

**Melati lezing door  
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14 augustus 2025**



**Nationale Herdenking  
15 augustus 1945**

**Japan as a Liberator and Colonizer: Indonesia's  
Perspectives on the Japanese Occupation of  
Indonesia – Then, Now and Beyond**

**Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,**

De First of all I would like to thank the Stichting Nationale Herdenking 15 augustus 1945 for working hard to get me from Yogyakarta to Den Haag. Standing and speaking here is a great honor for me. I would also like to thank all of you for being willing to attend and listen to my talk. Accepting an invitation to speak here is not easy, considering that as an Indonesian historian I must speak about Indonesian perspectives on Japanese occupation in front of a Dutch audience. Nevertheless, I accepted this invitation—as well as this challenge—because I consider that Melati Lezing is a bridge of dialogue between the two nations about their shared history in the past and the preservation of memory about that history in the present.

It is good to be back in the Netherlands. I studied for two years at Universiteit Leiden, then worked as a researcher at the Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie (NIOD) in Amsterdam and pursued my doctoral degree at Universiteit van Amsterdam. I often went to Den Haag, from searching archives at the Nationaal Archief, visiting Scheveningen, renewing passports at the Indonesian Embassy, to attending a communal meal and feasts to celebrate Eid al-Fitr at the residence of the Indonesian ambassador in Wassenaar.

When I first got this invitation and heard the word '*melati*', my memory immediately flew to many things. Melati is the most famous flower in Indonesia. My mother in Padang, West Sumatra, used to have a small *melati* garden in front of our house. Every time the *melati* flowers blooms, she will take them and sprinkle them in the house, making the whole room fragrant. In accordance with the function of *melati* as a giver of beauty and a good atmosphere maker, I imagine that this Melati Lezing certainly also has a function as a reminder of goodness, in this case about the cessation of war, about paying tribute to the victims who fell during the war, about remembering the massive impact of war, and about the importance of peace.

Ladies and Gentlemen,



On August 15, 1945, the Japanese Emperor announced Japan's surrender to the Allies, ending World War II and the Japanese occupation of Indonesia. In Jakarta, Indonesian youths heard the defeat of Japan from underground radio. They kidnapped two prominent nationalist leaders, Soekarno and Mohamad Hatta, to urge the two to immediately proclaim Indonesia's independence. Two days later, on August 17, 1945, Soekarno and Hatta declared Indonesia's independence. British and Dutch troops arrived in September 1945 and the war to defend Indonesian independence erupted.

The Japanese occupation was a crucial period for Indonesians, Dutch and Indo-Europeans in Indonesia. For the Dutch, the Japanese occupation meant the loss of their most precious colony. The Japanese interned about 100,000 Dutch people in internment camps in various regions of Indonesia in poor conditions. Many Indo-Europeans lived outside the camp because the Japanese considered them to have Asian blood. However, they had a miserable life. The Ambonese, Manadonese, Timorese and Javanese people who were affiliated with the Dutch faced hardship as well in these troubled times.

How did Indonesians view the Japanese occupation, both during the occupation and beyond? In general, the perspectives of Indonesians towards the occupation can be divided into two major ideas, namely Japan as a liberator of Indonesia from Dutch colonialism and Japan as a cruel colonizer. I will explain these two perspectives by describing the four frameworks used by Indonesians in responding to the Japanese occupation, namely: 1) acceptance and rejection, 2) hopes, 3) atrocities, and 4) resistance. Besides, I will explain how historiography and popular culture in Indonesia represent the occupation.

### **Acceptance and Rejection**

In the late colonial period, some Indonesians admired Japan, especially since Japan defeated Russia in the 1905 war and also because of its technological and economic advances. Japan often campaigned for the solidarity of Asian nations in the face of Western colonialism. This positive view of Japan was even stronger considering that Indonesian nationalists were disappointed with the colonial regime that limited the political participation of Indonesians. Many Indonesians were also frustrated with the Dutch because they fled the war and left Indonesians alone to deal with the Japanese. The defeat of the Netherlands as a Western nation by an Asian nation increased the appreciation of Indonesians for Japan. These reasons explain why some Indonesians accepted the Japanese.



