

**Harry A. Poeze. *Verguisd en vergeten: Tan Malaka, de linkse beweging en de Indonesische Revolutie, 1945–1949* (Reviled and Forgotten. Tan Malaka, the Leftist Movement, and the Indonesian Revolution, 1945–1949).**

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They don't make books like this any more. Over two thousand pages (in a boxed set of three volumes), containing everything the author felt relevant to his subject. Moreover, the subject is the last three years of his hero's life, during which—if not exactly reviled and forgotten as the title claims—Tan Malaka was for the most part in jail or in hiding. Fortunately for the author, but perhaps less so for the reader, Poeze is in charge of the KITLV Press and so could call the publishing tune. The first part of what has been his lifework, the biography of the Indonesian revolutionary Tan Malaka, recounted his heyday in the prewar independence movement, as a leader of the PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia, Indonesian Communist Party) and an agent of the Comintern.<sup>1</sup> It was a mere 605 pages long, and is a very solid contribution to our understanding of that time. Now the author has really been able to let himself go, and the result is both fascinating and frustrating. The three-volume set offers a view into the byways of revolutionary thinking and action that is a useful corrective to histories focused on grand events, as well as a source of interminable debates among people whose cry was for united revolutionary organization and who were totally incapable of agreeing on or organizing anything.

Poeze's approach to history is Rankeian—he wants to gather all possible material in order to discover “what really happened.” And what happened is a matter of personal action:

The Revolution and the Republic were not driven by the development of impersonal and ineluctable social processes, but by a myriad of persons and organizations, army units and armed groups, national and local politicians, idealism and opportunism, patriotism and banditry, heroes and cowards, whose complicated interaction ended, as if by a miracle, in the Dutch recognition of the sovereignty of an independent Indonesian state. (p. 2003)

In order to portray this web of activities, Poeze has undertaken a monumental program of archival research, in which it appears that he has read every relevant newspaper, intelligence report, and pamphlet that has been preserved from the revolutionary years in the Netherlands, Jakarta, and Yogyakarta. In addition, from the early 1980s he assiduously interviewed those of Tan Malaka's associates whom he could trace, though the work remains overwhelmingly based on written material. (It also makes good use of archival photographs, which do much to bring the account to life.)

The result is a book that is both a gold mine and a swamp. It is certainly not one to read without a good prior knowledge of Indonesian revolutionary events, for not only

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<sup>1</sup> Harry A. Poeze, *Tan Malaka, strijder voor Indonesië's vrijheid; Levensloop van 1897 tot 1945* [Tan Malaka: Fighter for Indonesia's Freedom: Career from 1897 to 1945] (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1976; KITLV Verhandelingen No. 78). Also published as Poeze's doctoral dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 1976.

is the detail overwhelming and skewed towards anything that happened in Tan Malaka's camp, but the exhaustive pursuit of one line of development can mean that the next section or chapter loops back to discuss the same period from another angle. The logic of a train of argument does not always correspond to the logic of events, and thus a subject such as the formation of the Partai Murba (Party of the Masses) is pursued to its finish, after which the discussion turns back in time to the Madiun Affair, the vital background against which Murba's foundation took place. Most people will probably approach this work as a book of reference, to find out what the author has unearthed about a particular issue. This is reasonably easy, as the book is indexed and well provided with section titles, but in so doing they will miss the overall picture that the author has been at pains to construct.

The problem is how you describe a mosaic of activities that is very complex and only partially known, when you wish to use the "facts" to reveal the picture rather than subordinating them to a particular argument. Do you include everything possibly relevant, so that there is a record and readers may judge for themselves? This generally has been Poeze's approach, but, aside from resulting in a sometimes impenetrable thicket of detail, the amount of material on Tan Malaka and his followers inevitably means that a wider picture of the revolution is lost. When there is some particularly dramatic piece of action, the author's desire to include every relevant detail does give way to a focus on narrative, resulting in an often riveting account of events. This is particularly true of the discussions of the 3 July Affair and the Madiun Affair. The latter, a chapter of three hundred pages, could easily have been a monograph on its own. Perhaps someday the author will be persuaded to publish it separately, as it is an important contribution to understanding that turning point in Indonesian revolutionary history.

If part of the problem is Poeze's desire to convey every bit of material he has dug up, another lies in the character of Tan Malaka himself and what it meant for his role in the revolution. His career in the 1920s, and the tales that circulated about him in exile afterwards as the "Scarlet Pimpernel" of the Indonesian independence struggle,<sup>2</sup> meant that he was far from unknown in radical circles when he returned secretly to Indonesia following the Japanese invasion. Understandably, he lay low during the war, but in the period after the Japanese collapse he was markedly reluctant to declare who he was or, when he had finally revealed himself to a small group of key political actors, to assert his own claims to leadership. He could, Poeze states, have had a great role with the outbreak of the revolution—"his name and fame were legendary. Soekarno recognized him as a teacher, a superior in revolutionary knowledge and experience" but "through accident, through bad luck" he missed out on a role in the Proclamation of Independence (pp. 2001–2). As we read on, however, we begin to wonder whether it was just misfortune. He did not play a role in the revival of the PKI in October 1945, though he certainly had a powerful claim to do so, nor did he revive PARI, a revolutionary group that he had founded in exile. He was active (indeed, the central symbolic figure) in the establishment of the Persatuan Perjuangan (Union for Struggle) in January 1946, but he refused to assume its leadership, or indeed any organizational

<sup>2</sup> Especially *Spionnage-dienst (Patjar Merah Indonesia)* [Espionage Service (Indonesia's Scarlet Pimpernel)], by Matu Mona (pseudonym of Hasbullah Parinduri), a very popular work of fiction published by Centrale Courant en Boekhandel in Medan in 1938.

role at all. When he was released from prison following the outbreak of the Madiun Affair, he did not seize the opportunity to support the government or to provide an alternative leadership for the left. He refused to become a member, let alone leader, of the GRR (Gerakan Rakjat Revolusioner, Peoples' Revolutionary Movement) and the Partai Murba, though he was the only real focus for loyalty among their adherents. Poeze thinks that over twenty years in hiding inclined Tan Malaka to an "underground" existence; he was simply very uncomfortable with legality. This was in spite of the fact that he could be a very effective speaker and had a personality that attracted a most loyal following.

