammunition. To make matters worse, the Dutch and the British discussed another plan that the Indonesians found detrimental to them—namely, to prosecute Indian army elements that sided with the Indonesians in various battles in Indonesia (*KR*, 22 November 1946a).

In addition, the *KR* reported that in Medan the last group of British and Indian soldiers had left the city on 19 November 1946. The soldiers departed from the city's Belawan Port on three ships bound for India. The press lamented that as soon as the British and Indian soldiers left, the Dutch army occupied the military barracks previously held by the British in the city. Further, the Dutch troops seized other public facilities, including schools. *KR* reported that Indonesian Republican forces were concerned about the increasing power of Pohantui, a Chinese paramilitary organization formed by the Allies and the Dutch in Medan (*KR*, 22 November 1946b). Established to protect the lives and properties of the Chinese population amid the Dutch-Indonesian conflict, Pohantui was armed by the Dutch and as a result considered anti-Republican by Indonesian nationalists and pro-Indonesia Chinese (Leo 2022, p. 216).

The Indonesian press also conveyed the impression that British influence would not disappear with the withdrawal of their troops from Indonesia. This view was evident in a news article in *KR* that mentioned a communiqué from the British Consulate General in Jakarta. The communiqué said that, once all British troops had been withdrawn on 30 November, a small number of British Royal Air Force members would remain in Indonesia to take care of air transportation. They would remain until Dutch engineers could replace them after two to three months (*KR*, 27 November 1946a).

In delayed news, *KR* reported that on 26 November 1946 the British would officially hand over their military authority to the Dutch in Padang (*KR*, 27 November 1946b). Indonesia was not mentioned in the handover process, and this news item indicated that the British did not consider the Indonesian military a party to cooperate in guarding the city when the British left. Meanwhile, ahead of the transfer, Dutch troops arrived in Padang on the ship *Ruys*. An increase in the presence of Dutchmen was also felt in Palembang. The Indonesian press reported that in November 1946 a number of Dutch civilians arrived at a dock in Plaju in Palembang City (*KR*, 27 November 1946b).

Indonesian Condemnation of British Atrocities ahead of Withdrawal

Indonesian nationalists considered the British troops to be trigger-happy and often responsible for causing trouble even though they planned to withdraw. Consider the example of the news about British and Indian soldiers creating an incident in Medan. On 27 August 1946, it was reported that about five hundred British and Indian soldiers forcibly disembarked Indonesian train passengers and rode the train to seek out and attack Indonesian freedom fighters. Antara labelled this act as a British attempt to cause trouble. British soldiers were also accused of “having opened fire indiscriminately” on Indonesian settlements (Antara, 5 September 1946c). In another case, Antara reported that in Padang, around the end of August or early September 1946, British troops carried out actions that disrupted security in the city by storming the city’s prison, detaining prison guards, looting

valuables and releasing dozens of prisoners (Antara, 6 September 1946b). Armed conflict also took place in late August 1946 in Medan between an Indonesian armed militia, Barisan Rakjat, and British soldiers (Antara, 6 September 1946c).

The tone of such news reports portrayed the Indonesian leadership as emphasizing the need for cooperation with the British—in the context of Indonesian diplomatic politics—while also accepting that armed struggle was indispensable. Battles with British forces on various fronts in the last months of 1945, including the bloody Battle of Surabaya, made Indonesian fighters realize that diplomatic struggle needed to be sustained by armed struggle. Indonesian fighters—including the Indonesian army commander, Sudirman, the prominent opposition leader Tan Malaka and leaders of the popular militias—believed that military prowess was necessary to back up Indonesian authority in the face of the British and Dutch.

The Indonesian press used the voice of the Western press to delegitimize British and Dutch rule and strengthen the legitimacy of the Indonesian Republic. A case in point was the writings of American journalist Ed Alexander in *Daily Worker*, the New York-based leftist newspaper that was also the mouthpiece of the Communist Party of the United States of America. Alexander, who visited Java in February 1946, wrote that the Indonesian Republic “remains strong, and is not defeated by British troops and America’s ‘lend and lease’ weapons”. Alexander stated that Indonesia rejected imperialism, and that two imperialist countries—Britain and the Netherlands—did not want to officially recognize the Republic of Indonesia even though it was the de facto authority in Java. Alexander was also shocked that only a few Americans knew about the struggles of the Indonesians, and he suspected that one reason for this was that news about Indonesia was transmitted to the United States through British sources (Antara, 6 September 1946d).

