

PART ONE - THE JOURNEY TO AUSTRALIA

The first refugees from the Netherlands East Indies arrive

After the surrender of Jakarta (Batavia) the Dutch rapidly evacuate as many people as they can to Australia, including approximately three thousand Indonesians.

A small party of key members of the Council of the Indies (Raad van Indies) escapes to Australia. It is lead by Dr Hubertus J van Mook, former Netherlands East Indies (NEI) Lieutenant-Governor-General. Van Mook goes to see the Australian Prime Minister and the Minister for Foreign Affairs. He gains expressions of support from them to enable the Dutch to establish their NEI Government in Exile in Australia.

Van Mook establishes the administrative headquarters at Archerfield in Queensland, before returning to report to the Netherlands Government in Exile situated in London. This compound is called Camp Colombo and is strategically situated on the outskirts of Brisbane.

Agreement is also reached for the surviving remnants of the Royal Netherlands Indies Army (Koninklijk Nederlands Indisch Leger, or KNIL), to operate out of Melbourne, where the Dutch are also establishing an information and intelligence service.

A true Indonesian hero

Since the KNIL remains a discrete entity in Australia, Indonesians within it have limited opportunities to make friends with the "diggers" (Australian soldiers). Only those Indonesian soldiers fighting closely with the Australians, or those actually seconded into the Second Australian Imperial Force (2nd AIF), will do so.

Thousands of US soldiers are passing through Australian cities and towns. Young Australian recruits from the militia are engaged in a desperate battle against the Japanese near Port Moresby. Experienced soldiers from the Second AIF are arriving home from the Middle East and preparing to join them. In the midst of all of this, a true Indonesian hero emerges.

Julius Tahija is an Ambonese soldier who leads a very small team of Indonesian soldiers in an unconventional but highly successful defence of the Island of Saumlaki.

In this action, Tahija and his brave band inflict considerable losses on a Japanese destroyer and preventing it from landing a large invading force. Tahija and his surviving men then sail to Bathurst Island near Darwin, where they link up with Australian troops.

Julius Tahija is immediately recruited by the Second AIF to join a special elite unit called Z Force. Z Force is a new unit the Australians are assembling from within the ranks of the Australian army and those of its allies. It is to operate independently behind enemy lines and the Z force missions are very secret, very dangerous and very important to Australia's defence.

Julius Tahija is soon awarded the Military Order of Wilhelm, the Dutch equivalent of the Victoria Cross, for his bravery both at Saumlaki and with the Z Force. Although many of the NEI soldiers in Australia are Ambonese, this is the first time the Dutch have recognised one of their Indonesian troops for bravery, rather than awarding the medal to a Dutch officer.

Indonesian refugees join the Royal Australian Air Force

Meanwhile, the first of two NEI Air Force squadrons to come to Australia, the 18th (NEI) Squadron, is working hard to be operational as soon as possible from the Douglas airfield outside Darwin. This NEI squadron is under the command of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF).

There are very few Indonesians in the ranks of the NEI pilots, although one pilot and several navigators are among the refugees. Most of the Indonesians are ground staff. They immediately set about the challenging task of building an airfield.

Their numbers are insufficient for the squadron to be independently operational, so Australian ground staff are recruited to join the Indonesians. Friendships are soon made which will last long after the fighting is over.

When the Aussies arrive, they find the Indonesians building huts to house the squadron using swords and bamboo. The Australians immediately provide more contemporary building equipment and the base rapidly takes shape.

Their biggest challenge at Douglas is the airfield, which is subject to flooding and needs constant repair. Plans are soon in place for construction of a better airfield at Batchelor, where the Indonesians will be stationed for the rest of the war.

Indonesian allies who "sail the ocean blue" (WS Gilbert)

Since the Dutch had a fleet of passenger liners and a merchant navy actively sailing in the Pacific at outbreak of war, one of their biggest contributions to the Allied war effort in the Pacific is shipping. This means the majority of the Indonesians who are now living in wartime Australia are seamen.

The Indonesians who are working at sea for the Dutch fall into two categories. Firstly, there are the Petty Officers, who are almost all Manadonese and Christian. They usually speak Dutch and English, as well as their native language and Bahasa Malay. Their job has enabled them to travel the world, to meet people and to enjoy wages not otherwise possible in colonial NEI. They are well educated and generally very politically aware.

