



RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Travel to Imprisonment: Remembering Cold War Trade Unionism and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in Adam Soepardjan's Prison Notebooks*

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Abstract

This article examines the role of travel in the practice of Cold War politics, focusing particularly on the experiences of Indonesian trade unionists who travelled between Indonesia, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe. During the Sukarno era (1949–1966), Indonesians from the country's largest trade union federation SOBSI held leading positions in the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). In 1965–1966, the army-directed purges against the Indonesian Left destroyed independent trade unionism as the country transitioned to the Suharto New Order regime. As leftist trade unionists were killed, imprisoned, or detained without trial, memories of travelling to the Communist bloc became denied, repressed, and submerged from history. The prison notebooks of Indonesian trade unionist Adam Soepardjan represent a unique set of underground writings produced after the army coup. An analysis of these notebooks reveals the ambivalences of Cold War political travel and the complex subjectivities of the traveller who appraises and reappraises the experiences of travel in a radically changed set of circumstances.

Introduction

Trade unionists travelled extensively after World War II, participating in international conferences and visits hosted by union federations based in Europe and the United States. Travelogues have been seen as “under-explored archives and literary writings”, which can help to reveal the “tangible nature” of solidarity as expressed through individual encounters and the emotional bonds that develop, albeit such bonds may

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be fragile.¹ As the Cold War developed, politically motivated travel, as a part of enacting the Cold War, also became a form of discipline, with conference delegates expected to report positively about such visits in party presses and meetings. This article analyses the travel accounts of an Indonesian trade unionist and metalworker, Adam Soepardjan, who represented a WFTU affiliate, the national trade union federation SOBSI (All-Indonesia Central Workers' Organization, Sentral Organisasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia), in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Czechoslovakia in 1959.² Travel for Indonesian trade unionists was possible thanks to links with international trade union federations, such as the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). Founded in 1945, the WFTU was not only a communist trade union "front", as was portrayed during the Cold War, but it also involved trade unionists from the Communist "Eastern bloc", communist federations from Western Europe, as well as Asian, Arab, African, and Latin American federations.

The travel accounts discussed in this article also represent a Cold War subaltern archive: Soepardjan was a political prisoner by the time he wrote these accounts in 1975–1976. His reminiscences, written in notebooks made by hand in prison, attest to a world that was violently eradicated as part of the anti-communist operations in Indonesia in 1965–1966. By selecting three of the strongest themes that appear in these notebooks, this article examines Soepardjan's political vision for Indonesia, which, at the time these accounts were written, was firmly in the grip of the Suharto New Order regime. Soepardjan was not only recounting a disappeared world when it came to the Indonesian Left, but also an alternative political vision as a survivor of those deep purges of the Left. In turn, these accounts also reveal the frictions, unmet expectations, and unintended drawbacks of political travel. This article demonstrates the importance of personal archives and the insights they can yield for the study of the global Left and ways of remembering political pasts.

Much of post-war international travel by activists in the 1950s was set against the backdrop of Cold War rivalries. Politically inflected travel, how it was organized and conducted, and the experiences gained from such travel during the Cold War, particularly to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Eastern European countries, has been the subject of greater scholarly attention in recent times.³ The USSR and the Eastern Bloc countries, "the Second World" competed with one another, as well as with the West – and, after 1956, the People's Republic of China (PRC) – "in the developing conflicts of the Third World, an important new arena of Cold War competition".⁴ For the travellers, however, political goals

¹Jodie Yuzhou Sun, Mingqing Yuan, and Lifang Zhang, "Third World Crossings: Afro-Asian Travelogues in the Early 1960s", *Interventions*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2022.2158484>.

²*Travels Abroad by Bintang Karim*, Books II and III, Adam Soepardjan Papers, ARCH02469, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

³Patryk Babiracki and Kenyon Zimmer (eds), *Cold War Crossings: International Travel and Exchange across the Soviet Bloc, 1940s–1960s* (College Station, TX, 2014); Sheila Fitzpatrick and Carolyn Rasmussen, *Political Tourists: Travellers from Australia to the Soviet Union in the 1920s–1940s* (Carlton, Vic., 2008); Weronika Rokicka, "Bengali Travel Writings on Soviet Russia in the Cold War Era", *Studies in Travel Writing*, 24:4 (2020), pp. 352–365; and Joanne Lee, "Political Utopia or Potemkin Village? Italian Travellers to the Soviet Union in the Early Cold War", *Modern Italy*, 20:4 (2015), pp. 379–393.

⁴Babiracki and Jersild, "Editors' Introduction", p. 7; Austin Jersild, "Sino-Soviet Rivalry in Guinea-Conakry, 1956–1965: The Second World in the Third World", in Patryk Babiracki and Austin

were sometimes secondary to the “curiosity and the excitement of visiting new, often distant, and [...] exotic places”.⁵ Travel represented personal mobility and prestige at a time when international air travel was still a rarity, but it also perpetuated the hierarchy between officials and rank-and-file members who did not have opportunities to travel.

Indonesia declared independence in August 1945, after the Japanese occupation regime surrendered in World War II, but Indonesian leaders across the political spectrum called for international recognition and support, including from the USSR, when the Dutch attempted to reclaim their colony of Indonesia.⁶ Although Premier Josef Stalin was opposed in principle to Dutch claims over Indonesia in order to reduce overall Western influence, he had little knowledge about the country and was lukewarm to its leaders’ approaches.⁷ It was under his successor, Nikita Khrushchev (1953–1964), however, who sought to establish closer relationships with Asia and Africa, that the relationship between Indonesia and the USSR deepened.⁸

The internal contradictions and frictions in the socialist world complicated what travellers found and experienced.⁹ Most significantly, the Sino–Soviet split shaped the attitudes of Afro-Asian activists towards the USSR and the PRC, with the latter being seen as a natural part of a “community protesting colonialism and imperialism within the ‘Third World’”.¹⁰ Earlier, Stalin himself was also of the view that the PRC, rather than the USSR, should play the dominant role in Asia.¹¹ With the split, the Chinese Communist Party challenged the Soviet claim of being free of imperialism. Tensions also resulted from African postcolonial leaders, who were mostly Western-educated, finding Soviet officials paternalistic and inflexible.¹² African students in the USSR reported experiencing racism, showing that proclamations from above of internationalism and working-class bonds did not eradicate paternalistic and racist attitudes at the community level.¹³

Jersild (eds), *Socialist Internationalism in the Cold War Exploring the Second World* (Cham, 2016), p. 314; and David C. Engerman, “The Second World’s Third World”, *Kritika*, 12:1 (2011), pp. 183–211.

⁵Alfred Rieber, “Afterword: Promises and Paradoxes of Socialist Internationalism (Personal and Historical Reflections)”, in Babiracki and Jersild (eds), *Socialist Internationalism*, p. 341.

⁶L.M. Efimova, “New Evidence on the Establishment of Soviet-Indonesian Diplomatic Relations (1949–53)”, *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 29:85, pp. 215–233.

⁷Efimova, “New Evidence”, p. 220.

⁸The number of people travelling from the USSR to other countries grew, doubling between 1956 and 1965. On traveller numbers, see Margarita Marinova, “With Friends Like These ...’ Soviet Travel Writing about Czechoslovakia during the Khrushchev Era”, in Andrew Hammond (ed.), *Global Cold War Literature: Western, Eastern and Postcolonial Perspectives* (New York, 2012), p. 130.