However, there were also Indonesians who even before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor had rejected German and Japanese fascism. They considered that fascism is discriminatory and viewed that Indonesians should adopt the new world order promoted by the United States, which respects human rights. Moreover, some Indonesians read in the print media about the atrocities committed by Japanese troops against local communities in the areas they controlled, such as in Hong Kong and Indochina. There were fears that Japan will do the same in Indonesia. All of this strengthened the reason for the Indonesians to reject the arrival of the Japanese.

I recently published two studies about how Indonesians responded to the Japanese invasion between late 1941 and early 1942. I found that when many Indonesians were frightened by the Japanese invasion and the colonial government barely providing protection to the natives, the initiative to protect the Indonesian people came from the Indonesians themselves. The Yogyakarta-based modernist Islamic organization, Muhammadiyah, for example, during the Japanese invasion guided the Indonesians to save themselves from the Japanese bombing and established a special institution to help the victims of the invasion. Similarly, the women's wing of Muhammadiyah, 'Aisyiyah', called on Indonesian women to keep their safety and honor in the midst of war and hailed them to contribute to defending the Indonesian homeland.

### **Hopes**

When the Japanese finally took control of Indonesia, the Indonesians believed that the Dutch colonial era was over. A new hope emerged, that Indonesia would soon become independent. The Japanese showed their sympathy for the political aspirations of the Indonesians. The massive Japanese propaganda that campaigned for Japan as the leader of Asian nations that would liberate Asia from Western colonialism was accepted by Indonesians as a prerequisite for Indonesian independence. Besides, the Japanese removed all things Dutch, from city names to colonial bureaucracy. For Indonesians, all of these were things they had dreamed of for a long time.

Japan massively mobilized Indonesians. Indonesians welcomed it enthusiastically because they were now considered important by the foreign rulers. This can be seen from the participation of Indonesians in Japanese-formed organizations aimed at Indonesians from various backgrounds, such as Fujinkai for women, Keimin Bunka Shidosho for man of letters, and semi-military organizations, Heiho and Gyugun, for Indonesian youth. Japan provided Indonesians with opportunities to express their nationalism—although limited—such as the use of the Indonesian language and the raising of the Indonesian flag.



For the first time, Indonesians were given the opportunity to occupy high civil positions, which in the Dutch colonial period were only given to the Dutch. An example is Bagindo Dahlan Abdullah, a Minangkabau who was appointed mayor of Jakarta in March 1942, replacing a Dutchman, E.A. Voorneman, as Burgemeester of Batavia.

Indonesians gained important knowledge and experience because they worked with the Japanese, such as in the fields of government, military, organization, propaganda, agriculture, and life skills. With Japan increasingly pressured by Allied attacks, the Japanese promised immediate independence for Indonesia, and this was manifested in the formation of the Investigating Body to Investigate the Preparation of Indonesian Independence (BPUPKI) and the Committee for the Preparation of Indonesian Independence (PPKI), which played a major role in the formation of Indonesia's constitution.

In short, the Japanese raised hopes about the imminent realization of an independent Indonesia. Several Japanese policies have succeeded in making Indonesians confident that they were capable of becoming leaders for their own people, an important foundation towards an independent Indonesian state.

### **Atrocities**

Although it is remembered as the period that paved the way for Indonesia's independence, the Japanese occupation period for Indonesians was also synonymous with a period of unprecedented suffering. Various Japanese policies exploited Indonesians for the sake of Japan's war. Millions of Indonesians were forced to become *romusha* to build railways, roads and bunkers under extremely poor working conditions. Many young Indonesian women were deceived and eventually made as sexual slaves by the Japanese army.