The second group are the ordinary seamen. They are usually Javanese and are mostly illiterate. They are almost invariably Muslims and normally only speak Bahasa Malay or their local Javanese language. Their wages are low and working conditions very poor. On shore they will often stay in hostels for seamen.

Soon these seamen come into contact with members of the Australian Seamen's Union in Sydney. The Australians are appalled at the wages they receive and the

conditions under which they are working. They explain to the Indonesians that they are working in Australia now, and have the right to go on strike.

Thus, within four weeks of the Dutch withdrawal from Jakarta, two thousand Indonesian seamen call a strike in Sydney. The Dutch Imperialists hit back, convincing the Australian Government that the seamen are traitors. They all go to Long Bay Goal. This leaves a critical shortage of labour but an attempt to use Filipinos and Indians as strike breakers does not work. The Indonesians are released from jail and triumphantly return to work under new and improved conditions.

This episode teaches the Indonesians, particularly the intensely nationalistic and politically sophisticated Petty Officers, the potential strength of the Australian maritime unions. It is a lesson they will not forget.

Anton Maramis, a Petty Officer with a Dutch ship, goes ashore and finds a desk job in Sydney. He decides it is important to keep nationalist spirit alive among the seamen. Therefore, he applies to the Australian government for permission to publish a monthly periodical to be known as the *Indonesian Seamen's Journal*.

His application is rejected by the Australian Government, although they appear to take it at face value. With some justification, the Dutch are most suspicious of Maramis and so they have him arrested on immigration charges and sent to Long Bay Goal until the war is over.

The first civilian refugees

Australia has suspended the Immigration Restriction Act for the duration of the war, allowing all Dutch nationals to remain in Australia regardless of ethnicity, on the proviso they will return to the NEI at Dutch expense within six months of the cessation of hostilities.

Clearly, the Dutch expect to run the South East Asian part of their colonial empire as usual from Camp Colombo. However, both the Australians and the Dutch are experiencing a shortage of personnel.

Some of the first Indonesian refugees to arrive are civilians, mainly members of the civil service. A few are servants of those few high-ranking Dutch families who are lucky enough to have their entire households evacuated. All these civilian refugees soon find work, ranging from relatively senior positions in the NEI Government Information Service, to nannies with expatriate NEI families or to dishwashers in Dutch clubs.

Reluctant civilian refugees - "The Snatched"

Also among the first civilian refugees who have arrived with the Dutch are some Javanese workers from the docks and airfields. This group is different, since they have not come willingly. The Dutch, recognising the need for a labour force, simply swept them up into their ships before pulling up the gangplanks and fleeing to Australia.

These men call themselves *Orang Rampasan* ("the snatched"), since the Dutch have not even allowed them time to go to say goodbye to their wives and families.

Refugees come independently to a "...little corner of Port Melbourne" (Esther Paterson)

On the 16th April 1942, an article in the Melbourne newspaper, *The Argus*, heralds the arrival of fifty-one Indonesians. They are from a community of skilled Javanese and Chinese tradesmen who had been working in munitions factories in Sumatra when the island was over-run by the Japanese.

The ships in which they were fleeing to Java were torpedoed and eighteen Javanese men, six Javanese women, fourteen Javanese children, eleven Chinese men and two Chinese women were plucked from the waters of the Sunda Strait.

As they are Dutch nationals, their rescuers decide the group ought to be delivered into the hands of the NEI administration in Australia and they sail all the way to Melbourne.

It is hard to imagine the excitement they cause when they finally arrive at the docks in Port Melbourne. The Indonesians have donned their traditional costumes in honour of the occasion. The women in their lace *kebaya* look so exotic, *The Argus* newspaper despatches a photographer to Port Melbourne to take their photograph the very next day.

Dutch NEI officials are there of course to formally greet them; but they have no idea what to do with this intrepid band. Fortunately, the Hospitality Bureau of the Australian Comforts Fund is equal to the occasion. The Naval Chaplain and Minister of the nearby Port Melbourne Methodist Church, Reverend John Freeman, establishes a refugee hostel in the Port Melbourne Methodist Hall.

The Indonesians elect a leader, Abdul Karim, who speaks good English. He takes a key role in ensuring that the Indonesians play their part in the establishment of the hostel and in communicating their particular cultural needs to their Australian hosts. Abdul Karim's role in liaising with the Australians is clearly appreciated by the Reverend Freeman, since he tells *The Argus* reporter how adaptable his Indonesian guests are.