⁹According to Patryk Babiracki, and Austin Jersild, “Editors’ Introduction”, p. 3, the Soviet Union prized Czechoslovakia for offering impressive travel experiences, showing simultaneously consumer culture, industrial productivity, and high culture to compete against the capitalist camp. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) saw itself as being more advanced than the rest of the Second World.

¹⁰Sun, Yuan, and Zhang, “Third World Crossings”, p. 7.

¹¹Efimova, “New Evidence”, p. 226.

¹²Vladislav Zubok, “Introduction”, in Babiracki and Zimmer (eds), *Cold War Crossings*, p. 10.

¹³Zubok, “Introduction”, p. 10. See also Marcia C. Schenck, Immanuel R. Harisch, Anne Dietrich, and Eric Burton, “Introduction: Moorings and (Dis)Entanglements between Africa and East Germany during the Cold War”, in Eric Burton, Anne Dietrich, Immanuel Harisch, and Marcia C. Schenck (eds),

New studies have emerged in the last decade focusing on the networks of organizations and individuals from a broad spectrum of politics engaged in transnational activism across the Cold War world.¹⁴ Some of this scholarship also examines lesser-known conferences and gatherings that laid the groundwork for more prominent events, such as the 1955 Bandung Asia Africa conference and how travel and regular cooperation at meetings and international gatherings led to ongoing interactions and exchanges of ideas between individuals.¹⁵ In turn, they also reveal the pedagogical aspects of Cold War travel, aimed at the creation of a technocratic world that is more technically adept and desirable than its competitor was offering.¹⁶

The increased scholarly focus on contact between individual activists and the career- and life trajectories of these activists also challenges official archives and lingering Cold War mindsets in the study of international history, which have suggested that left-wing transnational organizations, such as the WFTU were mere extensions of the Soviet bloc.¹⁷ In dealing with the Cold War, official archives perpetuate “a narrative that places progressive and radical social movements of the 1960s and 1970s firmly in the past, more often than not as evidence of their failure,” as Grimaldi and Gukelberger write.¹⁸ Stolte has reminded us that, in the 1950s, trade unionists in African and Asian countries were not only connected via global union federations (such as the WFTU and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, ICFTU) but also horizontally across Afro-Asia in networks that

Navigating Socialist Encounters: Moorings and (Dis)Entanglements between Africa and East Germany during the Cold War (Boston, MA, 2021), p. 8.

¹⁴Katharine E. McGregor, “Indonesian Women, the Women’s International Democratic Federation and the Struggle for ‘Women’s Rights’, 1946–65”, *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 40:117 (2012), pp. 193–208; Heather Goodall, “Uneasy Comrades: Tuk Subianto, Eliot V. Elliott and the Cold War”, *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 40:117 (2012), pp. 209–230; Lisandro E. Claudio, “The Anti-Communist Third World: Carlos Romulo and the Other Bandung”, *Southeast Asian Studies*, 4:1 (2015), pp. 125–156; and Jon Piccini, “‘People Treated Me with Equality’: Indigenous Australians Visiting the Soviet Bloc during the Cold War”, *Labour History: A Journal of Labour and Social History*, 111 (2016), pp. 45–57.

¹⁵Su Lin Lewis and Carolien Stolte, “Other Bandungs: Afro-Asian Internationalisms in the Early Cold War”, *Journal of World History*, 30:1–2 (2019), pp. 1–19.

¹⁶Leslie James, “‘Essential Things Such as Typewriters’: Development Discourse, Trade Union Expertise, and the Dialogues of Decolonization between the Caribbean and West Africa”, *Journal of Social History*, 53:2 (2019), p. 382; Rachel Leow, “Asian Lessons in the Cold War Classroom: Trade Union Networks and the Multidirectional Pedagogies of the Cold War in Asia”, *Journal of Social History*, 53:2 (2019), pp. 429–453.

¹⁷Francisca De Haan, “Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women’s Organizations: The Case of the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF)”, *Women’s History Review*, 19:4 (2010), p. 553; Leow, “Asian Lessons in the Cold War Classroom”, p. 430. On the complexities of trade unionists’ interactions and connections across the political spectrum, see also Gabriele Siracusano, “Trade Union Education in Former French Africa (1959–1965): Ideological Transmission and the Role of French and Italian Communists”, *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2021): 483–502; and Immanuel R. Harisch and Eric Burton, “The Missing Link? Western Communists as Mediators Between the East German FDGB, the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), and African Trade Unions in the Late 1950s and Early 1960s”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 103 (2023), pp. 292–311.

¹⁸Anna Grimaldi and Sandrine Gukelberger, “Reawakening Cold War Social Movements Through Memory Work and Archival Performance”, *Bandung* (online ahead of print 2023), p. 6. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1163/21983534-20230003>; last accessed 11 September 2024.

took advantage of links built through shared anti-imperialist struggles.¹⁹ Afro-Asian activists also took advantage of the resources provided by the USSR to help foster connections between them.²⁰

Researching the history and activities of the Indonesian communist trade union federation, SOBSI is complicated by these continuing Cold War biases as well as its violent suppression in Indonesia in 1965–1966. Studies of Indonesian trade unionism, with few exceptions, tend to make only brief mentions of leftist unions.²¹ SOBSI has been marked for its absence, rather than what its activism might have left behind for the Indonesian workers' movement. In researching this organization, sources comprise surviving official records such as official organs, other publications, and speeches by SOBSI leaders. Such official sources, as we enter the 1960s and after the Sino-Soviet split, demonstrate not only strident support for President Sukarno and opposition to imperialism, but they also express dissatisfaction with the USSR's role in the WFTU as Indonesia and the PKI moved closer to the PRC. Interviews with former unionists, as oral sources, were difficult to conduct openly during the Suharto New Order regime and are, therefore, rare in the public domain.²² Nowadays, there are few surviving SOBSI members, and oral history interviews can no longer further flesh out or nuance these official accounts. The dearth of studies about this important left-wing organization persists despite the boom in scholarly studies on the Indonesian Left in recent times.²³

Finer-grained micro-histories, in this case in the form of travelogues by one SOBSI unionist, help us to understand how one activist interpreted his experiences of travel across a Cold War world. Such micro-histories also complicate our perceptions of these activists, allowing us to see them as more than simply adherents to the party line. Reflecting lived experience, these firsthand accounts are under-explored archives of the activities of Indonesians that “enrich the statements, resolutions and other texts produced at conferences” of transnational organizations.²⁴

¹⁹Carolien Stolte, “Introduction: Trade Union Networks and the Politics of Expertise in an Age of Afro-Asian Solidarity”, *Journal of Social History*, 53:2 (2019), pp. 331–347.

²⁰Su Lin Lewis and Carolien Stolte, “Introduction: The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism”, in Carolien Stolte and Su Lin Lewis (eds), *The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism* (Leiden, 2022), p. 14.

²¹These exceptions include Jan Elliott, “Bersatoe Kita Berdiri Bertjerai Kita Djatoeh” [United We Stand Divided We Fall], *Workers and Unions in Indonesia: Jakarta 1945–1965* (Ph.D., University of New South Wales, 1997); and John Ingleson, *Workers and Democracy: The Indonesian Labour Movement, 1949–1957* (Singapore, 2023).

