

## AUSTRALIAN SUPPORT FOR INDONESIAN INDEPENDENCE: A REVIEW

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*Black Armada* by Rupert Lockwood.  
Sydney: Australian Book Society, 1975

A general feature of Allied strategic planning during the later stages of the Pacific war was its considerable underestimation of the potential resistance to reimposition of colonial rule on the part of the subject peoples of Asia. The Allied intelligence networks concluded that indigenous nationalist movements in Southeast Asia lacked both sufficient popular support and administrative competence to demand independence. They also advanced the view that the colonial peoples would be mollified by a recognition of the benefits in economic reconstruction and humanitarian welfare measures which would attend the return of the metropolitan powers. This was particularly true of assessments by OSS and the cooperating agencies of Allied powers with respect to the Netherlands East Indies. This miscalculation was to prove ultimately fatal to the interests of France and the Netherlands in Vietnam and Indonesia.

In the case of the Dutch, however, another unforeseen problem had by the time of the surrender of Japan in August 1945 come to represent a formidable hurdle to its reoccupation plans. In Australia, whence the main body of the Dutch NEI forces had fled in 1942, and where of necessity they had built up the military, administrative, and supply resources for their colonial comeback, they encountered unexpectedly strong obstacles to the realization of their objectives. The nub of the problem was that between 1942 and 1945 there had been forged a tight bond of amity and collaboration between Indonesian republicans in Australia and those militant trade unions of the host country which controlled most of the means of egress from the country. To make matters worse, this unusual alliance of Asian exiles and mutineers with workingmen of British background enjoyed not only substantial and growing support within the Australian community, but also the sneaking sympathy and at times the complicity of the Australian government itself.

The position taken up by the Labour Governments of Curtin and Chifley has often been misunderstood, and in Indonesia and Australia particularly a myth has grown up that they consistently and wholeheartedly espoused the cause of Indonesian independence. In fact, until the second Dutch "police action" of December 1948, the Australian government had always supported the reestablishment of Dutch rule in the NEI, as against the Republic. That having been said, however, there were a considerable number of ways in which Australian policy had in fact worked to frustrate and constrict Dutch plans and operations. There was no clear single motive in Australian official actions, but rather a complex of aspirations, interests, ideals, and prejudices among the Cabinet ministers which worked in inconsistent and haphazard ways but

overall hampered the Dutch effort and undermined relations between host and guest. Until firmly repressed by the great powers, Australia had her own mini-imperialist ambitions in the Southwest Pacific, and the Dutch had good reason to distrust Australian proposals for trusteeship and the like, which were aimed at their lowest at diluting Dutch sovereignty and at their highest at giving Australia entry to at least part of the NEI. But of greater consequence in practice were attitudes held by Australian ministers which derived from the social and political climate of Australia and proved incompatible with the rigidly authoritarian and hierarchical colonial outlook of the NEI Dutch. When External Affairs Minister Evatt intervened in 1943 to obtain the release of Indonesian prisoners of the Dutch held in Australian custody, he did so because a long record as a civil rights advocate had made it repugnant to him that he should preside over a prison for political detainees. When Minister for Information and Immigration Calwell went out of his way to frustrate Dutch plans to ship pro-Republican Indonesians back to Dutch-held territory, it was because his nationalist susceptibilities were outraged at the overbearing, supercilious ways of a colonial bureaucracy seeking to establish extra-territorial rights on Australian soil. When Prime Minister Chifley proved unwilling to take the firm measures expected of him by the Dutch to force maritime unions to lift their blockade on the ships that were to transport the colonial army and its supplies, it was not only out of concern for the economic and political consequences of doing so; the maritime leaders, by skillfully blending their political campaign on behalf of Indonesian independence with demands for the proper treatment of Indonesian seamen, struck straight to Chifley's heart. Chifley himself was a former engine driver,<sup>1</sup> a participant in the New South Wales general strike of 1917, and a trade unionist to the core.<sup>2</sup>