Millions of Indonesians in Java died of starvation, especially because of the forced delivery of rice to the Japanese authority. I, in my current research project, 'Oral History of the Great Java Famine of 1944-45', in cooperation with Ingrid de Zwart from Wageningen University & Research, have conducted interviews with a number of Indonesians who are mostly over 90 years old. When I asked them about the Japanese era, one of the things they remembered most was about the severity of the famine in those days. A 94-year-old Indonesian survivor in Kulonprogo summed up the impact by using a Dutch term: '*hongerodeem*'. Indonesians were malnourished and affected by diseases such as beriberi and dysentery, and even died of severe starvation. Another survivor from Bantul, who is 103 years old, told me that in terms of food policy, the Japanese were significantly more horrific than the Dutch. Because rice was rare, people in Java



ate unusual foods, including caterpillars, grasshoppers and snails. Now, if there is a child in Indonesia who does not want to finish his food, then his great-grandfather, who once lived in the Japanese era, will sometimes reprimand him by reminding him that it used to be very difficult for people to get food in the Japanese era. The theme of the great famine in Java, unfortunately, is still rarely studied by historians.

Clothes were very difficult to obtain during the occupation, and many Indonesians could only use burlap sacks for clothing. The savagery of the Japanese military police, Kempeitai, also left an imprint on the memory of senior Indonesians.

Because of the brutality of the Japanese occupation, Indonesian historians have recently argued that the Japanese period should no longer be called a period of '*pendudukan*' or 'occupation' but a period of '*penjajahan*' or 'colonialism', just like the Dutch colonialism but with much worse impacts in a very short time. The term 'occupation' indicates a temporary foreign rule while the term 'colonialism' means the foreign domination in the political, military, social and economic spheres as well as the extraordinary exploitation of natives and their natural resources.

### **Resistance**

Although the Indonesians cooperated with the Japanese, the relationship was not always stable. Indonesians saw that there was always a point where Japanese actions can no longer be tolerated. In some cases, Japanese atrocities were responded to harshly by the Indonesians. Some of the resistance against Japan was led by Islamic clerics, who rejected the '*seikerei*' (bowing in honor of the Japanese Emperor in Tokyo) and could not accept the Japanese's cruelty to the population. Such resistances occurred in Aceh in November 1942 and in West Java in February 1944.

Joining a Japanese-made institution does not mean that the Indonesians close their eyes to the suffering of other Indonesians. The Indonesian youths who were members of the semi-military body Peta (Defenders of the Homeland), witnessed firsthand the suffering of the *romusha* and villagers under Japanese rule. They resisted, although they were eventually crushed by the Japanese, as happened in the case of the resistance of the Peta soldiers in Blitar, East Java, in February 1945.

While some of the resistance to the Japanese was carried out with weapons, others were conducted in secret. There were several underground movement groups that organized resistance against the Japanese, such as the Sjahrir group, the Sukarni group, the Achmad Soebardjo group, and the

Amir Syarifuddin group. Sjahrir's group mobilized students and distributed anti-Japanese pamphlets. Amir's resistance movement, which was connected to the colonial government, was dismantled by the Kempeitai, who later arrested and punished him.



### **Memories of the Japanese Occupation**

The study of the Japanese occupation at the university level in Indonesia emerged in the late 1970s, with a particular focus on Japanese political and military policies in Indonesia. Nowadays, there have been more studies on Japanese occupation, with a more diverse focus, such as on aspects of culture, health, and everyday experiences in various local contexts. I myself at my campus, Yogyakarta State University, supervised several students who write undergraduate theses about the occupation, such as on the teaching of Japanese language to Indonesians and the mobilization of villagers in Bantul to become *romusha* to build bunkers. Throughout Yogyakarta there are dozens of Japanese bunkers or caves built using Indonesian workers. Last June I visited some of them, which were on a hill near Parangtritis Beach in south Yogyakarta. I could only imagine the hard work of the Indonesian *romusha* to transport the stones from the river to the hill on foot in the middle of the scorching daytime sun.