²²“Oral History Collection, In Search of Silenced Voices”, COLL00175, International Institute of Social History contains approximately eight interviews with Indonesian leftist trade unionists conducted by Hersri Setiawan.

²³These include Vanessa Hearman, *Unmarked Graves: Death and Survival in the Anti-Communist Violence in East Java* (Singapore, 2018); Jess Melvin, *The Army and the Indonesian Genocide: Mechanics of Mass Murder* (London, 2018); Geoffrey Robinson, *The Killing Season: A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965–66* (Princeton, NJ, 2018); and John Roosa, *Buried Histories: The Anticommunist Massacres of 1965–1966 in Indonesia* (Madison, WI, 2020).

²⁴Sun, Yuan and Zhang, “Third World Crossings”, p. 3.

Trade Unionism in Indonesia after World War II

In the 1920s and 1930s, trade unions were major urban organizations in the Dutch East Indies as Indonesia was then known. As Ingleson has noted, they were central to “the development of political consciousness, creating opportunities for Indonesians to acquire organizational skills and providing a channel for many to join nationalist political parties”.²⁵ In 1931, for example, there were around 100,000 financial members of urban labour unions while the total membership of nationalist political parties at that time was only around 20,000.²⁶

Spurred by the urgency of Indonesia’s Independence War against the Dutch (1945–1949), communist and non-communist unions formed a single federation.²⁷ The national trade union federation, SOBSI, was founded on 29 November 1946 from this fusion to mobilize workers for the defence of the newly declared Republic of Indonesia.²⁸ It held its first congress in Malang, East Java, in 1947, where it voted to affiliate with the then-united WFTU, initially as a political move to gain support for Indonesia’s independence struggle against the Dutch.²⁹

While always maintaining that it was independent of the PKI, from its inception, SOBSI was “closely aligned” with the party.³⁰ Attempts to unite SOBSI with other trade union federations failed as a result of political disagreements within the Left as well as the reluctance of non-communist unions to cooperate with SOBSI, particularly after the Madiun Affair, an alleged communist uprising in 1948. SOBSI was implicated in the events at Madiun through its association with the PKI, which resulted in the jailing and killing of its members and leaders by the Indonesian Army.³¹ In this context, SOBSI leaders saw the split in the WFTU in January 1949 as reflecting some of the organization’s own experiences of dealing with anti-communist forces in Indonesia and maintained its close relationship with the WFTU.

After the Dutch transfer of sovereignty to Indonesia in December 1949, the unions were now facing off against a mixture of Indonesian and Dutch managers and owners and the Indonesian state rather than just Dutch capital and colonial administration. In the first half of the 1950s, hundreds of strikes each year involved tens of thousands of workers in the transport, plantation, education, and public sectors.³² In 1955, the Ministry of Labour listed over 1500 national, regional, and local unions, half of which were unaffiliated to any union federation.³³ The explosion in the number of

²⁵John Ingleson, “The Legacy of Colonial Labour Unions in Indonesia”, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 47:1 (2001), p. 86.

²⁶John Ingleson, *Road to Exile: The Indonesian Nationalist Movement, 1927–1934* (Singapore, 1979), ch. 4.

²⁷Donald Hindley, *Communist Party of Indonesia, 1951–1963* (Berkeley, CA, 1966), p. 133.

²⁸Badan Penerbitan Dewan Nasional SOBSI, *Sedjarah Gerakan Buruh Indonesia* (Jakarta, 1958), p. 77.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰Ingleson, *Workers and Democracy*, p. 46.

³¹On the effects of the Madiun Affair on the PKI, see Vanessa Hearman, *Unmarked Graves* (Singapore, 2018), pp. 35–37.

³²On SOBRI, see Stolte, “Trade Union Networks and the Politics of Expertise”, p. 334. On ICFTU, see Ingleson, *Workers and Democracy*, p. 77.

³³Dwight Y. King, *Interest Groups and Political Linkage in Indonesia, 1800–1965*, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, Special Report, no. 20, (De Kalb, IL, 1982), p. 114, cited in Vedi Hadiz, *Workers and the State in New Order Indonesia* (London, 1997), p. 49.

workers on strike led to the government introducing a mediation and arbitration system. Army hostility to unions and workers increased and some strikes were forcibly suppressed.

SOBSI was no longer the sole national trade union federation in Indonesia when a rival, SOBRI (Sentral Organisasi Buruh Republik Indonesia, Central Labor Organization of the Republic Indonesia), linked to the leftist Murba Party, was founded in 1951, followed by Sarbumusi (Serikat Buruh Muslimin Indonesia, Indonesian Muslim Workers Union) in 1955. SOBRI also affiliated to the WFTU, while the ICFTU established an office in Jakarta and worked with Islamic labour unions from the mid-1950s.³⁴

Despite the relative rarity and luxury of air travel, Indonesian politicians, trade unionists, students, intellectuals, and social and political activists travelled overseas, mostly to the socialist countries in Europe and to the PRC in the 1950s–1960s, as part of organized visits and conference participation. They first promoted the newly independent republic through some of these activities and, later, participated in political campaigns, including through the WFTU, as well as other left-wing transnational organizations such as the World Peace Council and the Women's International Democratic Federation.³⁵ Some of the most intense contacts took place between left-wing organizations in Indonesia and overseas propelled by the strength and influence of the PKI, although the party by no means had the monopoly over travel undertaken by Indonesian Marxists in the course of the twentieth century.³⁶

Without union sponsorship, most Indonesian workers and worker representatives would have been unlikely to travel abroad. SOBSI had the most well-developed international networks compared to other union federations at that time in Indonesia, as the WFTU and the USSR provided it with “significant patronage”, inviting Indonesians to attend May Day gatherings, union conferences, and training courses.³⁷ The WFTU and its affiliates provided SOBSI with a channel to the outside world. Its political line was also shaped by its connection with the WFTU.³⁸

Under the radical nationalist President Sukarno, international solidarity was a key component of Indonesian foreign policy. As part of the communist grouping in Indonesia headed by the PKI, independently and in support of President Sukarno, SOBSI campaigned against Western imperialism by calling for an end to Dutch rule over West New Guinea and French rule over Algeria, and condemning interventions in the Arab world by Britain and the US in the 1950s up to 1965.³⁹

³⁴Ingleton, *Workers and Democracy*, p. 43.

³⁵The socialist world here refers to the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), other countries in the Eastern Bloc, and the People's Republic of China (PRC).

³⁶Lin Hongxuan, “The Minor Key: Indonesian Marxists Sojourning Abroad”, *Journal of World History*, 35:2 (2024), pp. 261–296.

³⁷Ingleton, *Workers and Democracy*, p. 50.

³⁸Articles on the political line and history of the WFTU featured regularly in SOBSI official organs, *Bendera Buruh* and *Buletin SOBSI*. See for example, “Perkembangan Gerakan Buruh Sesudah Perang Dunia II”, *Bendera Buruh* no. 1 & 2 (VIII), 30 May 1958, p. 2, for an account of the development of the trade union movement after World War II.