Poeze also suggests that Tan Malaka's basic self-image was as a guru, that he sought to guide others in action rather than to take action himself. Or perhaps, we might imagine, he saw himself as a prophet. One of his followers described how Tan Malaka departed on what was to be his final journey into hiding:

With some ceremony he consigned the manuscript of *Madilog*: "Jesus Christ left the Bible behind, Mohamad the Koran, and I leave only *Madilog*. This is no work of propaganda, but sets down a way of thinking, an approach to and analysis of all questions. *Madilog* is a guide; my death is not a serious matter, for *Madilog* exists" (p. 1046).<sup>3</sup>

At any rate, Tan Malaka does seem to have felt that there would be a moment when things would come together, that his followers would cease their quarrelling, and that people generally would recognize the truth of the things he was trying to tell them. Whether in jail, in hiding, or in the few months of his freedom, Tan Malaka wrote. Much has been lost (and was only ever available in typescript), and much was not signed by him. Of the twenty-five pamphlets that he wrote in his last period in hiding, from January 5 to February 7, 1949, all were attributed to the "Partai Murba Underground," and he himself was mentioned in only two of them, in the third person. But the last contained the text of the "testament" whereby Sukarno is supposed to have designated Tan Malaka as his successor in case he, Sukarno, was removed from the scene (p. 1417). The most enduring of these works is Tan Malaka's autobiography, written while in prison in 1946–48.<sup>4</sup> For the rest, though Tan Malaka's surviving followers tried to pass on his message as far as impecuniosity and chronic disorganization allowed, his writings found little resonance.

Tan Malaka seems to have been a revolutionary exile whose train to the Finland Station never departed, even when he found himself in the midst of revolt. Perhaps, by the time of the independence proclamation, his hard life had left him played out as well as suspicious.<sup>5</sup> But as a symbol of uncompromising struggle for independence, he

<sup>3</sup> Tan Malaka's declaration as remembered by Bujung Siregar in an interview in 1980.

<sup>4</sup> *Dari Penjara ke Penjara*. The first publication, in April 1948, was in stenciled form; for the subsequent publication of its three parts, see pp. 2023–25. It has been translated into English by Helen Jarvis: *Tan Malaka, From Jail to Jail* (Athens, OH: Ohio University, 1991; in three volumes).

<sup>5</sup> That, at least, was the opinion of Paramita (Jo) Abdurachman, Subardjo's niece; Subardjo was one of the first political leaders Tan Malaka contacted. She acted as Tan Malaka's assistant for a time in the early revolution, and was of the opinion that Subardjo and others involved in the opposition to a course of negotiation with the Dutch were using Tan Malaka for their own power struggle and had little concern about his goals. Conversations of the reviewer with Paramita Abdurachman, 1959. See also Poeze, p. 40, fn 89.

was powerful, and his significance lay not so much in what he did as what other political leaders thought he might do, or what might be done in his name. So he was jailed in March 1946, not for his actions but to get him out of the way. In July he was asserted to have mentored an attempted coup, even though he was in prison at the time and had no evident link to it. In the trials that followed, as Poeze notes, "the proceedings centered on Tan Malaka, even though he was not one of the ones tried" (p. 916). He remained unjudged but also unreleased, until the outbreak of the Madiun Affair in September 1948 led the republic's leaders to consider that he might be useful in their hour of need to split the ranks of the PKI. But once the Dutch had overrun the republic and captured Sukarno and Hatta, the possibility arose that Tan Malaka, who was underground with some TNI troops and guerrillas in the Kediri area, might yet assert leadership of the revolution. Orders were therefore given for his death (p. 1465), thus finally settling the matter of his potential threat or usefulness.

The third volume of the study (some six hundred pages) is entirely concerned with Tan Malaka's final flight and violent death, and the subsequent career of the Partai Murba and its followers, up to 2007. The latter is a rather discouraging account of an ever-dwindling band, its members for the most part concerned with hanging onto whatever shreds of significance the revolution and association with Tan Malaka had given them. Towards the end, the author himself makes an increasingly prominent appearance, as his interest in Partai Murba's hero becomes one of the group's few signs of vigor. One wonders what would have happened if Tan Malaka had survived the revolution. Would he have continued to be the symbol of a radical alternative for Indonesia, or would he have gradually, finding himself ever further from a real chance at power, ended up as the guru of a small and backward-looking sect? Perhaps revolutionary martyrdom was not such a bad end.

They don't make books like this any more. I can hear some of you saying "Thank God!" Still, if you are studying the Indonesian revolution, you will almost surely have to address yourself to this work. Those who struggle with Dutch can take comfort in the fact that an Indonesian translation is said to be in the works. We might also hope, now that all relevant material has been made available through these volumes, that the author will undertake a version (if possible, in English or Indonesian) that will concentrate on telling the tale. He is certainly capable of putting a narrative together, and it will make Tan Malaka accessible to many more who should be interested in him.