An urgent call goes out for floor coverings, since it is the Indonesians' custom to be barefoot indoors. The women are allocated small side rooms. Beds with warm blankets are provided for everyone. A communal kitchen is established, and food such as bananas and rice is found, despite the rationing.

The Indonesians' traditional clothing affords little protection from Melbourne's autumnal weather, so the provision of warm clothes is a priority. In no time, the Javanese women are themselves making clothes to supplement the small amount of clothing they were able to bring with them, when they fled the Japanese advance.

Because of their technical skills and experience in the munitions factories in Sumatra, the government aircraft factory at nearby Fisherman's Bend is delighted to

employ the men.

The Indonesians soon have the opportunity to thank their Australian hosts by consenting to allow famous freelance artist and journalist, Esther Paterson, to interview them.

Esther comes to visit them with her sister, Betty, an artist famed for her sketches of babies. Esther then writes a feature article in the 23rd of May 1942 weekend supplement of *The Argus*, donating all her fees for the article to the Australian Comfort Fund.

The feature article reflects the view Esther has formed that the Indonesian women she has met are adaptable, efficient and friendly. Her article particularly praises the children, telling her wide circle of readers how intelligent they are and how quickly they are learning English.

Betty is delighted when the Indonesian women praise her drawings of their babies. Esther proudly tells her readers the Indonesians have rated them as “bargoes”. In doing so, Esther becomes the first of many to apply the legendary Australian vowels to the Bahasa Indonesia word for ‘good’, *bagus*.

Colonial ‘business as usual’ is not quite the same Down Under

While the Netherlands Government in Exile is quite comfortably continuing with the business of running its Empire out of London, its NEI branch in Brisbane is discovering things are not quite as easy in Australia.

Firstly, unlike the British, the Australians have no experience in running an empire, only experience in being part of one. Their relationship to their former colonial rulers seems complex and contradictory to the Dutch colonialists.

On one hand the Australians are loyal and self-sacrificing, as in Tobruk or Syria. On the other, they are fiercely proud of their independent Commonwealth and are increasingly seizing the opportunity to act independently of Great Britain, particularly on matters of foreign policy.

This approach is quite acceptable to some of the more liberal thinkers in Camp Colombo, but their leaders in London will not have a bar of it. They haul van Mook back to London, promoting him sideways to the position of Minister for the Colonies. The Dutch in Australia now have predominantly more traditional views of colonialism.

The second problem for the refugee NEI administrators in Australia is that they do not really understand their hosts at all. They have lived their lives in a Dutch colony where the society is a rigid hierarchy, based firstly on race and then on heredity.

In this former British colony, the people pride themselves on being egalitarian and aspire to the development of a classless society. Australia’s colonial literature and songs praise the workingman and promote the idea that everyone is entitled to a “fair go”.

In wartime Australia, the Government is telling the people that every individual's contribution to the war effort is equally important and equally valued. Only those who are pro-Japanese or fascist will not be tolerated. People who work in essential industries are exempt from war service and this of course includes work in the ports and in shipping.

Furthermore, the Dutch at Camp Colombo cannot fail to notice that while Australians have welcomed many thousands of American servicemen, they are not doing so unconditionally. There is even a pitched battle in the main street of Brisbane between American soldiers and Australian diggers, in which the US military police fire on and kill Australians. This is the only time the diggers are actually called on to defend themselves on Australian soil.

The Dutch decide to bring more refugees to Australia

After the Japanese have established control over Java and have relentlessly driven south towards Australia, General Macarthur's attention is focused in early 1943 on two NEI outposts in West Papua. The first of these is Merauke, where the allies have a base. The other comprises two settlements further west on the Digul River, known as Boven Digul.

At Boven Digul, the Dutch run two camps, established as a place to send political prisoners from two pre-war NEI nationalist uprisings. With the bombing of Allied ships in the waters between Australia and Papua New Guinea, the NEI administration in Brisbane is having great difficulty in maintaining supplies to these Digul River camps.

Meanwhile, Netherlands Government in Exile in London has considerable concerns that, should Boven Digul fall into Japanese hands, the exiles will be happy to embrace Japanese imperialism. Through intelligence reports they know that Indonesian nationalists are working with the Japanese administration in other parts of the NEI.