³⁹Vannessa Hearman, “Indonesian Trade Unionists, the World Federation of Trade Unions and Cold War Internationalism, 1947–65”, *Labour History*, 111 (2016), pp. 27–44, 38.

Part of SOBSI's activities included educating its membership about global working-class politics and the relevance of socialism and communism as political models in Indonesia.⁴⁰ In so doing, the organization linked its domestic struggles to global politics, aimed also at strengthening the capacity of the PKI to chart an independent course from Sukarno by using its industrial muscle. Official SOBSI accounts of overseas visits aimed at winning support for socialism in Indonesia by reporting life in the Eastern Bloc and PRC in glowing terms.⁴¹ Official publications of SOBSI, such as its journals, *Bendera Buruh* [Workers' Flag] and *Buletin SOBSI*, as well as the PKI newspaper, *Harian Rakjat* [People's Daily], offered highly curated (edited and stylized) accounts of travel by Indonesian workers and union representatives, describing the superior living and working conditions of workers in the communist bloc.⁴² These reports showed that SOBSI was an integral part of the WFTU and that links facilitated by the WFTU enabled SOBSI to weave its own relationships with unions in various countries such as Italy, Australia, Czechoslovakia, and Japan.

By the mid-1960s, SOBSI was the largest trade union federation in Indonesia, with about forty national union affiliates. Donald Hindley puts the figure of SOBSI members as "at least 1.8–2.4 million" in the late 1950s, drawing on estimates by Tedjasukmana, a former minister for labour, that SOBSI accounted for more than sixty per cent of the three to four million unionized workers.⁴³ SOBSI unions could be found in sectors including railway, plantation estates, forestry, maritime, film, ports, transport, manufacturing, and public service.⁴⁴

Key SOBSI officials were leading PKI cadres and WFTU international office bearers at the same time.⁴⁵ Ruslan Widjajasastra, second deputy secretary-general of SOBSI and Munir, the SOBSI deputy secretary-general, were also WFTU General Council members with their deputies being Mardjoko and Ferdinand Runturambi, respectively.⁴⁶ SOBSI secretary-general Njono was also one of the seventy-two members of the Executive Committee of the WFTU in 1953.⁴⁷ By 1957, Njono was a vice-president of the WFTU. Leading unionists in SOBSI unions also played key roles in Trade Union Internationals in fields such as agrarian, forestry, oil, and mining.⁴⁸ A member of the SOBSI Central Bureau and a representative of the PKI in Parliament, Tjugito was elected president of

⁴⁰Hearman, "Indonesian Trade Unionists".

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁴²See for example "Djaminan Kesehatan di Tjekoslowakia", *Bendera Buruh*, 19/20 (VII), 30 April 1958, p. 11 on the doctor–patient ratio in Czechoslovakia.

⁴³Hindley, *Communist Party of Indonesia*, p. 136.

⁴⁴Walter Galenson, *Labor in Developing Economies* (Berkeley, CA, 1962), p. 101.

⁴⁵Ingleson, *Workers and Democracy*, p. 48. As part of the CIA's surveillance activities, the names of these office bearers are also documented in Central Intelligence Agency, "Directory of the World Federation of Trade Unions", 15 May 1961, p. 77. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp78-00915r001300120002-2>; last accessed 17 October 2024.

⁴⁶Weltgewerkschaftsbund, 3. Weltgewerkschaftskongress / Protokoll. Weltgewerkschaftsbund, Wien / 10. Bis 21. Oktober 1953 (Berlin, 1953), p. 1169.

⁴⁷Weltgewerkschaftsbund, 3. Weltgewerkschaftskongress / Protokoll, p. 1173.

⁴⁸For example, R.P. Situmeang, secretary general of the Indonesian Oil Workers' Union (Perbum) was also a member of the administrative committee of the WFTU Chemical and Oil Workers TUI. Central Intelligence Agency, "Directory of the World Federation of Trade Unions", 15 May 1961, p. 33. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp78-00915r001300120002-2>; last accessed 17 October 2024.

the International Agrarian and Forestry Union in 1953.⁴⁹ Sugiri, a member of the SOBSI executive, was the WFTU secretary in Prague who, at the end of his term, was replaced by a woman labour activist and deputy chair of the SOBSI National Council, Setiati Surasto.²⁶ Indonesians helped improve knowledge within the WFTU of the conditions in developing countries where industrialization was low and agriculture predominated, bridging the gap between the WFTU and member unions.⁵⁰

The rise of the New Order regime in 1966 led to independent trade unionism being outlawed. When the army seized power from Sukarno in a right-wing coup, SOBSI was officially banned along with the PKI and other leftist organizations. Leftist trade unionists were killed and imprisoned, mostly without trial. The events that led to this takeover were the abduction and murder of six generals and a lieutenant in Jakarta on 30 September 1965, by a group of progressive army officers calling itself the Thirtieth of September Movement. They argued they were protecting President Sukarno from a planned coup by a so-called Council of Generals. Their actions, however, were subsequently linked to the PKI and portrayed by the army under Major General Suharto as a coup attempt.⁵¹ The army orchestrated and led anti-communist pogroms that claimed half a million lives in Indonesia.

Army-sponsored special tribunals sentenced SOBSI leaders and activists to death and long prison sentences, but many others were killed and detained without trial. Njono was executed by a firing squad in 1969, and others would follow. In 1974, Amnesty International listed thirty-three imprisoned SOBSI officials, including those who had held senior positions in the WFTU, among an estimated total of 55,000 political prisoners.⁵² Some Indonesians who were travelling overseas at the time of the purges were forced into exile in the PRC, the USSR, Vietnam, Burma, Cuba, Albania, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria.⁵³

The Soviets made compromises with the new rulers, having regarded Sukarno and the PKI as being firmly orientated towards Beijing by 1965 and concerned with ensuring the repayment of Soviet loans to Indonesia and preserving its influence in the region.⁵⁴

⁴⁹Ingleson, *Workers and Democracy*, p. 48.

⁵⁰Ruslan Vidjajasastra, *The Development of the Trade Union Movement in the Colonial and Semi-colonial Countries: Report Presented at the Third World Trade Union Congress Vienna, 10–21 October 1953* (London, 1954).

⁵¹Hearman, *Unmarked Graves*, pp. 69–70.

⁵²Amnesty International, “Trade Unionists and Parliamentarians Gaoled in Indonesia” (Moorvale, Qld., Amnesty International, Queensland Section, 1974), pp. 5–7.

⁵³David T. Hill, “Indonesian Political Exiles in the USSR”, *Critical Asian Studies*, 46:4 (2014), pp. 621–648; David T. Hill, “Cold War Polarization, Delegated Party Authority, and Diminishing Exilic Options: The Dilemma of Indonesian Political Exiles in China after 1965”, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-en Volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, 176:2–3 (2020), pp. 338–372; and Sita Magfira, *Witnessing State Socialism: The Lives of Indonesian Diaspora, Hungary–Czechoslovakia, 1950s–1989* (MA thesis, Central European University and Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2022).

⁵⁴Ragna Boden, “Silence in the Slaughterhouse: Moscow and the Indonesian Massacres”, in Bernd Schaefer and Baskara Wardaya (eds), *1965: Indonesia and the World* (Jakarta, 2013), pp. 86–98.

