

# BORN IN FIRE

*The Indonesian Struggle for Independence*

AN ANTHOLOGY

Edited By

COLIN WILD  
PETER CAREY

*by arrangement with BBC Publications,  
of BBC Enterprises, LTD.*

# BORN in FIRE

*The Indonesian Struggle for Independence*

\*

AN ANTHOLOGY

edited by

COLIN WILD  
PETER CAREY

*Published by arrangement with  
BBC Publications,  
a division of BBC Enterprises, Ltd.*



*Ohio University Press \* Athens*

Originally published as *Gelora Api Revolusi*  
in 1986 by P. T. Gramedia, Indonesia

© Copyright 1986 by the British Broadcasting Corporation

Ohio University Press edition published 1988.

Printed in the United States of America.

All rights reserved.

Ohio University Press books  
are printed on acid free paper.∞

## LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

[Gelora api revolusi. English]

Born in fire: the Indonesian struggle for independence: an anthology/edited  
by Colin Wild, Peter Carey.

p. cm.

Translation of: *Gelora api revolusi*.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-8214-0881-X. ISBN 0-8214-0882-8 (pbk.)

1. Indonesia—History—Revolution, 1945–1949.

2. Indonesia—History—20th century. 3. Nationalism—Indonesia—History.

I. Wild, Colin. II. Carey, P. B. R.

DS644.G3613 1988

959.8'035—dc19

87-31223

CIP

# FOREWORD

This book arises from a series of radio programs made by the Indonesian language service of the BBC External Services in London, and first broadcast in 1985 to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the proclamation of independence in Jakarta on August 17th. The main purpose of these programs was to give the BBC's very large and predominantly young audience in Indonesia an opportunity to hear this most important part of their history told in the most authoritative manner possible. I felt this could best be done by inviting a wide range of scholars to contribute talks on those aspects of the story which they had studied most thoroughly. What such a series might lack in homogeneity of style and interpretation—compared with a series by a single author—it would gain in vividness and scholarly authority. Moreover, to parade before our Indonesian listeners a cavalcade of international scholarship would encourage them in their own studies by impressing upon them the earnestness with which their story is studied, and the excellence of scholarship that is devoted to it, around the world. We hoped that the series would make a contribution to the Indonesian-language literature available to students of modern Indonesian history, in particular offering interpretative ideas which they might miss by studying the works of Indonesian historians alone.

This last thought is not a particular reflection on Indonesian historians. Even in long-established nations like Britain and France, national

history is frequently interpreted in a narrow, nationalistic manner. How often are British students, for example, invited by teachers to study their history from a French or American point of view? It is a notorious fault that Europe's disastrous history of nationalistic bickering has still not driven home to us the virtue of seeing ourselves as others see us. Indonesians, whose national history is as yet so short that many people have lived through the whole of it, could, I felt, be helped to understand that history by seeing it through disinterested eyes.

Whereas to have invited only Indonesian historians to contribute to the series would have been "taking coals to Newcastle"—doing what Indonesia could do for itself—there are, nonetheless, certain aspects of Indonesia's history in which the leading experts are, not surprisingly, Indonesians. Further, the inclusion of talks by Indonesian experts was desirable to avoid the charge of attempting to foist upon the listeners a totally foreign interpretation. More important still, though 40 years and more have passed since the climax of the struggle, much of the story still reposes in the memories of those who played a role in it. Radio can bring to the microphone not just the commentator but the maker of history himself. This we were able to do in generous measure.

When the programs were broadcast, the response from the audience was massive and enthusiastic. As a result, they were compiled in book form and appeared in August 1986 as *Gelora Api Revolusi* (The Fire of the Revolution) under the imprint of Gramedia, a well-known Jakarta publishing firm. Now here is the English edition. Its core is the texts of the original broadcasts, including translations and transcriptions of the interviews, supplemented by an introduction written by my collaborator on the radio series, Dr. Peter Carey, suggestions for further reading, and photographs. There is also a new chapter, an interview with John Coast. The manuscript has been re-edited to give the whole greater consistency and readability. While this procedure has necessarily robbed the interviews of some of their spontaneity, we feel the result is superior for this printed version.