One of the earliest and most essential references for Indonesians in understanding the Japanese occupation is a series of government-sponsored history books, *Sejarah Nasional Indonesia*, which was first published in 1975 and updated several times. This book mainly focuses on Japanese military rule, the participation of the nationalist leaders, the mobilization of Indonesian youth, and preparations for Indonesian independence. Meanwhile, history textbooks in Indonesian schools have a uniform narrative pattern in explaining the occupation. These textbooks emphasize the massive mobilization of Indonesians, the plight of *romusha* and sexual slaves, the exploitation of villagers, and the ongoing struggle for an independent Indonesia. A text in a history book for senior high schools published in 2007 states that: "In the hands of the Japanese the Indonesian people were exploited for their own interests. But this was a blessing in disguise, because as a result of the exploitation, the Indonesian people become a resilient nation. They had skills in war and in politics". These books barely mention the fate of the Dutch and Indo-Europeans during the occupation. If anything, what is discussed is the crushing defeat of the Dutch troops and their allies by the Japanese forces.

After the occupation, Indonesians who lived during the occupation viewed this period as a momentum for the collapse of Dutch colonialism and the road to an independent Indonesia.



Cooperation with Japan, thus, was seen as a strategic choice. Sukarno, in his autobiography in 1965, stated that he knew of the brutality of the Japanese in the areas they occupied, but he felt that the Japanese occupation could be used to realize Indonesian independence. Similarly, Mohamad Hatta, who was originally an anti-fascist and a supporter of the Allies, in his autobiography in 1979 underlined that he was willing to help the Japanese as long as the Japanese also helped Indonesia to achieve its independence.

### **Representations of the Japanese Occupation in Popular Culture**

Nowadays Indonesians, both millennials and especially Gen Z, are very active on social media. Themes about the Japanese occupation in Indonesia can be found on various social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter or X, and YouTube. Social media helps the narratives on the Japanese occupation spread more quickly and widely, mainly because of its simplified storytelling and the use of audio-visual media that is easier to understand. The National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia's Instagram, for example, in 2023 featured a postcard photo of a Dutchman held captive in a Japanese camp for his family, and this post received dozens of likes.

The most widely used platform to discuss the Japanese occupation is Twitter or X. X accounts related to Indonesian history, such as history book publishers, young historians or popular historical websites, post various aspects of the Japanese occupation. The book publisher Kobam, for example, promotes their latest books on Japanese atrocities, and got a lot of views. Popular historical web accounts Historia.id feature different aspects of the Japanese occupation, such as the sexual violence of Japanese troops against Indonesian women and its long-lasting impact even into the 1990s, when survivors demanded their rights. Indonesian amateur historians in X discuss Japanese atrocities, including the massacre of tens of thousands of natives as well as a number of Chinese, Indians, and Arabs accused of fighting against the Japanese in West Kalimantan in 1943-1944. Collectors post documents, print media or books that date back to the Japanese era. Another theme that receives a lot of attention in X is about Japan's war compensation for Indonesia.

An Indonesian account on X discusses the Japanese camp in Cideng, Jakarta, that was used to intern the Dutch, with photos taken from the NIOD. Wikipedia Indonesia is also active on X, for example by posting the history of *Rukun Tetangga* and *Rukun Warga* (Neighborhood Associations) dating back to the Japanese occupation, and about the execution of an Indonesian doctor at the Eijkman Institute, who was accused of contaminating the tetanus vaccine, Achmad Mochtar. Today,

Achmad Mochtar's name is used as the name of a hospital in Bukittinggi, a city that was once the center of Japanese military rule in Sumatra. Local X accounts, such as Merapi Uncover in Yogyakarta, posts information about the Mataram Canal, a 31-kilometer-long ditch in Yogyakarta, which was built during the Japanese occupation by Indonesian labors to irrigate rice fields in Yogyakarta.



YouTube takes the memory of the Japanese occupation of Indonesia to a higher level. It provides educational videos about the Japanese occupation. On August 15, 2020, one of the leading television stations in Indonesia, TV One, on their YouTube channel released a video titled '*Masa Pendudukan Jepang*' (The Japanese Occupation Period) in commemoration of Indonesia's 75th Independence Day. The video in popular style explains the suffering of the Indonesian people under Japanese military rule as well as the importance of the Japanese period in ending Dutch colonialism and opening the way for Indonesian independence. The video is a huge success, and as of July 2025 it has received 7.4 million views with more than 5,000 comments, mostly from millennials and Gen Z. The views for this video are even more than the views for the video about the Second Dutch Military Aggression, which was also released by TV One in 2020, which has as many as 1.4 million views.