Adam Soepardjan, Trade Unionist and Leftist

One of those unionists imprisoned without trial was Adam Soepardjan. He was born on the island of Sumbawa in Eastern Indonesia in 1927.⁵⁵ From his autobiography, we learn that he completed primary schooling in Kediri, East Java, just as the Japanese invaded the Dutch East Indies. In his teens, he and his father were forced to work for the Japanese occupying forces in West New Guinea in 1942–1945. Upon the Japanese surrender in 1945, they found their way back to Java, where he then became involved in the youth militias in the Indonesian independence war against the Dutch. Soepardjan started working in heavy industry in 1950 and became involved in trade unions in Surabaya, East Java. In that city, he also studied part-time to complete high school and a course in politics at the PKI-linked People's University. At his workplace, the Braat machine factory in Ngagel, Surabaya, Soepardjan became the chairperson of the Metalworkers' Industrial Union (Serikat Buruh Industri Metal, SBIM) branch, a union affiliated with SOBSI. In 1957, the Braat factory was nationalized as part of Indonesia's campaign to take control of West New Guinea from the Dutch and renamed Barata. Soepardjan was deeply involved in SOBSI and left-wing politics by the late 1950s.

In April 1959, SOBSI instructed Soepardjan to obtain a passport so he could represent the union federation at May Day celebrations in the GDR. In the period leading up to his departure, SOBSI had been campaigning against foreign interference in Indonesia as evidence emerged of United States support for the PRRI-Permesta anti-government rebels in Sumatra and Sulawesi in 1958. The WFTU and affiliated national federations in Japan, the United Arab Republic, Australia, France, Hungary, India, Pakistan, and the PRC condemned the rebels and the US intervention.⁵⁶ In this climate, where the Indonesian government and its staunch allies felt under threat as a result of the Cold War, Soepardjan travelled abroad with Hadi Soedardjo, deputy chair of the Indonesian Oil Workers' Union (Perbum). Their complex route required multiple flights and stopovers before they reached East Berlin in time for the May Day celebrations. They then headed to the Third International Conference of the Trade Union International (TUI) of Chemical and Oil Workers in Leipzig (Figure 1).⁵⁷ After this conference, Soepardjan flew to Czechoslovakia to attend the inaugural conference of the International Trade Union of Workers in Commerce (1–4 June 1959).⁵⁸ Spending two and a half months in the GDR and Czechoslovakia between April and July 1959, it was to be his first (and only) international trip representing SOBSI.

Soepardjan's life drastically changed when he was captured on 20 October 1965 as part of the anti-communist purges.⁵⁹ He was accused of supporting the Thirtieth of

⁵⁵Biographical information is obtained from Adam Soepardjan, *Mendobrak Penjara Rezim Soeharto* (Yogyakarta, 2004).

⁵⁶Bendera Buruh 1 & 2 (VIII), "GSS dan Serikatburuh2 Berbagai Negeri Kutuk Intervensi AMERIKA/TAIWAN di INDONESIA", 30 May 1958, p. 1.

⁵⁷Soepardjan, *Mendobrak Penjara*, p. 47. For a list of some of the WFTU meetings in 1959, see Central Intelligence Agency, "List of Principal Meetings Organized or Controlled by WFTU in 1959", pp. 3–4, CIA-RDP78-00915R001100020006-1. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp78-00915r001100020006-1>; last accessed 8 March 2024.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

⁵⁹On conditions in Kalisosok, see Hearman, *Unmarked Graves*, pp. 87–88.



Figure 1. From left: Indonesian delegates, Adam Soepardjan, Situmeang, and Hadi Soedardjo with German and Hungarian delegations at the Chemical Workers' Conference in Leipzig, 1959.

Source: Adam Soepardjan, *Mendobrak Penjara Rezim Soeharto*, p. 298. Used with permission from Penerbit Ombak.

September Movement and detained without trial in several prisons in East Java for thirteen years, including Surabaya's Kalisosok Prison, notorious for its appalling conditions and corrupt, violent guards. After the fall of the New Order regime in 1998, dozens of memoirs and oral histories of the life stories of former political prisoners were published, including Soepardjan's 2004 memoir, *Mendobrak Penjara Rezim Soeharto* (Smashing the Soeharto Regime's Prison).⁶⁰ The memoir focuses largely on his detention but does briefly mention his European trip. Soepardjan wrote that his visit improved his knowledge of "workers movements in other countries", increasing his awareness of the importance of eradicating "*exploitation de l'homme par l'homme*" (exploitation of man by man, [sic]) and "to intensify efforts to construct a socialist society in Indonesia".⁶¹ Photographs of his travels to the GDR and Czechoslovakia are included in the appendix of his memoir.

Unpublished, however, are two handwritten notebooks (Figure 2) that retold his experiences of travelling abroad, stored with the rest of his papers at the International Institute for Social History (Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale

⁶⁰Soepardjan, *Mendobrak Penjara Rezim Soeharto*; Vanessa Hearman, "Uses of Memoirs and Oral History Works in Researching the 1965–1966 Political Violence in Indonesia, *International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies*, 5:2 (2009), pp. 21–42.

⁶¹Soepardjan, *Mendobrak Penjara*, p. 48.

Geschiedenis, IISG) in Amsterdam.⁶² Between 1975 and 1976, while still imprisoned, Soepardjan created three notebooks as materials for him to use in teaching English once he was released. The three volumes (Books I–III) contained thirty-nine stories or vignettes in total. The first volume reportedly contained fifteen vignettes but is not in the IISG collection and is therefore not analysed at length here. The remaining two volumes, two handstitched small notebooks titled *Travels Abroad by Bintang Karim*, Books II and III, contain eleven and thirteen vignettes, respectively.⁶³ The books were intended as English-language readers for those learning the language.

The notebooks present the travel stories of a low-ranking union branch leader from the industrial city of Surabaya, written in the third person. The main protagonist, Arman, is clearly based on Soepardjan. In these books, Soepardjan uses a pseudonym, Bintang Karim, as the author, almost certainly to avoid government prohibitions on (former) political prisoners writing and being published. The first volume deals with a visit by Arman and his travelling companion, fellow unionist Suhadi (also a pseudonym), to Berlin for the 1959 May Day celebration and to participate in an international conference of oil and chemical workers in Leipzig.

Book II deals with travels to the GDR. The author's foreword to Book II is dated 5 August 1975. At forty-five pages long and containing eleven stories, the book includes accounts of travel to Leuna, Karl Marx Stadt, Potsdam, and Buchenwald in the GDR, hosted by the Free German Trade Union Federation (Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, FDGB). SOBSI and FDGB had cordial relations, and the Indonesian union federation expressed its support for the reunification of Germany.⁶⁴ The FDGB was likely to have been supporting the GDR efforts to establish diplomatic relations with Indonesia to overcome attempts by the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), under the Hallstein Doctrine, to isolate it. While the FRG already had an embassy in Jakarta from 1952, the GDR was cultivating relations with officials, journalists, and intellectuals in Jakarta to gain diplomatic recognition.⁶⁵

The third volume of Soepardjan's notebooks was dated June 1976 and deals with the delegation's visit to Czechoslovakia to attend an international trade union conference and visit the WFTU headquarters in Prague, where a fellow Indonesian, Sugiri, was posted. They also travelled to the former concentration camp, Terezin, and other towns. In each country, the Indonesian delegation was allocated local functionaries and interpreters to accompany them on their site visits.