The Allies negotiate - Dutch colonial style: "It is the habit of every aggressor nation to claim that it is acting on the defensive." (Jawaharlal Nehru)

In early 1943, Japanese planes begin to strafe Boven Digul. Dutch military officials are now concerned for the safety of loyal Dutch civilians stationed there and at Merauke.

They have no difficulty in convincing General Macarthur that the political prisoners from the Digul River will collaborate with the Japanese to undermine the Allied war campaign, if the Japanese are to take over the camps. Macarthur immediately requests that the NEI administration in Brisbane approach the Australian government to allow these internees to come to Australia.

At the end March in 1943, Dr Charles Van der Plas, the chief administrator at Camp Colombo, goes to Boven Digul. When he returns, he tells the Australian authorities that the prisoners being evacuated from the camps on the Digul River are "extremely

dangerous psychopaths” and “communists who are sincere and militant, advocating illegal and violent action.” He also says that they refuse to work.

Van der Plas reaches an agreement regarding arrangements for the placement of these “prisoners” with the Australian Government and the evacuation of about five hundred men, women and children begins.

Australian authorities accept the explanation given to them by the Dutch as the truth. With Australia under siege, nobody has time to find out who these Indonesians really are. Anyway, there is nobody available who is able or willing to tell them, and Dutch are, after all, their guests and allies.

Who are these people from the Digul River?

The last group of Indonesian refugees to come to wartime Australia begin the hazardous journey from the Digul River to that vast “sunburnt country” (Dorothea McKellar) to the south.

When these people finally arrive safely on Australian soil, they are simply known as the “Digulists”. Nobody asks what kind of a place Boven Digul is or what kind of people live in such an isolated place as a camp on the Digul River.

Knowing the answers to these two questions is very important, since those Digulists are about to play a vital role in the development of a unique friendship between their native land and Australia.

We are therefore now going to pause in our narrative, to learn something of the story of Boven Digul and the people who lived there.

Boven Digul - The *Isolatie Kolonie* Solution

When nationalist uprisings against Dutch colonial rule began in the NEI in the 1920's, the Dutch colonial administration found themselves needing a place to exile political activists. Their problem was that no such place existed. Their solution was to create one.

The person given the task of designing that solution was none other than Dr Charles Van der Plas, now the head of the wartime NEI administration in Australia.

Charles Van der Plas was born in Bogor (Buitenzorg) in the Sundanese region of Java, and had a well-deserved reputation for having great knowledge and understanding of Indonesian culture, history and religion. He spoke Arabic, Bahasa Sunda and Bahasa Malay, as the official “Indonesian language” was then called. Indeed, in 1940, when he was Governor of East Java, he even gave a series of half-hour radio talks on a range of topical issues in fluent Malay.

Together with Hubert Van Mook, Charles Van der Plas was a leading member of *Stuw*, the group of Dutch Indonesians who supported the formation of a multi-racial government in the Netherlands East Indies. His speeches often began with the

phrase, “my fellow Indonesians”.

Van der Plas’ brief was to create a place where over one thousand often well educated, politically aware, socially elite members of the indigenous NEI population could be completely cut off from the rest of NEI society.

This was not to be a concentration camp used for genocide, like *Auschwitz*; nor a fortress to house criminals sentenced by the state to imprisonment, like *Alcatraz*. It was simply to be an “isolation colony”, or *isolatie kolonie*; and isolated it was.

Boven Digul, as it was soon called, was built by Captain L Th Becking in remote South East Papua (Irian Jaya or Dutch New Guinea). It comprised two camps, the main one at Tanah Merah, and another further upstream, at Tanah Tinggi.

The nearest town was Merauke. After sailing the Arafura Sea, the camp could then only be reached by travelling about five hundred kilometres up the Digul River from its estuary, a journey that took three days.

Boven Digul: The *Isolatie Kolonie* in theory - A showcase of enlightened colonialism

Boven Digul, the *Isolatie Kolonie* Solution, was designed to be a showcase of enlightened colonialism. On superficial inspection, the camp at Tanah Merah, which was about three kilometres square, appeared just like an ordinary Javanese *desa* (village).

There were schools, a hospital, a mosque and churches, a tennis court, two soccer fields, a camp theatre and shops. Tanah Merah was divided into three areas, one for internees, one for administration and one for the military.