In a similar case, Antara quoted from a broadcast carried by Radio Moscow on 9 September 1946 concerning the situation in Indonesia. According to the broadcast, the situation in Indonesia for a year since Japan lost to the Allies had not been safe because there

were still battles between the Dutch, British and Japanese on the one hand and the Indonesian people on the other. Indonesians were described as unwilling to be colonized by imperialists and were said to be fighting hard to maintain their independence. The Indonesian government, for its part, was considered to have legitimacy because it was backed by a parliament and had the support of the people from various regions in Indonesia (Antara, 13 September 1946). Quoting Radio Moscow was a way for the Indonesian press to obtain external validation—particularly considering Russia was a big country and another of the victors of the Second World War—that foreigners recognized Indonesian independence and denounced Dutch and British intervention in the already independent and sovereign nation.

Religious sentiments were utilized by the Indonesian press to justify the Indonesian public's dislike of the behaviour of British troops in Indonesia. British actions were perceived to be disruptive to Muslims' Friday prayers. Antara stated that on three consecutive Fridays—16, 23 and 30 August 1946—British troops had conducted massive searches in Padang. Antara claimed the British carried out their search “by using various ploys” that resulted in “a majority of city dwellers not being able to carry out their Friday prayers”. Antara concluded sharply, on the basis of the opinion of Muslims in Padang: “It is hereby apparent that the Allies in Padang belittle the religion of Islam and hurt the Muslims' feelings” (Antara, 11 September 1946b).

Further disturbance came in the form of Indian soldiers stealing chickens from Kampung Marapalam in Padang. When their actions were challenged, they opened fire, which drew retaliation from Indonesian fighters (Antara, 12 September 1946). These instances gave the impression that the British soldiers were a threat not only to Indonesian freedom fighters but also to Indonesian civilians. In various reports in the Indonesian nationalist media, British soldiers were equated with thieves who stole various items belonging to Indonesians, ranging from daily necessities to valuables. Another conflict arose when gunfire broke out on 10 September between British soldiers and Indonesian fighters in east Medan (Antara,

14 September 1946a). Antara even reported that the British forces in Padang, who lacked food, forcibly took vegetables from residents' gardens after expelling the latter by showering them with mortar fire (Antara, 14 September 1946b).

An Indonesian nationalist journalist, M. Tabrani, writing in the *Boeroeh* newspaper on 23 September 1946, expressed his views on the relationship between Indonesia, Britain and the Netherlands. Tabrani was an experienced journalist active in several print media outlets in the colonial period, including *Hindia Baru* and *Pemandangan*, and since late 1945 he had worked for the Ministry of Information of the Republic of Indonesia (Pers Indonesia, January–April 1984, p. 115). As quoted by Antara, Tabrani judged that the Dutch only “*mengekor*” (blindly followed) the British army. He reminded his readers that the task of the British (and the Dutch, who were part of the Allies) was to disarm the Japanese and transport Japanese soldiers and APWI, but not to interfere in politics in Indonesia. From his standpoint, the party that made considerable contributions to matters of disarmament and transportation of Japanese soldiers was the Indonesian army, not the British or Dutch. He postulated that the fault for the failure to finish the task of transporting APWI lay with the British and Dutch parties, who did not fulfil the agreements that had been made and tended to undertake provocative acts (Antara, 24 September 1946).