⁶²Adam Soepardjan Papers, ARCH02469, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. The collection was donated by Mrs M.T.J. van den Bosch-Beeren in 2002. The genesis of the collection is discussed in "Fifth Friends Day", *On the Waterfront: Newsletter no. 5 of the Friends of the IISH*, 2002, p. 3. Available at: https://iisg.amsterdam/files/2018-01/iish_on_the_waterfront_05.pdf; last accessed 17 October 2024.

⁶³*Travels Abroad by Bintang Karim*, Books II and III.

⁶⁴9 Tahun RDD", *Bendera Buruh* 8 and 9 (VIII), 30 October 1958, p. 2. SOBSI sent solidarity greetings to the FDGB on the ninth anniversary of the founding of the GDR.

⁶⁵Bernd Schaefer, "The Two Germanys and Indonesia 1965/66", in Bernd Schaefer and Baskara Wardaya (eds.), *1965: Indonesia and the World* (Jakarta, 2013), pp. 99–100. The GDR opened a "General Consulate" in Jakarta in 1960.

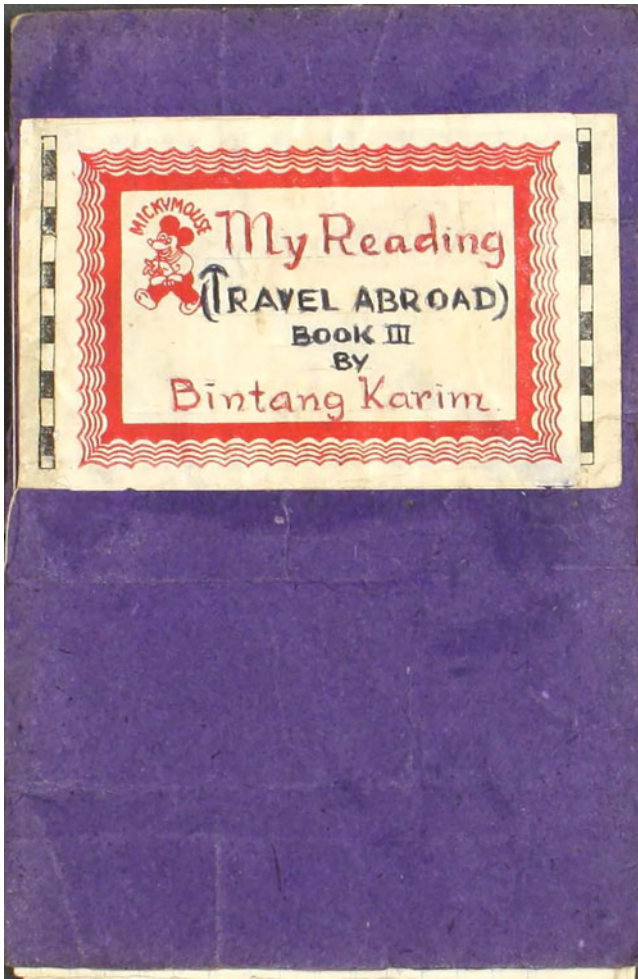


Figure 2. Front cover of *Travel Abroad Book III*.

Source: Collection of the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. Photo by the author.

Arman was overwhelmingly positive about the achievements of the countries he visited, praising their level of industrial development, self-reliance, and solidarity with other workers' movements. Each story includes Arman's reflections on how what he was witnessing compared to his country, Indonesia. He dreamt of being able to apply what he had seen and experienced in Indonesia. The writer, Soepardjan, planned for these vignettes to be read in the New Order era by Indonesians who had little experience or recollection of independent trade unionism or the Eastern Bloc, mostly a new generation without any direct experience of the Sukarno era or much knowledge about Indonesian leftist organizations.

Soepardjan's travel writings were distinct from official accounts and the more common forms of Cold War travel writing in which travel is represented as crossings based on notions of shared ideas and solidarity. These prison notebooks, handwritten in long hand during his detention, attest to the complex trade union networks in Afro-Asia in the 1950s by showing that Indonesian communist trade unionists affiliated with the WFTU did not always see the Eastern European countries they visited in the positive light that their trade union hosts and SOBSI expected them to. While still highly mediated and stylized, three key themes are analysed below to examine how memories of Cold War political travel and trade unionism are conveyed to anticipated new audiences in light of the complete annihilation of the communist movement in Indonesia and the author's need to frame his recollections in a way that avoided discussing openly the reasons for his travel in the New Order's anti-communist setting. These three themes are chosen to highlight the main ideas that galvanized Indonesians and other unionists in the WFTU and excited Indonesians about the prospects of a socialist world being constructed in Europe and Asia (notably, the PRC and the Democratic Republic of Korea). They recollect a disappeared world, a world of foreclosed possibilities, smothered by the authoritarian, military-dominated development model of the New Order. These travelogues also reveal, however, that travel – and its attendant discomforts – acted as an irritant and a reminder of difference, thereby challenging the bonds of shared ideals and political vision.

Socialist Industry and Modernity

One of the key themes of Soepardjan's travelogues is industrialization and the development of an industrial working class, elements that Marxists perceive as crucial for the advancement of socialism. The PKI assessed Indonesia in the late 1950s as a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society wherein Indonesia had political independence, but its economic assets were controlled by "the imperialists and dependent upon the economy of the imperialist states".⁶⁶ Its view was highly influential on activists involved in the party and its mass organizations. Indonesians, like those from other Third World countries, were interested in how the Second World could contribute to industrial development in their country. In promoting their political and economic model to the Third World, their hosts, in turn, arranged visits by international delegations to industrial plants and factories. They were struck by the presence of what they considered symbols of modernity in the Eastern Bloc countries and believed that the socialist model of development offered something fundamentally different to the Western capitalist model, although scholars have argued that the socialist model was still premised on "Eurocentric modernization theory, reproducing a chronopolitics familiar from Western imperialism" that promised to eradicate the "backwardness" of non-Western societies.⁶⁷

⁶⁶Hindley, *Communist Party of Indonesia*, p. 36.

⁶⁷Eric Burton, Zoltán Ginelli, James Mark, and Nemanja Radonjic, "The Travelogue. Imagining Spaces of Encounter: Travel Writing Between the Colonial and the Anti-Colonial in Socialist Eastern Europe,

In both the GDR and Czechoslovakia, Arman and Suhadi visited factories and industrial plants in an attempt to experience socialist modernity. In the GDR, along with Dutch, Belgian, and Indian trade unionists, Arman and Suhadi visited Leunawerke, one of Germany's largest chemical production complexes. The visit aimed to showcase East German development, although the plant had been operating since 1916. What Arman saw at Leunawerke prompted his reflections on his own country's underdevelopment:

Seeing Leuna Wercke (sic) with its many kinds of productions and efficiency in the use of manpower and the equipments, Arman remembered about his beloved country. As an agrarian land, thus as an underdeveloped country, Indonesia have (sic) still wasting many kinds of materials and manpower.⁶⁸

Arman cites the country's shortcomings as the inability of its leaders to "convene the whole nation", suggesting that Marxism, "a certain theoretical science", is what is required as an effective basis of the nation.⁶⁹ His laboured explanations, drawing on Marxist tenets, lend a heavily pedagogical and disciplining aspect to these travel accounts, in which the author reflected on how these tenets were being practised in the GDR and could be applied in Indonesia. As Marxism was officially banned under the New Order regime, the "theoretical science" he elaborated was never referred to by name.