This book is neither comprehensive nor definitive. It has many shortcomings. Not every aspect of the complex story of the first 50 years of this century has been covered; no book of this size could hope to do so. The reader may also find it lacks the continuity and stylistic integrity of a book by a single author. It is unfortunately inevitable that the interviews must lack in translation, and in more formal manuscript form, the vivid authenticity of the original broadcasts. In spite of these qualifications I hope the book has the ring of authority about it.

The story itself is that of the birth of the world's fifth largest country. It may contain no single feat of human endurance so astonishing as Mao Zedong's Long March, no single character so inspirational as Mahatma Gandhi, and thankfully, no tragedy as appalling as the massacres upon the partition of India and Pakistan, yet it is the story of a struggle comparable in magnitude to that of the birth of any modern nation. It is a story that deserves to be known better beyond the shores of that beautiful and richly endowed country. I therefore hope that this book will be read not only by those who already know the story and are looking for fresh insights and perspectives, but more particularly by those new to the subject.

The production of the original radio program and the subsequent preparation of both the Indonesian and English editions of the book have imposed demands upon many people during more than three years. Those whose names appear in the book have that as their reward, which I trust they feel is some recompense. But many others, in particular members of the BBC Indonesian section during this time, deserve my gratitude, not only for the help they gave but for their forbearance when I neglected other interests in my enthusiasm for this project. Particular acknowledgment is due to Nicholas Nugent who conducted most of the interviews and to Annabel Teh Gallop who translated them into English.

Colin Wild



# INTRODUCTION

*We were born in fire. We were not born in the rays of the full moon like other nations. There are other nations whose independence was presented to them. There are other nations who, without any effort on their part, were given independence by the imperialists as a present. Not us, we fought for our independence at the cost of great sacrifice. We gained our independence through a tremendous struggle which has no comparison in this world.*

(Sukarno, Radio Address, December 1962,  
on the eve of Indonesia's confrontation  
with Malaysia)

The Indonesian Revolution is without doubt the seminal event in the modern history of that country. Not only did it mark the coming of age of the Indonesian people and the flowering of national self-awareness, but it also left a lasting social and political legacy, one which will continue to be interpreted and reinterpreted by Indonesian historians for years to come. Virtually every aspect of modern Indonesian life—be it the relationship between army and state, the role of the president, the nature of the constitution, *pancasila* democracy, the tension between Islam and secularism, the thrust of economic development, the composition of the elite, the evolution of an “independent and ac-



tive" foreign policy, the relationship between Java and the Outer Islands, and the character of Indonesian nationalism—has been molded by the revolutionary experience. Present-day Indonesians and those yet unborn will all regard themselves (and be taught to regard themselves) as children of the revolution, spiritual members of an ever-expanding *angkatan '45*, or generation of 1945.

The fact that the Indonesian Revolution, like the French and Soviet ones before it, has now entered the realms of metahistory and ideology, however, makes the task of the historian doubly difficult. How is it possible to advance a dispassionate analysis of a process which has been so deeply marked by the exigencies of modern myth-making? Can even foreign scholars, studying the event from outside the prism of Indonesian culture, escape the shadow of historical orthodoxy? The editors of the present volume, originally broadcast as a BBC radio series to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of Indonesian independence in 1985, have few illusions about the difficulties of interpreting such a complex and multi-layered phenomenon. Not only did the requirements of the original radio series impose a severe restriction on the length of the individual contributions, but the manner in which they have been arranged, spanning the period from the cultural and nationalist awakening at the beginning of the present century to the final diplomatic recognition of the Republic of Indonesia by the Dutch at the Round Table Conference in The Hague in December 1949, has tended to reinforce the established orthodoxy of an ineluctable process toward national unity and independence, a Whig interpretation of the Indonesian Revolution first advanced by George Kahin in 1952<sup>1</sup> and long dominant on the historical landscape.