A comment that received the most likes on the video about the Japanese occupation emphasizes that the video is an ideal example of how to narrate history and needs to be passed on so that the younger generation in Indonesia does not forget about the cruelty of the foreign rulers in Indonesia. Many of the commentators reveal their grandparents' experiences in the distant past, especially their suffering as *romusha* during the occupation and their struggle against the Dutch in the Revolution era. This shows that the Indonesian public considers the Japanese occupation period to be a very important period in Indonesian history, because it is full of suffering as well as hope, and especially that Indonesian independence, which is enjoyed by Indonesians until now, is the fruit of the sacrifices of the Indonesian people at that time. There are many more videos about the Japanese occupation on YouTube, which get thousands to millions of views.

When Indonesian nationalism in the early 20th century was formed by print media, then in the early 21st century Indonesian nationalism was further strengthened through civic engagement on social media. Millennials and Gen Z did not experience the Japanese occupation, but their participation in discussing the theme of Japanese occupation on social media helps them build a sense of solidarity as fellow Indonesians and adds their pride to the struggle of Indonesians in the past.



## Final Reflections

Historical events are long gone, but sometimes we come to understand history better through our experiences in the present. My personal experience, as an Indonesian who was born and raised in Indonesia and then learned Indonesian history in the Netherlands, shaped my perspective on Indonesian history and Dutch-Indonesian history. Ethnically, I am a Minangkabau who was born in Padang, West Sumatra, the place of origin of Indonesian national heroes who fought against Dutch colonialism, such as Tuanku Imam Bonjol, Mohamad Hatta, Sutan Sjahrir, Tan Malaka, Agus Salim, and Rasuna Said.



The public memory of Dutch colonialism and Indonesian independence is very strong in Indonesia. I used to go to a junior high school in Padang, SMPN 1 Padang, a school that used to be a MULU school founded by the Dutch in 1916. If you visit the school now, you will find these words on its doorstep: 'Here was once the school of the proclaimer of the state of the Republic of Indonesia, Dr. Mohammad Hatta'. Interestingly, Hatta's name is now used as the name of a building at Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam and the name of a street in Haarlem. My son now attends a vocational school in Yogyakarta, formerly called the Prinses Juliana School, a school built by the colonial government in 1919. The Dutch-Indonesian history, thus, has always been present in my experience, and also in the experiences of many Indonesians, both in Indonesia and in the Netherlands.

The history of Indonesia and the Netherlands is intertwined, and perhaps the 1940s were the most dynamic period in the history of relations between the two nations. Both nations commemorate the turbulent decade of the 1940s from time to time. At the end of July, my neighbors and I in Yogyakarta conducted '*gotong royong*' (communal work) to prepare our neighborhood for the commemoration of Indonesia's independence day on August 17, 2025, and today I am in Den Haag to talk about the memory of Indonesians about the Japanese occupation. I believe that Melati Lezing is an important step in building a conversation between the two nations whose history is linked from hundreds of years ago to the present. Although the two nations commemorate it in different ways and purposes, there seems to be a common understanding that commemorating the end of Japanese occupation is an effort to honor the victims who fell into it and a joint effort to learn from past wars in order to create a more peaceful world in the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Finally, I close my lecture with a quote about the importance

of justice and humanity in human relations between people from different backgrounds, which I think is also the aim of holding this Melati Lezing. I take this quote from Sutan Sjahrir's booklet published in October 1945, *Perdjoeangan Kita (Onze Strijd)*, translated by Ben Anderson. Sjahrir says: "Ultimately all nationalities will inevitably come to an end in a human fellowship which will envelop the whole world and form it into a single nation of mankind, whose relationships will be based on justice and truth, no longer limited by narrow sentiments which cut man off from man, through difference of skin color or ancestral descent."



Thank you, dank u wel, terima kasih.