Tabrani came to the conclusion that “the obligations of the Allied occupation army here were practically undertaken with the complete assistance of the Republican side” (Antara, 24 September 1946). Given that by November 1946 the British army would be withdrawn completely from Indonesia and that the Dutch were part of the Allies, Tabrani insisted that the Dutch army should also be withdrawn from Indonesia. But what he considered “*aneh bin adjaib*” (wonder of wonders) was that in reality the Dutch army still wanted to remain in Indonesia and deploy additional army divisions from the Netherlands to Indonesia. He believed that the withdrawal of the Dutch army simultaneously with the withdrawal of the British was important for the course of peace talks between Indonesia and the Dutch. For Tabrani, the presence of the Dutch army in Indonesia

and their plan to add troops to Indonesia “will definitely not make negotiations easier in the future”. He thus demanded that the Dutch army be withdrawn from Indonesia. Or, at the least, the Dutch should no longer be allowed to bring new troops to Indonesia, while their troops in Indonesia should be prohibited from implementing military operations. For Tabrani, this was a condition to ensure that Indonesia’s honour and sovereignty were not violated and that the peace talks had the potential to succeed (Antara, 24 September 1946).

10 November 1946: Remembering British Atrocities and Indonesian Heroism

In the process of withdrawing British troops from Indonesia, 10 November 1946 became an important day for the Indonesian government and freedom fighters. The day is celebrated as Heroes’ Day in Indonesia. Indonesian nationalists used the event to recall the sacrifices of Indonesian fighters in defending their independence from British threats. The Heroes’ Day commemoration was first observed on 10 November 1946 and is still observed by the government and people of Indonesia today.

KR gave ample space for news about Heroes’ Day, making it the headline story on 9 November 1946. On the front page, it carried a large photo collage showing the Indonesian flag, armed Indonesian soldiers and the heroes’ cemetery where Indonesian fighters are buried (*KR*, 9 November 1946c). Moreover, it displayed a photo of the most famous Indonesian fighter from the Battle of Surabaya, Sutomo, also known as Bung Tomo. *KR* dubbed him *Djenderal Pemberontakan* (General of the Rebellion). In the photo, he stands with his arms akimbo in front of a British captain, a gesture that symbolizes the courage and confidence of Indonesians in facing a Western power.

Soepardo, an independent author who was also a youth leader in Yogyakarta, recalled the Battle of Surabaya in *KR* on 9 November 1946. He claimed that 10 November 1945 had two meanings for Indonesian youth. First, it was the day of the outbreak of the Battle of Surabaya, where youth had played a key role, and second, it

was the birthday of an Indonesian youth organization, the Badan Kongres Pemoeda Repoeblik Indonesia (Indonesian Youth Congress Agency, BKPRI), which was determined to defend the Indonesian state. He said that “a major battle was fought because of foreign aggression against the Indonesian nation and people”. Thousands of young Indonesians became victims in the battle against foreign forces, and they, in the opinion of Soepardo, were “*boenga bangsa*” (flowers of the nation) who “*goegoer sebagai pahlawan*” (died as heroes) and whose contributions were not in vain. Even though a year had passed, he continued, the Indonesian youth in November 1946 must follow the example of the young Indonesians who died in their fight against the British. Indonesian youth must continue to fight to demand a hundred per cent Indonesian independence. He also called on Indonesian youth to continue to make sacrifices for the sake of Indonesia’s existence (*KR*, 9 November 1946a).

Various Indonesian nationalist elements planned diverse agendas to commemorate Heroes’ Day. The BKPRI planned to hold a large meeting and parade to the Heroes Cemetery in Yogyakarta on 10 November 1946 (*KR*, 9 November 1946b). In the afternoon of 10 November 1946, a mass meeting was held in the North Square of Yogyakarta to commemorate Heroes’ Day and Youth Day. One of the speeches at the event focused on the courage of Indonesian youth in rejecting the colonization of Indonesia by foreign nations (*KR*, 11 November 1946e).

The commemoration of Heroes’ Day was also held at a number of other locations in Indonesia. In Madiun Square, East Java, a giant meeting was held at which the history of the struggle of the Indonesian people on 10 November 1945 was delivered to the audience (*KR*, 11 November 1946a). In Solo, Central Java, a massive rally to celebrate Heroes’ Day was held at Sriwedari Stadium. One of the speakers, a local nationalist named Hassan, conveyed the courage of Indonesian youth in fighting the “British threat to disarm the people in Surabaya”. Young Indonesians, Hassan said, responded by “attacking the British occupation army” (*KR*, 11 November 1946d). Similar commemorative events were held in other cities,

including Magelang (*KR*, 11 November 1946b) and Mojokerto (*KR*, 11 November 1946c).