Although there is no denying the central importance of the years up to 1949 in terms of Indonesia's political and military struggle for independence, it is arguable that the process of decolonization did not end with the formal transfer of sovereignty. President Sukarno always insisted that the Indonesian Revolution was a continuing phenomenon, one which needed to run its full course before Indonesians could truly consider themselves free of the shackles of the colonial past. Mental attitudes of inferiority to the West, engrained during the colonial period, had to be utterly transformed. Indonesians had to learn to "stand on their own feet" (*berdikari*) and develop a pride in their national identity. To be an Indonesian, in Sukarno's view, was a privilege not a burden. His actions during the late 1950s and early 1960s, when he enjoyed full

executive power as president under the revived 1945 constitution, were all aimed at enhancing Indonesian self-confidence by making them masters in their own house. One by one, the political, economic, cultural, financial, and strategic ties which continued to bind Jakarta to The Hague after 1949 were severed. In 1957, the Indonesian takeover of Dutch estates and businesses marked the de facto end of the colonial economic relationship. Four years later, with the Irian Barat affair reaching its climax, interest payments on Dutch loans had been suspended, Dutch possessions nationalized, the Dutch-Indonesian "Union" unilaterally abrogated, and diplomatic relations broken. Condemned by many in the West as an impractical visionary and demagogue, Sukarno had nonetheless succeeded in carrying the decolonization process a long way towards its logical conclusion. His youthful dream of a unitary and independent republic stretching from Sabang to Merauke<sup>2</sup> had become a reality. It would remain for his successors to ensure that this political achievement was rendered unassailable, through educational advances, economic development, and consolidation of state power on a scale sufficient to guarantee the coherence of the Indonesian nation in the late twentieth century, a time of change more far-reaching than any previously experienced by the inhabitants of the archipelago.

If one returns to the period of the Japanese occupation (1942–45) and the physical revolution against the Dutch (1945–49), it is possible to trace this process of nation building almost back to its source. As Anthony Reid has pointed out in a recent essay,<sup>3</sup> Indonesia before 1942 was far less clearly or consciously a nation than most colonies, certainly less than its Southeast Asian neighbours, Burma, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Yet by 1950, when the United States of Indonesia (USI) finally merged into the unitary republic, the nation had undoubtedly become one; its development into an ever more integrated and centralized country has been inspired directly by the forces unleashed during the revolution.

The exact nature of those forces, however, has become a subject for debate among historians. Most are agreed that there was a powerful common ideal at work, particularly that of Indonesian youth (*pemuda*), which had as its object the creation of a just and prosperous society, the *negara adil dan makmur* of millenarian and socialist prophecy.<sup>4</sup> But the actual character of the independence struggle has been interpreted in widely different ways by Indonesian and foreign scholars. Was it a gen-

uine social revolution or merely a war of liberation? Did new elites come to the fore or were old ones merely consolidated? Should the period principally be seen as a series of local struggles against the Dutch and their indigenous allies, or was the power of the republican center such as to impose a unity on the revolutionary experience? Who did more to ensure the survival and eventual success of the republic, the Indonesian diplomats and politicians, or the soldiers of the republican army?