Queen Wilhelmina Hospital provided better medical care than that offered to the free population in Java. In Tanah Merah, there were two missions schools (one Catholic and one Protestant) and a government school. There was even a small school in Tanah Tinggi.

There were several *kampung-kampung* (districts within the village). At the head of each *kampung* was a *lurah* (leader), elected by the *warga* (adult males). The people in each *kampung* represented the different ethnic and ideological groups within the exile population, such as the Bantenese and the Minangkabau.

The camp administration was Javanese in design, reflecting Van der Plas’ knowledge and love of that culture. The chief administrator was called the *wedana*, and his deputy, the *assisten wedana*.

Within the administrative areas of the camp (*bestuursterrein*) the *wedana* lived in *Oranje Park*, an almost palatial residence. Next door was less imposing accommodation for the military commander, who had the rank of Captain. Indeed, Sutan Sjahrir was to observe that “it might pass for the European quarter in one or another Javanese town.”

Prisoners were issued with basic tools for carpentry, since they were to build their own housing. Within each *kampung*, a collective system of house building called *gotong-royong* was set up. Gardens were established in which to grow fruit and vegetables to supplement their diet.

Cultural events were encouraged. The camp had its own Javanese gamelan orchestra and the exiles from Java also enjoyed *Wayang* and *Ketoprak* (traditional Javanese theatre). However, a concert band (playing its own unique form of jazz) and *komedie stanbul* (a Malay theatrical tradition greatly in demand in Medan in the 1920s), were far more popular with the Sumatran exiles.

Government officers and even the press were allowed to inspect Boven Digul, where they would be “officially” greeted by internees dressed in all-white European suits and hats. Snow capped mountains and a lush green jungle provided an exotic backdrop for stiffly posed photographs.

The widespread use of Dutch at the camp created an impression of “modernity”. There was even some English on street signs and shops, which was particularly fashionable at the time. One high-ranking Dutch official was greeted in the street by “Good morning, Sir! How do you do?”

Colonization of New Guinea was a popular Dutch policy after the First World War, and it was promoted as “the land of the future”. Such was the enthusiasm for this idea that in 1927 the colonial administration hoped that Boven Digul might in time become another Dutch colony.

A secret Dutch government communication even presented the first internees as “pioneers”. Those internees who were willing to work were encouraged “to open new land”. As well as the guards and their families, who were loyal Dutch citizens and in the main Ambonese, there were a small group of “self employed” shopkeepers and even moneylenders, often Chinese Indonesians.

At the Union Coloniale Francais in 1928, a former minister of the colonies declared, “the interior of New Guinea, where the culprits were sent with their families, is favourable for the creation of an agricultural colony”.

However, beneath this façade was a very different world, the real world of the *Isolatie Kolonie* Solution.

Boven Digul - The *Isolatie Kolonie* in practice

Charles Van der Plas wrote of the site he had chosen for his *Isolatie Kolonie*: “Tanah Merah, as a place, appeals to me enormously.” While it may have been appealing to its creator, the site was certainly not as appealing to those condemned to exile there.

Rain fell constantly and the atmosphere was very hot and very humid. Clouds of flying ants descended on the site with soul-destroying regularity, covering everything and everybody. Mosquitoes were endemic. The surrounding swamps were full of crocodiles, as were the often rapidly flowing rivers.

The jungle surrounding the camp was virtually impenetrable. In that jungle were tribes of headhunting natives. They either killed those who ventured outside the settlement, or bartered with the Dutch authorities for their return in exchange for tobacco.

Upon arrival at Tanah Merah, exiles were given the choice of being a paid worker, or “*werkwillig*”. Being among the ranks of the co-operative “*werkwillig*” meant having the opportunity to earn money, buy goods in the shops and, once the authorities believed the exile had repudiated their old nationalistic and revolutionary beliefs, of leaving Boven Digul.

Those who did not co-operate by accepting employment were called “*naturalisten*”, and were forced to grow their own food and to care for themselves, with only their most basic needs being met. To choose to be a *naturalisten* meant denying oneself, and sometimes one’s family, any opportunity to leave Tanah Merah.

Those *naturalisten* who were particularly recalcitrant were sent further up the Digul River to the second camp, called Tanah Tinggi. These ‘incorrigibles’ of Tanah Tinggi, the “*onverzoenlijken*”, were deeply committed nationalists who refused to co-operate with the Dutch in any way at all.