Still, in the atmosphere of the commemoration of Heroes' Day in 1946, *KR*'s *Podjok* column criticized the use of the word "*Serikat*" (Allies) to refer to the British army. The writer noted that the term "Allies" referred to Britain, America, Russia and France, who worked hand in hand in the Second World War against the Axis powers. With the cessation of the war, he said, the term "Axis" was no longer used. Consequently, the term "Allies" should also be discontinued. He urged that there should be a juridical and technical evaluation of whether the term could still be used at that time. He stressed the urgency of the matter, especially to prevent the British and Dutch from committing the "*misbruik*" (misuse) of the term for their own benefit. He said there was a difference in the use of the words "Allies" and "Britain". For example, if the Allies asked the Indonesian side for help, the Indonesians would give the request greater consideration than would be the case if the British asked for help. He therefore urged Indonesians to be "more judicious and more cautious" when using the term "Allies". Indonesians, he continued, should not easily refer to Britain and the Netherlands as Allies (*KR*, 12 November 1946).

30 November 1946: British Withdrawal and Indonesia's Memory of the British Occupation

On 30 November 1946, the British army was finally withdrawn from Indonesia. One of the most representative and powerful responses to the departure from Indonesian nationalists was reflected in the editorial on the first page of *KR*. The editorial stated that the day could not be let to pass without comment. It stressed that the history of the British occupation, lasting about a year, "cannot be forgotten because that date contains the most important history of our independence struggle". In addition, *KR* underlined that many of the occurrences during more than a year of British occupation served as an opportunity "that is sufficient for us to get to know more deeply who and how the British nation really is" (*KR*, 30 November 1946).

KR reviewed the history of the British army's presence in Indonesia, particularly in relation to the United States ordering the British army to carry out the Potsdam Agreement there, in this case by disarming the Japanese army and liberating APWI. Louis Mountbatten, the supreme commander of the British South East Asia Command, gave orders to Lieutenant General Philip Christison to lead the British and Indian armies to perform the tasks. One thing that *KR* emphasized was that before Christison landed his troops in Java, there was news from Singapore that the British army would not interfere in Indonesia's internal affairs and that Christison would not send Dutch troops to Indonesia. It could be argued that Indonesian nationalists were pleased with the news, so that when the British and Indian soldiers landed in Jakarta at the end of September 1945 they were "welcomed by the Indonesian nation calmly and warmly". The Indonesian people, *KR* stressed, "at that time did not suspect at all that behind the sweet words were deceptions" (*KR*, 30 November 1946). In the event, *KR* lamented, the British army helped pave the way for the landing of the Dutch army, which then engaged in various provocations and acts of violence, prompting responses from Indonesian independence fighters (*KR*, 30 November 1946).

KR reported its observations about the traits of the British nation, which clearly reflected the Indonesian dislike for the British. The depiction of the British as deceitful and cruel was contrasted with the honest and chivalrous nature of Indonesians:

The character of the British nation that we cannot forget is as follows: When they are still weak then they always relent and make various promises that benefit the opponent so that they have the opportunity to strengthen themselves. By the time they are strong, however, they strike with inhumanity and shred the treaty they signed before. On the other hand, it is clear how honest and strong the Indonesian nation is in holding to agreements. The evidence of the lies of the British and the honesty of the Indonesian people in adhering to agreements is clearly seen in Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung, Medan, Padang, Palembang, and others. (*KR*, 30 November 1946)

As stated by *KR*, the withdrawal of the British army on 30 November 1946 was the right moment to recall “how massive and cruel the bombings from the sea, land and air carried out by the British were against the city of Surabaya as well as the hundreds of thousands of people who defended their rights”. *KR* also spoke about the devastating British bombing of Bekasi (West Java) that cost the lives of hundreds of Indonesian civilians and the destruction of hundreds of homes. *KR* believed the bombing was an “atrocious and savagery” that occurred for only a small reason—namely, the disappearance of several British airmen in the region. Moreover, *KR* criticized the British action of using Japanese soldiers, who should have been disarmed and returned to their country, “to destroy our spirit of independence” (*KR*, 30 November 1946).