For the late Nugroho Notosusanto, head of the Center of Historical Research of the Indonesian Armed Forces, the answers to all these questions were unequivocal. The Indonesian struggle against the Dutch was not a revolution but a *perang kemerdekaan* (war of liberation). A new military elite did come to the fore, but on the whole they were scions of the old *priyayi* (bureaucratic/official) families rather than *novi homines* of peasant or plebeian stock. The unity of the struggle was provided by the republican army and not the politicians in Yogyakarta. And finally, Indonesian independence was won on the battlefield not at the conference table; *perjuangan* (armed struggle) rather than *diplomasi* (diplomacy) was the key to republican survival. All these views are clearly expressed in the last volume of the national history of Indonesia, of which Nugroho was the senior editor. Here the whole period between 1945 and 1949 is subsumed under the heading of *perang kemerdekaan*, all events center on the armed struggle against the Dutch, and the terrible social revolutions of 1945–46, which led to the physical elimination of the Dutch-supported aristocratic/bureaucratic elites in many areas, are relegated to a coy footnote.<sup>5</sup> It is not difficult to see in this interpretation the influence of the army-dominated politics of the post-1965 “New Order” period in Indonesia. With Sukarno’s fall, the civilian politicians prominent during the revolution were discredited and the PKI view of a revolution from below anathematized. The field was left open for the army to advance its own official perspective on the revolution. Thus the revolutionary nature of the 1945–49 experience came to be consistently downplayed in favor of an army interpretation which stressed the centrality of the military struggle to the unity and survival of the republic both before and after 1949. According to this view, it was the army not the civilian leadership which was the true midwife of the republic, guaranteeing its survival by beating off attacks from both the communist left (the Madiun Affair of 1948 and the PKI “coup” of 1965) and the Islamic right (the Darul Islam revolts

and PRRI-Permesta secessionist movements of the 1950s and early 1960s). The civilian politicians, when they make their appearance at all in such histories, are invariably portrayed in a negative light, either negotiating away battlefield gains against the Dutch at the conference table or appeasing extremist forces for their own self-seeking ends. Furthermore, these accounts insist that it was the army rather than the civilian politicians which forged the closest links with the Indonesian *rakyat* (peasant mass) through the guerrilla struggle in the countryside, links which were later used to justify the special role of the army in civilian and military affairs when the *dwifungsi* doctrine was being crystallized in the late 1950s.

Ironically, just as this new historiographical orthodoxy was beginning to take root in Indonesia in the early 1970s, a younger generation of Western-trained historians (some of them Indonesians preparing doctoral theses in Australia and the United States) was moving away from an overarching national interpretation of the revolution, be it from a civilian- or army-dominated perspective, toward one which laid greater emphasis on the regional dynamics of the revolutionary experience. Although to date only a few of these regional studies have been published,<sup>7</sup> the main outlines of their arguments can be discerned in the collection of essays edited by Audrey Kahin in 1985<sup>8</sup> and in the aforementioned article by Reid, which provide a masterly analysis of their common themes.<sup>9</sup>

Briefly stated, what these regional histories share is a common vision of the revolutionary process as a series of local movements, often quite isolated from each other, but reflecting similar characteristics and concerns. First, unlike the military accounts, they tend to see the social revolutions of 1945–46 as major catalysts of the revolutionary experience. Far from being bloody aberrations or devious, communist-inspired distractions from the anti-Dutch struggle, they are thought to have represented the resolution of tensions which had been building since the 1930s, tensions gravely exacerbated by the suffering of the Japanese occupation period. In areas such as Aceh, eastern Sumatra, Banten, and the Tiga Daerah (Three Regions) zone of north-central Java, members of the feudal aristocracy or local village elite who had been directly associated with the harsh requisitioning policies of the Japanese or who had earlier cooperated with the Dutch, were either publicly humiliated or brutally murdered along with their families.<sup>10</sup> More Indonesians probably lost their lives or suffered torture at the

hands of their fellow countrymen during these tragic months than were killed in the whole guerrilla struggle against the Dutch. Here the Indonesian Revolution had much in common with its French and Soviet predecessors.

Appalling though this may be to present-day Indonesians, many of whom have lived through the more recent trauma of 1965-66, the social revolutions of 1945-46 must be recognized, according to these histories, as an integral part of the revolutionary climacteric. Not only do they provide the key to an understanding of the struggle between rival elites in Sumatra and Java, and the intergenerational conflicts which fuelled the evanescent *pemuda* revolution of these years, but they also throw open a window on a world suddenly cut loose from its moorings—a world in a “time of tremblingness” (*jaman kegelisahan*) in Sutan Syahrir’s evocative phrase<sup>11</sup>—in which violence ruled supreme and the heady fusion of Islam, Marxism, and millenarianism seemed to herald a new egalitarian day. By mid-1946, this radical challenge to the revolution had been contained, but its ideal of *sama rata sama rasa* (brotherhood and equality) continued to resonate in the hearts of many long after the physical revolution had ended. In this way the dragon’s teeth of the great PKI party of the 1950s and early 1960s were sown. Most important, the social revolutions shattered the link with Indonesia’s “feudal” past, leaving the way open for a new national identity to be forged amid the hardships of war and the shared experience of anti-colonial sacrifice.

