

NOTE ON SOEDJATMOKO'S RECOLLECTIONS OF A HISTORICAL MOMENT:
SJAHRIR'S REACTION TO HO CHI MINH'S 1945 CALL FOR A FREE
PEOPLES FEDERATION¹

Hanna Papanek

In November 1984, in the course of one of our many conversations during the nearly twenty years I knew him, Soedjatmoko—Koko—spoke about his friend Harold Isaacs, then a Professor at M.I.T., and told me a story involving Ho Chi Minh and Sutan Sjahrir that I found so remarkable that I made some notes immediately afterwards. Although a different outcome to this story might have changed the course of history, I have no personal recollection of discussing such a possibility with Koko. He would presumably have dealt with these events more fully in his memoirs—the memoirs that Harold Isaacs and I, among others, were always urging him to write—but these memoirs will now never be written. For this reason, I have pursued further some of the details of this story and present them here for the historical record. For the same reason, I have also mentioned the incident briefly in some of the memorial articles I have written elsewhere about Soedjatmoko.² Historians of both Indonesia and Vietnam, and perhaps India, may want to seek details from other sources but here is the story as I know it.

In 1945, the late Harold Isaacs, then covering the Asian Revolutions for *Newsweek* magazine, carried a letter from Ho Chi Minh, his "Shanghai friend of long ago," to the leaders of the Indonesian nationalist revolution in Java.³ Isaacs had been barred from returning to China by the "Kuomintang government . . . not having approved particularly some of my reports from that country,"⁴ but he had continued to travel throughout the region, including Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Indochina, Siam, Malaya, and Java, as described in some detail in *No Peace for Asia*.

In this book, Isaacs also describes his conversations with Ho Chi Minh about Asian revolutions and the role of the Great Powers (see especially pp. 163–76)—conversations that provide some of the background for the documents that he was asked to carry to Java. Isaacs reports that, while Ho Chi Minh felt that "the Viet Nam Republic could count on relative cohesiveness [because] the dangers of internal conflict were small,"⁵ Viet Nam would need outside help to survive as an independent state. At the time, they could not count on the Chinese although that might change in the future. As for the Russians, Isaacs reports that he met "no Annamite," including many Communists, who thought the Russians would help their cause. The small group of French Communists in Indochina, who might have been expected to support it, instead issued a document warning the Indochinese Communist Party that they should be sure that their struggle "meets the requirements of Soviet policy."⁶ Under the circumstances reported by Harold

¹I am grateful to Viola Isaacs and Galuh Soedjatmoko for their help and advice in preparing this note.

²See *Tempo*, January 6, 1990, and *Economic and Political Weekly*, with Goenawan Muhamad, forthcoming.

³Harold Isaacs, *No Peace for Asia* (New York: Macmillan, 1947; Paperback edition, Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1967), p. 163.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. vii.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 173.

Isaacs, it is not surprising that Ho Chi Minh turned to the leaders of the new nationalist revolutions in southern Asia with the proposal outlined in the documents reproduced below (from the Harold R. Isaacs Papers in the M.I.T. Archives). I have no information as to whether similar letters went to other Asian leaders, but this again is a point to be pursued by historians.

BỘ NGOẠI-GIAO

VIỆT-NAM DÂN-CHỦ CỘNG-HÒA
ĐỘC-LẬP - TỰ-DO - HẠNH-PHÚC

Số

Hanoi
Nov. 17, 1945

To the President of the Republic of Indonesia

My dear friend:

In the present struggle which we are waging against foreign domination, our two peoples are bound in a common cause which no force can weaken.

I take this opportunity to propose to you that Viet Nam and Indonesia make a public declaration of their complete solidarity in their present struggle for freedom, at the same time appealing jointly to India, Burma, and Malaya and all the subject peoples of Asia to join us in a common front.

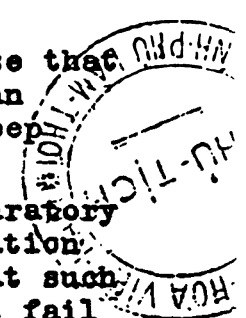
Confident in the justice of our cause, I propose that we show all the Great Powers of the world that nothing can break down our unanimous determination to fight and to keep on fighting for our liberation.

