



# Journal of Contemporary Asia

ISSN: 0047-2336 (Print) 1752-7554 (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjoc20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjoc20)

## Towards the Indonesian Republic: Marxist Lineages in the National Revolution

Geoffrey Gunn. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2025.

Nick Dobrijevich

To cite this article: Nick Dobrijevich (27 Oct 2025): Towards the Indonesian Republic: Marxist Lineages in the National Revolution, Journal of Contemporary Asia, DOI: [10.1080/00472336.2025.2573712](https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2025.2573712)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2025.2573712>



Published online: 27 Oct 2025.



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## BOOK REVIEW

**Towards the Indonesian Republic: Marxist Lineages in the National Revolution.**

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For more than half a century, the central role of the Marxist left in Indonesia's struggle for independence has been denied in official histories and erased from popular memory. In this context, Geoffrey Gunn's 2025 *Towards the Indonesian Republic* offers a timely account of the Indonesian national revolution, bringing to the fore the centrality and influence of revolutionary Marxism in the anti-colonial struggle for liberation. Structured chronologically, except for Part 1 on the incarceration of revolutionaries in Boven Digul in Papua after the 1926–1927 communist-led anti-colonial uprising in Java and Sumatera, Gunn turns in Part 2 to the origins and early development of Indonesian communism within the broader movement for national liberation.

The Communist Union in the Indies (*Perserikatan Komunis di Hindia*, PKH) – later the Communist Party of Indonesia (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*, PKI) – was formally established in Semarang, Central Java in May 1920 and the first Marxist-Leninist party in Asia. Affiliated to the Communist International (Comintern), the PKI grew out of the Indies Social Democratic Association (*Indische Sociaal Democratische Vereeniging*) led by Dutch socialist Henk Sneevliet and radicals from the Islamic Association (*Sarekat Islam*), the first mass-based nationalist organisation in the Netherlands East Indies with over two million members by 1918. As highlighted by Gunn, the PKI was a significant force in the Indonesian nationalist movement until the late 1920s when the failed 1926–1927 uprising against Dutch colonial rule saw the party enter a period of harsh repression and disorganisation.

In Chapters 4 and 5, the author examines the emergence and hardening of divisions within the Indonesian communist movement – particularly the schism between “pro-Moscow loyalists of the Indonesian Communist Party” (5) led by Alimin and Musso, Europe-based communists like Darsono and Semaun, as well as the “national communists” (5) around Tan Malaka. All central leaders of the first generation of revolutionary Marxists in Indonesia, from the late 1920s Alimin and Musso were based in the Soviet Union and soon in sharp conflict with Tan Malaka, also exiled outside Indonesia and who broke with the PKI to establish the rival Indonesian Republican Party (*Partai Republik Indonesia*, PARI) in 1927. This schism saw “ideological – and sometimes personal – divisions between Indonesian Marxists” (13), ranging from sharp polemics recorded in Comintern archives to Tan Malaka-led organisations supporting the First Mohammad Hatta Cabinet's repression of the PKI in 1948 as described below.

In Part 3, *Towards the Indonesian Republic* turns to the years of Japanese Occupation (1942–1945). During World War II, sections of the anti-colonial movement, notably Sukarno and Hatta – future president and vice president respectively – co-operated with Japan to pursue independence while others, such as first Prime Minister Sutan Sjahrir, worked underground in the independence struggle. Although there were communist groups waging a clandestine struggle against Japanese occupation, they were not a significant organised force as in other countries like Malaya, where the communist-led Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army was a central force in the armed resistance during the war. Part 3 concludes with a chapter “The Digulists Down Under: Waging the Struggle from

Australia” exploring the independence struggle by Indonesian revolutionaries taken to Australia by the Dutch colonial government during the war. Among the several thousand Indonesians transported to Australia were several hundred political prisoners previously held in the Boven Digul concentration camp, including 1926 PKI chair Sardjono and PARI co-founder Djamaluddin Tamin.

*Towards the Indonesian Republic* ends with two sections on the Physical Revolution (1945–1949), the period from the proclamation of independence on August 17, 1945 until formal recognition by the Dutch in late 1949 when national liberation forces physically resisted Dutch imperialist efforts to re-colonise the archipelago. Across six chapters, Gunn traverses one of the most complex periods of Indonesian history, exploring the role played by communists in the national liberation struggle and working as before to highlight “political contests within the national revolution” (284). These contests included antagonistic visions of how independence could be won with one side pursuing *diplomasi* (diplomacy) and the other *perjuangan* (struggle). The former included Sutan Sjahrir and the Republican government that expounded negotiation and placed a strong emphasis on winning international recognition for the Republic. On the other side, proponents of *perjuangan* (struggle) pursued armed struggle and no negotiation with the Dutch. As Gunn details, the groups around Tan Malaka were central proponents of *perjuangan* and put forward a programme of no compromise, mass action, expropriation of Dutch property and the well-known slogan *Merdeka 100%* (100% independence).