Concerns with modernity and development also became a key plank of the Suharto New Order regime. Soepardjan's travel writings thus also attempted to contribute his opinions on Indonesia's developmental quest, whether by discussing the mechanization of the steelworks in Germany or the availability of cheap tickets for the concert hall, of televisions, and holiday houses for workers. It was while walking in Stalin-alley in Berlin that he "saw several TVs installed behind the display windows of shops".⁷⁰ Noticing "something that could be found very much on the roofs of the houses", Arman was curious to discover that these were "TV antennas".⁷¹ He wrote of the importance of both material and spiritual development for the worker. Through his writings, he subtly criticized the New Order regime and its inability to provide what he considered a high standard of living compared to the places he visited in 1959.

Soepardjan saw differences in the level of development between the GDR and Indonesia as not being due to the progress of technology but rather to differences in the two countries' political and economic systems. In the book, Arman visited a car factory that featured a modern assembly line. Although it only produced one model of car, he marvelled that workers could afford to buy cars in the first place. In contrast, he noted:

1949–1989", in Kristin Roth-Ey (ed.), *Socialist Internationalism and the Gritty Politics of the Particular: Second-Third World Spaces in the Cold War* (London, 2023), p. 241.

⁶⁸ *Travels Abroad*, Book II, p. 47.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁷⁰ *Travels Abroad*, Book III, p. 54.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Indonesia as an ex-colonial and an underdeveloped country is still far to be compared with the GDR as an industrialized country. It still needs many years in order that Indonesia in the field of technology shall be able to reach the grade of an industrialized country.⁷²

He contrasted the modern machinery he saw to the pre-war, antiquated machinery inherited from the Dutch at the factory in Surabaya where he worked.⁷³ Indonesia was underdeveloped, in his view, because it was a semi-colonial, semi-feudal country. These problems needed to be addressed through a change in political system.

As well as visiting industrial sites such as chemical- and car plants, the hosts also included World War II sites and leisure facilities such as the Berlin Tierpark Zoo and schools and performance halls in the GDR in the itinerary.⁷⁴ The delegates were therefore assured that “actually existing socialism” not only guaranteed the physical well-being of workers through industrial development, but also fulfilled their intellectual needs.⁷⁵

Anti-Fascism and Authoritarian Past

Anti-fascism was a key part of the socialist ideology of the GDR.⁷⁶ Its ideological perspective suggested that the promotion of peace and the construction of a socialist economy and society underpinned by strong industrial development would prevent the return of fascism. World War II sites were central to the travel itinerary as part of the hosts’ remaking of the GDR’s postwar identity by proving their anti-fascist credentials and cutting any ties with the Nazi past. Monteath describes it thus: “Embracing an official doctrine of “antifascism” served to distance the new state from the fascist past while also setting the remembrance of that past as the foundation of postwar identity”.⁷⁷ Such a focus on anti-fascism was shared by the WFTU and its affiliates. While visiting Dresden, “Arman saw that some places were still empty of buildings”, reflecting the aftermath of World War II bombing, which he specifically mentioned as having been committed by US warplanes.⁷⁸ The role of the Western Allies in defeating fascism in Germany is underplayed; the Allies and Hitler’s Nazi Germany were equally blamed for the destruction of the country, particularly of the city of Dresden.⁷⁹ History was thus being rewritten, cleaving apart the joint efforts involving the USSR, the US, and other allies in defeating Nazi Germany.

⁷²*Travels Abroad*, Book II, p. 74.

⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 81–85.

⁷⁵On the Tierpark, see J. Mohnhaupt, “The Zoo of the Others: Relationship and Competition between the Two Berlin Zoos during the Cold War”, *Mammalian Biology*, 81 (Suppl 1):14 (2016).

⁷⁶Peter Monteath, “Holocaust Remembrance in the German Democratic Republic – and Beyond”, in John-Paul Himka, and Joanna Beata Michlic (eds), *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe* (Lincoln, NE, 2013), p. 229.

⁷⁷Monteath, “Holocaust Remembrance”, p. 223.

⁷⁸*Travels Abroad*, Book II, p. 52.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, p. 63.

The focus on fighting fascism is continued through the delegates' visits to other World War II sites, such as the former Buchenwald Concentration Camp and the town of Potsdam, where the Potsdam Agreement was signed at the end of the war. As the largest concentration camp memorial in Germany, according to Monteath, Buchenwald "more than any other site [...] represented the doctrine of 'antifascism'".⁸⁰ In 1958, just several months prior to the Indonesian delegates' visit, a national memorial was constructed and opened at the camp site. The memorial represented the camp as having been liberated by the inmates themselves, rather than the US Army, in 1945.⁸¹

In describing the visit to the camp, Soepardjan focused on the incarceration of German Social-Democratic Party leader, Ernst Thälman (described as a "prominent German worker's leader") at the camp while saying little about other groups the Nazis targeted. The only mention of a Jewish person was of a mentally ill university professor who threw himself at the electrified fence and was killed in an escape attempt. Arman's recollections, therefore, reflect the ambivalences of World War II remembrance in the GDR. Despite their grave persecution during the Nazi era, Jews were cast as passive victims, and their suffering was overshadowed by the state's celebrations of the victory of the Red Army in World War II and the heroic resistance of those who bore the red triangle.⁸²

If the GDR's mode of commemorating World War II, as reflected in the Buchenwald memorial, is echoed by Soepardjan's writing about Nazi persecution, it is notable that Arman's conclusion as to who bore responsibility for World War II was somewhat ambivalent, ending his account of the visit with a reflection of the impermanence of humans and the ambiguous words: "Even the longest day shall come to an end."⁸³ In Czechoslovakia, the Indonesians visited a monument where Czechoslovak "working class leaders" were killed by the Nazis for organizing a strike. Other workers involved in the strike were sent to a concentration camp, which the delegates also visited, a much smaller camp than Buchenwald. Arman concluded that fascism had been defeated and workers achieved liberation and victory.⁸⁴

These ambivalences regarding the value of fascist ideas and admiration for Japanese military fascism among some Indonesian nationalists go some way to explain Soepardjan's lack of thorough condemnation of German fascism and its legacies. Although left ideologies such as Marxism and socialism were more influential on the Indonesian nationalist movement, historically some Indonesian leaders were fascinated with fascism, authoritarianism, and the European concept of the organicist state.⁸⁵ The Japanese occupation opened the way for Indonesians to declare independence by defeating Dutch colonialism.

⁸⁰Monteath, "Holocaust Remembrance", p. 231.

⁸¹*Ibid.*

⁸²Monteath, "Holocaust Remembrance", p. 229.

⁸³*Travels Abroad*, Book II, p. 60.

⁸⁴*Travels Abroad*, Book III, p. 25.