According to *KR*, it was finally revealed that, in addition to carrying out their two main duties, the British also felt obliged to restore the power of the Dutch in Indonesia. *KR* believed that this was the biggest problem in the relationship between Indonesia and Britain. *KR* ended its editorial by emphasizing Indonesians’ goodwill in helping the British carry out their post-war tasks and the bad memories the British left in Indonesia after about a year of occupation:

Nevertheless, the Indonesians are still trying to lend a hand and help the British complete their arduous work by the time they leave our homeland. However, in any case, British actions in our homeland will remain a black page in Indonesian history. (*KR*, 30 November 1946)

Conclusion

This study addresses an important but hitherto overlooked aspect of the history of post-war decolonization; namely, the Indonesian perspective of the British occupation of Indonesia and subsequent withdrawal in late 1946. By examining the Indonesian nationalist print media published in late 1946—namely, *Antara* and *KR*—this

study shows the complex relationship between Indonesia and Britain during the British occupation, from cooperation in liberating APWI to armed conflict.

For Indonesian nationalists, the withdrawal of British troops was crucial because the Indonesians believed Britain's tasks of disarming Japanese troops and releasing APWI had been completed—with the help of the Indonesian government. They therefore felt it was the right time for British troops to withdraw. They saw the withdrawal as necessary to end various acts by the British that they felt violated Indonesian sovereignty and terrorized the Indonesian people. These acts included shootings, killings, robberies and the burning of villages. Indonesian nationalists envisaged that the withdrawal would reduce substantially the loss of Indonesian lives and property and prevent further British intervention in Indonesia's internal affairs.

In addition, the nationalists saw the withdrawal as ending the cooperation between British troops and Japanese forces, which had led to the deaths of many Indonesians and was considered to have played a role in the resumption of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia. With the withdrawal, Indonesian nationalists assumed that the number of enemies they had to contend with had been reduced, so they could now focus on confronting the Dutch. In a broader context, the withdrawal marked the end of the British occupation and an epilogue to the Second World War in Indonesia, especially in terms of the completion of the British task of disarming the Japanese army and releasing APWI.

This study highlights the views of Indonesian nationalists as reflected in the Indonesian nationalist media. The first set of views relates to the British decision to withdraw from Indonesia. Indonesian nationalists believed the withdrawal should be carried out immediately because the tasks of the British troops in Indonesia had been completed. The Indonesian government, public and media showed their support for the decision of the British to withdraw, as evidenced by the news reports in *Antara* and *KR* on this. The second set of views covers the withdrawal process. The Indonesian side claimed that while the withdrawal process was a sign of progress,

the British were still violating Indonesia's sovereignty by handing over power to the Dutch instead of the Indonesians.

This study adds a new understanding to Indonesian perspectives on their struggle for independence. Part of the struggle included confrontation with the British, who did not recognize Indonesian sovereignty during their occupation of Indonesia. Another part involves the way the British withdrew, which was seen as detrimental to Indonesian sovereignty and civil governance because the British handed authority over to the Dutch. Thus, the Indonesian people's struggle for independence included not only the armed struggle against the Dutch and the herculean efforts at winning international recognition and support through diplomacy, but also confronting and contending with British forces that denied Indonesian sovereignty, whether during their occupation of or withdrawal from Indonesia.

For Indonesians, the conflict with the British contributed to their identity construction and nationalism as a newly independent nation-state. In particular, the Battle of Surabaya—where thousands of Indonesians, both freedom fighters and civilians, fell victim to British bombardment—served as a symbol of the unity and great sacrifice of the Indonesian nation in defending its independence. At the time of the withdrawal of the British army, the Indonesian media revived the memory of the battle to showcase the strength, determination and confidence of the Indonesian people in defending their independence, including by fighting the British.

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NOTE

1. All translations of Indonesian texts are mine unless otherwise stated.

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