Undoubtedly, the most calculated cruelty in *Isolatie Kolonie* Solution was this system of ‘re-education’. Exiles were forced to choose between co-operation and concession on the one hand, and steadfast maintenance of beliefs and passive resistance on the other.

Although a public school was provided, it was specifically designed as part of this ‘re-education’ system. To demonstrate their loyalty, the *werkwillig* sent their children to this public school. The children of the civilian population attended one of the two Christian schools.

The teachings of all the nationalist movements whose members were exiled in Boven Digul placed emphasis on education. Any teaching that encouraged children to challenge the colonial view of enlightenment was forbidden and the teachers risked punishment. Therefore the *naturalisten* established their own school, the Malay English School (MES), where their children were educated.

Queen Wilhelmina Hospital was a simple, green painted building in the exiles’ section of Tanah Merah. Despite its plain appearance, it was one of the busiest places in Boven Digul.

Although there was a wide range of tropical diseases in Tanah Merah, three diseases in particular plagued the population. They were malaria, dengue fever and tuberculosis.

A program of malaria prevention was established in Tanah Merah, although nothing was ever done for the inhabitants of Tanah Tinggi. Despite its best efforts to reduce the amount of stagnant water and to ensure the use of mosquito nets, malaria remained endemic in both camps.

Chronic health problems acquired in Boven Digul were to haunt many of the exiles long after they were gone. However, they considered themselves lucky, since some never left at all.

The exiles of Boven Digul were a deeply divided community. The first and most obvious division was the one in the social framework created by the *werkwillig* versus the *naturalisten* system.

Since being a *werkwillig* meant being able to leave Tanah Merah, those who took position were prepared to adopt any means required to defend it. Consequently, at one stage, they even formed a vigilante group to protect the interests of the *werkwillig*.

The Dutch used this to develop a network of informants as well. The antipathy to these men, particularly amongst the *onverzoenlijken* who had lived with the extreme isolation of Tanah Tinggi, became an intense hatred. Three of these collaborators died on one night under mysterious circumstances.

Boven Digul was conceived and run almost like a feudal Javanese village, which alienated some of the exiles from Sumatra, Manado and Ambon. This was exacerbated by the system of *kampung-kampung*, which encouraged the banding together of the various ethnic groups.

Religious differences were evident as well. Some internees were stricter than others in the observance of their Islamic faith. The Christians worshipped in both the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. Members of the two Islamic parties advocated the development of an Islamic state in the Netherlands East Indies. They were therefore fundamentally opposed to the Communists, who promoted the abolition of all religion as being the “opiate of the people” (Karl Marx).

The first exiles

In 1927, nearly one thousand people were sent to Boven Digul as a result of the first nationalist uprising. Together with their families, they were sent there because they were members of the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI, or Indonesian Communist Party).

Although many were well-educated PKI leaders within the Banten region of West Java and the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra, others had only tenuous affiliations to communism. They represented all strata of society and came with a range of skills. Many were merely victims of circumstance and association.

Notwithstanding, the numbers continued to build up, reaching a peak of 1308 internees in 1930. However, following an official study of Boven Digul by the Governor of the Moluccas in 1930, the number at the two camps dwindled to 510 in 1937.

The second wave of exiles

Between 1930 and 1934, the NEI administration sent nationalists from the second

uprisings to Boven Digul. These new internees were committed nationalists but not members of the PKI. They brought with them fresh, new, non-communist, approaches to nationalism.

They were leaders of *Sarekat Kaum Boeroeh Indonesia* (SKBI, Indonesian Trade Union); *Partai Republik Indonesia* (PARI, Party of the Indonesian Republic, founded by Tan Malaka in 1927); *Parti Indonesia* (Partindo, chaired in 1932 by Sukarno); *Perhimpunan Moeslimin Indonesia* (Permi, Indonesian Muslims' Association); *Partai Sarekat Islam Indonesia* (PSII, Indonesian Islamic Party) and *Pendidikan Nasional Indonesia (PNI-Baru)*, Indonesian Nationalist Education, founded by Sutan Sjahrir and Mohammad Hatta).

With them, the whole ideological focus of the internees was to shift, and thus the second wave of exiles bought a new form of division to a community that was already deeply divided. These ideological differences were to become more evident as time moved on.

Before they were sent to Boven Digul, this second wave of internees would most likely have known of Soebakat, one the founders of PARI, who suicided before he could be sent there; or have read the damning newspaper article Mohammad Hatta wrote in 1929 about the camp. Therefore, they would have made the journey up the Digul River with some trepidation.