The second point which these regional histories insist on is the weakness of the republican center throughout the revolutionary period and the importance of local support for regional elites. The short-lived Japanese occupation (1942-45), which imposed an artificial isolation on the regions through the emphasis on economic autarky and the administrative division between the 16th Army (Java), 25th Army (Sumatra), and the Navy (eastern islands), is regarded as having been of fundamental importance. Far from having been a drawback, this isolation, it is argued, prevented any resentment of Javanese leadership taking root in the Outer Islands prior to 1945. On the contrary, the reestablishment of contact between the regions after the sudden Japanese surrender is seen to have been a positive experience which enhanced the popularity of the infant republic.<sup>12</sup> Rival elites in the provinces tended to look to the center for support in the resolution of their conflicts in the early months of the revolution, support which

was invariably thrown in on the side of the conservative nationalists, be they scions of old *pangreh praja* (administrative elite) families in north-central Java and eastern Sumatra, or the newly-dominant *ulama* (religious scholars) in Banten, Aceh, and West Sumatra.

Even the army, lauded by Indonesian military historians as the living symbol of national unity, is viewed by the regional historians as having derived its strength largely from its local links. Again the Japanese period is seen as crucial, for the highly devolved battalion structure of the PETA (Fatherland's Defence Force) in Java is regarded as the precursor of the autonomous regional units which fought against the Dutch in the revolution. Indeed, one of the major themes of the post-revolutionary period is the gradual integration of these local units of the TNI (Tentara Nasional Indonesia; Indonesian National Army) into a unified command structure, a process which could be said to have begun just prior to the Madiun Affair in September 1948 and reached its fruition after the regional revolts of 1957-58.<sup>13</sup>

Both Indonesian military historians and Western-trained scholars are, however, agreed that the Dutch policy of trying to surround the republic with puppet federal states based on regional sentiments played directly into the hands of the nationalists. Not only did it destroy the legitimacy of regionalism, but it also increased sympathy in the regions for the embattled republic. As Reid has pointed out,<sup>14</sup> no policy could have been better designed to promote Indonesian unity, and its legacy has continued to shape Indonesian political thinking until the present day.

There are only a few echoes of this major historiographical debate between the Indonesian military historians and the Western-trained regional scholars in the present volume. The late Nugroho, although approached on several occasions by the BBC to contribute to the original series, declined to cooperate. Indeed, he was the only Indonesian to publicly voice reservations about the series, perhaps out of pique that the orthodox army line of a "war of liberation" had been passed over in favor of a concentration on the civilian politicians and the diplomatic struggle.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, it has been left to a Western-trained historian, Harold Crouch (Chapter 27), to give an assessment of the balance between *perjuangan* and *diplomasi* in the present volume, and to officers of an older generation, Djatikusumo (Chapter 14) and Nasution (Chapter 23)—neither of them particularly sympathetic to Nugroho—to provide personal accounts of the genesis of the TNI and the military expe-

riences during the early months of the revolution. At the same time, the regional perspective has been largely ignored except in the interviews with Mara Karma (Chapter 24) and Syafruddin Prawiranegara, the head of the emergency government in Sumatra in 1948-9 (Chapter 35). The two Western-trained scholars qualified to discuss the "social revolutions" of 1945-46 and the regional dynamics of the revolution, Anton Lucas and Anthony Reid, were both required to address other themes in their chapters (28 and 31).