In his account of the Physical Revolution, Gunn details the independence struggle in Java and other parts of the country as well as the “post-war Marxist revival following the virtual extinction ...” (285) of the Communist Party in the late 1920s. Influencing this revival was the return of central leaders to Indonesia, particularly from the Soviet Union, Australia, and Europe while in 1946 the PKI joined other left organisations to form the *Sayap Kiri* (Left Wing) coalition. In February 1948, *Sayap Kiri* became the People’s Democratic Front (*Front Demokrasi Rakyat*, FDR) with the PKI and communist-led Central All-Indonesia Workers Organisation (*Sentral Organisasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia*) involved. At the same time, there was a revival of far-left groups deeply antagonistic to the PKI, in particular the *Persatuan Perjuangan* (Struggle Union) under the influence of Tan Malaka. Formed in 1946 and composed of various political and armed organisations, including Tan Malaka’s *Partai Murba* (Proletarian Party), *Persatuan Perjuangan* grew into the *Gerakan Revolusi Rakyat* (People’s Revolutionary Movement, GRR) formed in January 1948. The influence of the PKI in the national revolution was abruptly halted however when from September 1948 the Hatta-led Republican government launched a violent military crackdown on the PKI- and FDR-affiliated troops in the city of Madiun, East Java. As shown in *Towards the Indonesian Republic*, this violent repression was actively supported by Tan Malaka-led groups including *Partai Murba*.

Popularly referred to as the *Peristiwa Madiun* (Madiun Affair) and contested in Indonesian historiography until today, in September 1948, FDR forces launched an uprising which was eventually backed by PKI leadership now led by Musso upon his return from the Soviet Union in August 1948. When the rebellion was condemned by the Republican government, Musso responded via radio: “The people of Indonesia were asked by Sukarno to choose Sukarno or Musso! The people should answer back “Sukarno-Hatta, the slaves of the Japanese and America! Traitors must die!”” (cited in Gunn, 309). For the second time since the 1920s, the PKI faced a harsh wave of violent repression as the uprising was brutally crushed. Thousands of leftists were imprisoned and killed while almost the entire PKI leadership were captured and executed. As Gunn highlights, “after the insurrection broke out, the Tan Malaka parties stood behind the Hatta government,

and the fighting organisations of the GRR (various *laskar* [armed units] and militia groups) took an active part in the purges against the PKI insurgents. These events culminated in Tan Malaka being released from prison and regaining his full freedom of action” (334). After being released Tan Malaka was, for the second time, imprisoned by the Republican government and in February 1949 was executed. As noted in the book’s epilogue, and continuing his strong focus on Tan Malaka in the final chapters of the book, Gunn writes, “... Tan Malaka’s ‘national communism’ ... came to be acknowledged inside Indonesia in the revolutionary period – indeed, I have shown him to be in the forefront of the revolutionary struggle – his leftist tradition was hostile to the capitalist underpinnings of the beneficiaries of the Republican governments ...” (375).

An extensive account of the Indonesian anti-colonial movement and the role of Marxists – particularly during the complex period of Physical Revolution, *Towards the Indonesian Republic* broadens an already extensive English-language literature on the Indonesian National Revolution including established and well-known studies like those by George Kahin, Benedict Anderson, and Anthony Reid, among others. It also complements existing studies of the Indonesian Left before independence by Ruth McVey (1965) as well as more recent analysis of Indonesian Marxism such as that of Xie Kankan (2022) and Hongxuan Lin (2023). As a study of Marxist *lineages*, significant sections of Gunn’s book are accounts of the anti-colonial movement broadly rather than communists specifically. As Gunn describes, the focus is “the cadre of secular activists who not only gave gestation to the republican ideal but also defended it to the last – and they included PNI [Indonesian National Party] nationalists, the PKI-Moscow, the national communists around Tan Malaka, and not excluding the armed forces of the Republic once it was proclaimed” (14). Such a varied study is understandable for periods such as the 1930s when “the PKI was virtually knocked out of action” (93) and during the Japanese Occupation, yet it also points to topics for further study. For example, a more comprehensive appraisal of Alimin, Semaun, and Tan Malaka’s analysis of Indonesian society in the 1920s – given only seven pages in Chapter 3 – is a potentially interesting springboard to analyse contemporary objective conditions a century later. Another future project is a systemic study of Comintern records on Indonesia, particularly as more material becomes available.

As well as students of Indonesian studies, Gunn’s book is also a useful resource for those interested in the history of “transnational linkages in anti-colonial movements” (10). The use of Comintern archives from the Russian State Archive for Social and Political History – until 1992 unavailable to historians – enriches the understanding of the anti-colonial communist movement and its international character. The transnationality of Indonesian communism was especially clear following the colonial crackdowns after the unsuccessful 1926–1927 rebellion when revolutionaries were scattered internationally from the Netherlands and Soviet Union to Boven Digul and Australia. In this way, links can be drawn between *Towards the Indonesian Republic* and recent works on anti-colonial radicalism in Asia, including studies of underground revolutionary networks by Sidel (2021) and Harper (2023). Beyond this, historical works such as Gunn’s are important in the general context of state-led historical revisionism and erasure of popular memory, recently highlighted by the Indonesian Ministry of Culture’s project to rewrite the nation’s history. Efforts to document and learn from Indonesia’s radical past are one step in building an alternate future to the one fostered since 1965.

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Nick Dobrijevič  
School of Humanities, University of Sydney, Australia  
 [nicholas.dobrijevič@sydney.edu.au](mailto:nicholas.dobrijevič@sydney.edu.au)

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2025.2573712>