It was the combination of these reflexes, rather than any coordinated foreign policy vision, which gave the unions the freedom of action they required and allowed a groundswell of support for the Indonesian cause to build up within the Australian public. But it was the union campaign itself which was decisive in establishing in Australia what amounted virtually to a second front for the Indonesian republican movement. The long overdue story of that campaign is the subject of a recent book by Australian journalist Rupert Lockwood. *Black Armada* (Sydney: Australian Book Society, 1975) describes the origins of the boycott campaign, traces its history, and analyses its contribution to the Republican cause from the angle of a sympathetic participant and supporter.

In 1942 the Dutch brought with them to their Australian refuge an assorted baggage which included thousands of Indonesian servicemen, clerks, medical orderlies, and merchant seamen. Not least, they had taken the trouble to transport from the dreaded Boven Digul camp in Dutch New Guinea the hard core of Indonesian nationalist resisters, among whom were leaders of the Indonesian Communist Party captured during or after the uprisings of 1926-27. These were destined to

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<sup>1</sup>Otherwise known as a locomotive engineer.

<sup>2</sup>A carefully researched and illuminating study of Australian government policy in this area is to be found in Margaret L. George, "Australian Attitudes and Policies Towards the Netherlands East Indies and Indonesian Independence, 1942-1949" (Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 1973).

remain locked up in a military camp at Cowra, N.S.W., until the war's end. But it happened that when one of the prisoners was at an outer Sydney railway station he dropped a note (in English) onto the platform. This note outlined the prisoners' plight, and it was retrieved by a militant Australian unionist. From that moment, a nexus was established which was to play a determining role in the future course of Dutch experience in Australia. Credit has often been given to left-wing Australian unions for initiating the anti-Dutch actions in Australia, and frequently this bouquet has been thorned with allegations of an international communist conspiracy. A great merit of Lockwood's book is his establishing the fact that at every point in the struggle, at least up to late 1945, it was the Indonesians themselves who took the initiative, while Australian unionists, students, civil libertarians, and liberal churchmen responded to Indonesian approaches and acted upon Indonesian appeals.

Within the Indonesian camp, two forces were at work. On the one hand, the five hundred or so Boven Digul prisoners began an agitation for their freedom, to which various Australian leftwing and civic groups lent their support. Having won this vital first round, they immediately set about establishing Indonesian Independence Committees from which there poured out to Indonesian and Australian communities alike a constant stream of publicity and propoganda for the independence cause. During the same period, the Indonesian personnel under Dutch control began to be worked upon by other influences. Coming into contact with Australian soldiers, seamen, and other citizens, they began to appreciate the differences between the conditions of service in a colonial army and workforce and those in a conventional western democracy where wage rates, conditions of work, and civil rights were the stuff of everyday concern and activity. Finding considerable sympathy for their circumstances among their Australian hosts, it was not long before they began to press for a share in the Australian welfare cake. Dutch reactions and Republican propoganda from the Independence Committees ensured that by war's end the Dutch had lost control of virtually the whole of their Indonesian support force save for the Ambonese Janissaries. In September 1945 the crippling blow was struck when Indonesian servicemen in Queensland, New South Wales, and Victoria mutinied, demanding discharges and repatriation to Republican areas of their homeland.

Still the Dutch clung to a belief that, once removed from the contaminating atmosphere of Australian life, their colonial servants would come to heel and obey orders. For the most part, they failed to obtain the chance to put the theory to the test. As soon as the Dutch began to prepare their ships for sailing back to the NEI (September 1945), the busy Indonesians canvassed the key maritime unions for support for their decision not to sail the ships, and the unions responded. The great boycott had begun.