Space has not permitted the wider range of contributions which might have done justice both to the regional aspects of the revolution and the equally important post-1949 decolonization process in Indonesia, but the editors will feel disappointed if all that has been achieved here is just another sycophantic celebration of Indonesian "national history," another textbook which, suitably purged of embarrassing comments, can take its place in the sanitized syllabi of Indonesian high schools and universities. Although nearly all the contributors were basically sympathetic to the Indonesian struggle for independence, every effort was made to include as broad a spectrum of views as possible, views which range from those of *ex-pemuda* like Adam Malik (Chapters 12, 18 and 37) to senior army officers like Simatupang (Chapter 37), from journalists like B.M. Diah (Chapter 30) to men at the center of political events like Ide Anak Agung Gde Agung (Chapter 31) and the Sultan of Yogyakarta (Chapter 33). Similar efforts were made with the foreign contributors, who include economic and political historians as well as experts on the literary and cultural background of the revolution, a background still much in need of further research. Here too the stress was on the multi-faceted nature of the revolution. We hear from zestful republican enthusiasts like John Coast (Chapter 26), as well as from former colonial servants like A. J. Piekaar (Chapter 36), from pro-Indonesian socialists like Shigetada Nishijima (Chapters 16 and 18) and friends of the republican leadership in Yogyakarta like George Kahin (Chapter 34). British, Dutch, Japanese and American participants thus take their place alongside Indonesian eyewitnesses in a book which aims to enliven the historical narrative with illustrations culled from the recollections of those who had the privilege to be part of the events they describe. Indeed, if this book has any claims to originality at all, these will reside principally in the contributions made by contemporaries, men and women whose recollection of the dramatic

days of the revolution were still fresh when this volume was in preparation.

Peter Carey\*

\*Thanks to Dr. J. van Goor of the Rijksuniversiteit te Utrecht, the Netherlands, for many suggestions used in writing this introduction.

## END NOTES

1. George McTurnan Kahin, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1952).
2. Sabang is an island off the northernmost tip of Sumatra and Merauke is a town on the southeastern coast of Irian Jaya (Indonesian New Guinea), close to the border with Papua-New Guinea. Sukarno used them as short-hand terms to indicate the vast geographical spread of Indonesia and its territorial boundaries. See Cindy Adams, *Sukarno. An Autobiography As Told to Cindy Adams* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p.4.
3. Anthony Reid, "The Revolution in Regional Perspective," in J. van Goor (ed.), *The Indonesian Revolution. Papers of the Conference Held in Utrecht, 17-20 June 1986* (Utrecht: Utrechtse Historische Cahiers, Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht, 1986), p.196.
4. Reid, "The Revolution," p.197.
5. Nugroho Notosusanto (ed.), *Sejarah Nasional Indonesia*, Vol. VI (Jakarta: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1976), p.39, n.103.
6. Nugroho Notosusanto (ed.), *Sejarah*, pp.29-72, 142-52.
7. Apart from the older works by John Smail, *Bandung in the Early Revolution, 1945-1946. A Study in the Social History of the Indonesian Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1964); and Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution, Occupation and Resistance, 1944-46* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), which concentrate on Bandung and Surakarta respectively, the only recently published monograph on the Indonesian Revolution at the regional level is Anthony Reid, *The Blood of the People. Revolution and the End of Traditional Rule in Northern Sumatra* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979).
8. Audrey Kahin (ed.), *Regional Dynamics of the Indonesian Revolution. Unity from Diversity* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985).
9. Reid, "The Revolution," pp. 183-99.
10. Reid, "The Revolution," pp. 190-94.
11. Sutan Syahrir, *Our Struggle*, trans. Benedict R. O'G. Anderson (Ithaca:



Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1968); and see Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution*, p. 11.

12. Reid, "The Revolution," p. 196.
13. On this process of military unification, see Ruth McVey, "The Post-Revolutionary Transformation of the Indonesian Army," *Indonesia* 11 (April 1971), pp. 131-76; and 13 (April 1972), pp. 147-82.
14. Reid, "The Revolution," p. 196.
15. Susanto Pudjomartono, "Bung Karno di Radio London," *Tempo* (27 April 1985), p. 25.