However, when they finally arrived at Tanah Merah, their first reaction would have been one of surprise at how seemingly normal things were. It would have seemed to them that life was continuing there very much in the way it did in the villages of their homeland.

Newcomers were given an official welcome and offers of assistance to settle in to their accommodation. When Sutan Sjahrir and Mohammad Hatta and the executive of the *PNI-Baru* arrived, they were certainly welcomed with a flourish. Even a soccer game was organised with a team of older exiles and their children opposing a team of new arrivals.

However, it did not take the new arrivals very long to realise that this was, to use a phrase later coined by Rudolf Mrázek, a sinister form of "perverted normality". Indeed, Tanah Merah was far from being the noble thriving colonial enterprise the Dutch had so boldly touted to an imperialistic Europe.

Included among the newcomer's soccer team was a young *PNI-Baru* executive member called Mohamad Bondan.

".... the gentlest of revolutionaries" (JD Legge)

Mohamad Bondan was born in 1910 in Cirebon into the Sundanese aristocratic class. His traditional education, which finished at the end of high school, included learning Dutch.

Fun-loving by nature, he did not apply himself to his lessons in the later years of high school and initially failed to gain entry to university. After repeating his entry tests,

he qualified easily, but his father refused to send him, since money was short and he was unhappy with his son's initial failure.

Instead of continuing his studies, Bondan went to work. At the same time, he became attracted to the nationalist cause. He developed a strong belief in an independent and democratic Indonesia. His participation in nationalist activities soon caused Bondan to lose his public service job and even to be imprisoned very briefly. It also exposed him to a world of ideologies and of learning.

Initially, he was attracted to join Sukarno's mass movement, the PNI (Indonesian Nationalist Party). However, this relied on large rallies and emotive oratory and he soon moved on to the *PNI-Baru*.

The *PNI-Baru* was conceptually very different from the PNI, since it was well organised with educated leadership and membership and a sound theoretical framework for political action.

His lack of university education certainly saddened Bondan then and for the rest of his life. A thirst for knowledge and willingness to learn was certainly something he found he shared with Mohammad Hatta and was the thing which convinced him to join the *PNI-Baru*.

He was very happy to play a key role in the successful *PNI-Baru* campaign to prevent the restrictions the Dutch were imposing on private schools, established to supplement the limited number of government schools open to Indonesians.

Unfortunately, like Bondan, the NEI colonial administration had also recognised that the development of the nationalist movement along lines advocated by *PNI-Baru* was far likely to be effective in the long term than mass agitation. Therefore, in 1934 the entire executive of the *PNI-Baru* was arrested.

By nature, Bondan was a quiet, contemplative man, later to be described by Legge, (an Australian academic), as "the gentlest of revolutionaries". Notwithstanding, he had an intense belief in Hatta's vision of a free democratic Indonesia, so he joined the *PNI-Baru* executive. For this, and this only, he was arrested, interrogated and sent to Boven Digul without a word being uttered in his defence.

Bondan certainly felt his lack of university education keenly on the journey to the Digul River, because Hatta and Sjahrir, as a consequence of their "intellectual" status, were given second-class cabins with the Caucasians, while he travelled as a deck passenger with the other prisoners.

At the time of his exile to Boven Digul, Bondan was married with a very young son; but he was not as fortunate as some prisoners, who were able to take their wives and children with them.

Like Sjahrir (who wrote regularly to his Dutch wife, Maria), Bondan could only communicate by censored mail. It was thus that he learned that his wife did not wish to be tied to a political exile. She requested he divorce her, which he generously agreed to do. His son was to be raised by his paternal grandfather, since Bondan

would not agree to his coming to Tanah Merah.

Upon arriving, Sjahrir, Hatta and Bondan declared themselves to be *naturalisten*, since the policies advocated by the *PNI-Baru* were grounded in non-violent resistance.

When Hatta was on the boat travelling to Tanah Merah, one of the other political prisoners asked how he would cope with the forthcoming internment. He replied: "When the wider world is narrowed by others, you have to build a universe in your own bosom."

Hatta's own personal world was one dominated by intellectual pursuit and the sharing of the fruits of one's learning with others. He went to Tanah Merah well equipped, since he took about fifteen cases of books on all manner of subjects.