Lockwood estimates that over the next nine months "subject in some manner to black bans in Australia were 36 Dutch merchant ships, passenger-liners and troopships, two tankers and 35 other oil industry craft, 450 power and dumb barges, lighters and surface-landing craft . . . and aircraft and a vast land transport fleet. Nine corvettes, two submarines . . . and seven submarine-chasers of the Royal Netherlands Navy, two British troopships under Admiralty orders and three Royal Australian Navy vessels were also listed as black." He argues that by

preventing or delaying the dispatch to the NEI of sorely needed troops, administrators, technicians, supplies, communications vessels and vehicles, archives, and coinage, the boycott contributed importantly to the survival of the Republic, and there is no reason to quarrel with this assessment. Certainly SEAC Commander Lord Louis Mountbatten, as Lockwood recounts, found the boycott sufficiently hampering to operations in his zone that in March 1946 he made a special flight into Sydney in a vain attempt to persuade maritime union leaders to release the ships. Not all the honors went to the boycotters, however: Dutch determination and navigational skills, union divisions, and Australian government pressures combined to break the ban at various points. The brunt of the sacrifices in the struggle fell most heavily upon the Asian seamen--not only Indonesian, but Malayan, Indian, and Chinese--who took part in the campaign, many of them being jailed, deported, and (as in the case of many Indians) deprived of their livelihood. By mid-1946 the Dutch had managed to free most of their ships, but they carried very little of their cargoes away; these were destined never to be used in the colonial war. The boycott was gradually abandoned, to be revived during each of the subsequent Dutch police actions, on these occasions with united trade union support, an indication of the decisive shift in Australian opinion towards the Republic as the war dragged on.

Lockwood, himself a communist journalist at the time these events took place, makes no secret of the role played by the Communist Party of Australia in planning and leading the boycott campaign. At that time the CPA was at the height of its strength and influence. It controlled the large unions of seamen and waterside workers, as well as unions involved in land transport, and its influence was crucial in mobilizing the key workers and public opinion. However, there are two points to be made about the communist role. First, there is no reason to believe that it was motivated by considerations other than its own ideological commitment to anticolonialism and the support this stand would earn it among sympathetic sections of the community. Soviet policy towards Asia at this time was certainly too loose and ambivalent to have formed a significant element in the Australian communist actions. Second, no amount of stress on communist plotting can explain the extraordinary efflorescence of popular support for the Indonesians among workers, soldiers, students, church groups, popular democrats, and within the government itself. The fact that the movement arose within a working class and a community with a history of anti-Asian sentiment, expressed not infrequently in chauvinistic outbursts and restrictive practices, makes it all the more inexplicable within such narrow bounds of interpretation. Lockwood is aware of the contradiction, but makes no serious attempt to resolve it. There is no doubt that a number of factors combined to produce the Australian reaction, among them the impact of wartime ideals and euphoria, communist ideology, resentment against Australia's wartime "occupiers," soldiers' experiences during the Pacific fighting, and union principles. There was a diffuse sympathy for oppressed people in circumstances where they were visibly weak and not menacing. As a student political activist myself at the time, I recall the deep impression made upon young people by the contrast between beefy, pugnacious Dutch officers and self-effacing but persistent Indonesian seamen. A caricature perhaps, but a living one. Nevertheless, a catalog does not make an interpretation. There is a subject for further study here for one whose interests lie in Australian culture rather than in Indonesian life. One irony of

history that such a study should not overlook is that the only event since 1945 which has evoked anything like a comparable response in Australia has been the Indonesian invasion of East Timor.

Rupert Lockwood has given a colorful and basically reliable account of one of the more interesting and significant eddies in the anticolonial current. Despite minor blemishes--a tendency at times to overstate the role of Indonesians in Australia in comparison with the struggle inside Indonesia itself, a rather weak appreciation of internal Republican politics, a bias towards Sydney sources and activities, and some patches of purple prose--his book is eminently readable and a valuable supplement to other accounts of the birthpangs of the Republic. In its own right, too, the Australian shipping boycott deserves to be documented; as Lockwood says, "It is difficult to recall a boycott anywhere in the world comparable in character and scope."