To this end we propose the formation of a Preparatory Commission with the ultimate purpose of creating a Federation of the Free Peoples of Southern Asia. I am confident that such a proposal, coming jointly from our two peoples, will not fail to awaken the widest response.

Here in Viet Nam we continue and shall continue to fight to the bitter end. We extend to you our warmest greetings and our wishes for your victory in our common cause.

Yours sincerely,

Ho Chi Minh
President of the Provisional
Government of the People's
Republic of Viet Nam.



BỘ NGOẠI-GIAO**VIỆT-NAM DÂN-CHỦ CỘNG-HÒA
ĐỘC-LẬP - TỰ-DO - HẠNH-PHÚC**

Số _____

Proposed Text of Common Declaration by Viet Nam and Indonesia

1. We the peoples of Indonesia and Viet Nam proclaim to the world our complete solidarity in our common struggle for our common cause: liberation and independence from foreign domination.

2. We jointly appeal to the peoples of India, Burma, Malaya and all colonial Asia to join us in this sacred struggle for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

3. It is evident, from the actions of Great Britain on the battlefronts of Indochina and Indonesia and from the silence of all the other Great Powers in the face of the efforts of France and Holland to re-establish their empires by force, that we must depend on ourselves and ourselves alone to win our freedom.

4. It seems no less evident now that all the fine phrases and glittering promises made by the Great Powers during the war were nothing but empty words meant to deceive the peoples of the world, especially those peoples who have yet to win for themselves the most elementary liberty of self-determination.

5. We declare to all the peoples of the world that for us the words justice and freedom and self-determination still have some meaning, that they can be translated into real life instead of remaining lies on scraps of paper written by scheming politicians and would-be masters.

6. We appeal to the peoples of India, Burma, and Malaya to join us in a Preparatory Commission to meet at the earliest possible moment, with a view to creating a Federation of Free Peoples of Southern Asia, to form a common front in the present struggles and to join hands for the building of our common future.

According to Koko's recollection in 1984, the letter from Ho Chi Minh went to Mohammad Hatta (whom Ho had apparently met in 1929, according to a member of the Soedjatmoko family). Hatta passed it on to Sutan Sjahrir who was then prime minister. (Sjahrir had become prime minister of Indonesia's first parliamentary government in November 1945 and, according to Viola Isaacs, Harold Isaacs was in Java in early or mid-December 1945. According to a member of the Soedjatmoko family, Koko had been asked by Amir Sjarifuddin, minister of information in the Sukarno government, to help him set up the foreign section of that Ministry. Koko's primary task was to talk to foreign correspondents, and it was in that capacity that he met Harold Isaacs on his visit to Java. This was the beginning of a life-long friendship.)

Sjahrir discussed the offer with Koko but told him he would not answer the letter and would just ignore it. Koko recalled that he was bitterly disappointed and asked why. Sjahrir replied that the Indonesian nationalists were facing the Dutch who were a weak colonial power and would be quickly defeated. He argued that "our revolution is based on nationalism and our movement contains mainly nationalists." On the other hand, according to Koko's memory of Sjahrir's argument, "Ho Chi Minh is facing the French who will resist him for a very long time. Ho is also dependent on the support of the Communists who are very powerful in the independence movement which is not the case with us." Sjahrir concluded by saying that "if we ally ourselves with Ho Chi Minh, we will weaken ourselves and delay independence." Koko, then a young and passionately idealistic activist, argued that this was a betrayal of the greater Asian Revolution. Sjahrir was not persuaded and never answered the letter. According to a member of the Soedjatmoko family, Koko later felt that history had proved Sjahrir right.

For Koko, this was obviously a very important memory for he referred to it on other occasions, including our last conversations in New York in late October 1989, a few weeks before his death. He also discussed it with members of his family and other friends in conversations that I hope they will wish to publish in the future.