One month after his arrival, Hatta turned his attention to schooling, volunteering to take classes for adults in Philosophy, Economics and Political Theory. Bondan enrolled in all these classes, though his favourite was the English class for adults given by the MES. His letters home usually contained requests for books, the most insistent being for an English dictionary.

When Bondan went to hospital with malaria, Hatta visited him there and met some of the exiles from Tanah Tinggi. He was appalled at their descriptions of conditions there, even though the only real help he could give was to present them with some of his precious books.

Hatta continued his political activities in Tanah Merah. A letter he sent to his family in Jakarta was published in the newspaper, *Permandangan*, which was circulated in the Netherlands. In it he pointed out that the government spent significantly more on food for criminals in jail, than it did for political exiles in Tanah Merah who had committed no crimes.

When offered a larger financial allowance, he declined. Finally, twelve months after they arrived, Hatta and Sjahrir were transferred to Banda Neira. The Dutch administration had decided that such high-profile prisoners should remain in Tanah Merah no longer. However, their less well-known fellow *PNI-Baru* members, including Bondan, were left behind.

Escape from Boven Digul - "There is no struggle for independence just living in Tanah Merah, trying to escape is struggle." (Nayoan, quoted by Bondan)

Nayoan was a Manadonese who was elected as a *lurah*. When he stood up to the Dutch administration, they deposed him and substituted a more co-operated person in his place. For some exiles, like Nayoan, leaving Tanah Merah became a symbol for casting aside the shackles of colonialism.

There were only two ways the exiles could leave Boven Digul. The first way was simply to walk out. This was easy, since the Dutch had built the settlement without any surrounding walls.

In the short term, three escapes were successful. The first was led by Nayoan, the second by Sanjoyo (a PARI leader), and the third by Dulrachman. All three went east through the jungle and crossed the Mandobo, Kaoh and Muyu Rivers to the Fly River, which was in Australian Territory.

Sadly, the Australians promptly handed the groups led by Nayoan and Dulrachman back to the Dutch, as soon as they were discovered. After this, Nayoan tried yet again to escape by walking off into the jungle. He was never heard of again. Dulrachman was sent to Tanah Tinggi.

Sanjoyo and his friends avoided detection and managed to cross the Torres Strait by boat to Thursday Island, where they lived for some time, even running a barbershop. Finally, an informant in Java betrayed them. They were arrested by the Australian police and shipped back to the Netherlands East Indies.

Thus, in the end, not one person ever succeeded in permanently escaping from Boven Digul by walking out.

Having failed in his attempt to leave Tanah Merah in this manner, Sanjoyo adopted the only successful way of leaving. He joined the ranks of the *werkwilleg*. In 1938, after becoming a model prisoner and declaring himself 're-educated', he finally left the world of Tanah Merah forever.

The years pass.

Escape from Boven Digul - From one imperialist to another

In 1942 another imperialist nation invades their homeland and the Japanese take control of the NEI, although the Dutch are still in command at Tanah Merah. Regular supplies are not coming and the internees are now suffering from increasing levels of malnutrition.

At the end of March 1943, to their surprise they are paid a visit by Dr Charles Van der Plas. Afterwards, Van der Plas writes to Dr Hubert Van Mook, Minister for the Colonies in London. He says that, far from the picture of a rich fertile agricultural colony painted by the colonial administration in the 1920s, the land at the camp on the Digul River had proved to be "extremely infertile".

In actual fact, the Dutch had known this unofficially since 1928, but had suppressed the information for fear of being seen internationally as running a *concentratiekamp*, once the concept of an agricultural colony was acknowledged to be a fraud.

Van der Plas asks them if they are willing to co-operate in fighting against Japanese fascism. Since the exiles are generally in agreement that fighting Japanese imperialism is the only way to establish an independent democracy in their homeland, they say they are prepared to work with the Dutch.

Farewell to the Digul River

Of course, they are not told what this is all leading to, but they only have a wait a

short time before they find out. In early April 1943, the evacuation of Tanah Merah and Tanah Tinggi begins.

The internees from Tanah Tinggi are kept in a separate group, although the last remaining family there, being Kadirun and his wife and children, rejoin the exiles from Tanah Merah and travel with them.

At last, the exiles say goodbye to their *kampung-kampung* on the Digul River. A whole new world awaits them, one in which, for the first time, they will enjoy the fruits of democracy.