⁸⁵David Bourchier, *Illiberal Democracy in Indonesia: The Ideology of the Family State* (Abingdon, 2014), pp. 32–33 writes that, most notably the political party, Parindra (Greater Indonesia Party) in the 1930s was "sanguine about both Germany and Japan in the late 1930s".

In analysing how anti-fascism might have been received by Indonesian leftists after the 1965–1966 purges, at its most banal Nazi Germany had parallels with the Indonesian New Order regime. The New Order was not fascist but drew on aspects of fascist ideology and practice in its conception of the organicist state and the use of force in suppressing its opponents. In the books, Arman drew subtle parallels between the authoritarian New Order and fascism in Europe in World War II, although never mentioning the former by name. For Arman, the defeat of German and Japanese fascism shows that “any power that reigned with merciless (sic), sooner or later anyhow certainly should be crushed down”.⁸⁶ Assuming Arman’s voice, Soepardjan wrote that time and resistance would sweep away authoritarian regimes (which, in his view, however, did not include the Eastern European Stalinist regimes who hosted his visit). If, as Soepardjan believed, the construction of a socialist society along the lines of the GDR prevented the revival of fascism, then the real enemy of socialists was those forces that threatened the socialist camp, namely, the US and its allies.

The Personal and the Political

It is the personal encounters described in these notebooks that move away from the familiar themes and slogans in Cold War travel accounts of Eastern Europe, forming the elements of the micro-histories of Cold War encounters. The people Arman and Suhadi met in the GDR and Czechoslovakia perceived them as curious and alien. In turn, while he and Suhadi were treated at times like exotic creatures, Arman, too, paid close attention to the people he met during his travels. When the Indonesian and Indian delegates went to Karl Marx Stadt (renamed back to Chemnitz after 1990), a local functionary of the FDGB accompanied them on their travels in the area.⁸⁷ As the author wrote: “Otto a functionary of the FDGB was appointed to be their company. Every day Otto came to their lodging to carry out together the program that was already composed by the FDGB.”⁸⁸ Rather than seeing Otto’s presence as evidence of the carefully curated nature of their programme, they saw liaison officers such as him as a caring, dedicated comrade. Regine, Otto’s daughter, according to Arman, could not take her eyes off him, so fascinated she was by him. Near Potsdam, when the delegates were taken to visit “a mineworker’s palace”, a club for the workers and their families, the Indonesian duo attracted curiosity for their appearance and were dubbed the “little delegation” by a waitress due to their small statures.⁸⁹ These personal, cross-cultural encounters nuance the accounts of travel to the Eastern Bloc in which a shared commitment to socialism was presumed to overcome other differences.

Beyond these accounts emphasizing difference, there were also those that reflected personal bonds and kindness. At the mineworkers’ palace near Potsdam, the delegates met with a group of “miner activists” to discuss the experiences of workers in

⁸⁶ *Travels Abroad*, Book III, p. 26.

⁸⁷ *Travels Abroad*, Book II, p. 49.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

Indonesia and the GDR. In contrast to the working class being in charge in the GDR, Arman told the assembled workers that Indonesian workers were facing multiple oppressions: “The Indonesian working class had still a heavy task in their struggle to liberate themselves and the whole people from the oppression of the rulers, the capitalists, and the feudalists.”⁹⁰ These were familiar themes for the assembled workers, but Arman recounted that it was the mention of his and Suhadi’s children and their dream for the children to go to university that led two of the workers to give the delegates their watches, “the most valuable gift even though it was only old watches”.⁹¹

The men also developed bonds with their interpreters, particularly the women, who expressed sympathy for their feelings of homesickness. Emma supplied Arman with chilli powder to enrich his meals in Prague and farewelled him with gifts of Slovakian records. Another interpreter, Adela, pinned a flower in his buttonhole. To his surprise, Adela communicated with him in Dutch as she was an interpreter for a Dutch delegate, Arnold, reminding him of the Dutch colonial past in Indonesia.⁹² These accounts remind us of the multiple languages – German, Czech, Slovak, Dutch, Japanese, and English – used over the course of their travels and participation in WFTU-sponsored conferences with Dutch, Belgian, Indian, Iraqi, Japanese, and Ceylonese trade unionists. The trip made Arman even more interested in languages because it showed him how important they were for “world communication”.⁹³

Travel as Discomfort

Czechoslovakia presented the Indonesian trade unionists with a more confounding experience of socialist modernity compared to the GDR. In Prague, Arman and Suhadi attended the first conference of “commerce workers” to set up a new TUI affiliated to the WFTU in this sector and elected the first “Leading Council” of this new TUI.⁹⁴ Czechoslovakia had less heavy industry compared to Germany, and given the focus of their conference, Arman’s hope of seeing heavy industrial manufacturing plants was dashed. Other than a coal mine, they visited retail shops, factories making women’s stockings, and workshops that made confectionery, glass vases, and pottery. To his disappointment, at the confectionery factory, workers had gone home on a meal break and the delegates walked through an empty workshop past the steel boilers and pans.

Although attempting to view retail stores through a socialist lens, Arman criticized the stores in Prague as drab. He thought the window-dressing and sparse displays of consumer goods in the department stores were ugly. When the “shop director” asked for his opinion of the displays, Arman suggested that the goods not be spread so far apart, and that attention should be paid to colour in how the goods should be

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁹²*Travels Abroad*, Book III, p. 8.

⁹³*Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

displayed.⁹⁵ When asked about his impression of the store, Arman thought that there was more variety in Indonesia, but he hazarded a guess that the quality was better in that store. In Indonesia, he reflected, goods were mostly imported from elsewhere, whereas in Czechoslovakia they were domestically produced, emphasizing that self-reliance was more important. Despite his disappointment with the industries that he was being shown, Arman persisted in putting forward a positive view of socialist self-sufficiency.

However, it seemed Czechoslovakia did not meet Arman's expectations of a socialist society in other ways. The delegates were taken to see Slovakian dances and acrobatics, a fashion show, and a symphony orchestra performance as part of the trade union conference they were attending. Accustomed as they were to organized trade union activities of a more serious nature, the delegates became unsettled by these seemingly frivolous activities. An Iraqi delegate complained that the fashion show was of no relevance to them, and Arman joined in his criticisms, arguing that fashion shows were degrading to women who were being used to sell clothing.⁹⁶

Dancing was a regular activity during their trip, in nightclubs and in halls, creating another source of discomfort for the delegates. It was a far cry from the moralistic tone of life that the Indonesian Left had promoted, especially after the advent of Sukarno's straitlaced authoritarian Guided Democracy period (1959–1965), in which Western music and dancing were condemned. Arman conceded that dancing was "a necessary skill" for the trade union delegate when in Europe, as was drinking "a luxurious drink" such as beer or wine.⁹⁷ The act of dancing between Sudanese and French delegates was read politically as signalling internationalism and reconciliation, but some of the delegates were uncomfortable as they themselves did not know how to dance.⁹⁸ Instead, they sat around the table sipping their wines with their interpreter, Emma.

Classical music concerts also made the delegates conscious of their poverty and lack of familiarity with what would have been Western (specifically Dutch and upper-class) experiences in Indonesia. The formality of a Prague symphony orchestra performance made them feel out of place in their regular, coloured dress suits. They did not fit in: Suhadi in his grey suit, Arman in brown, and the Ceylonese delegate in white, while European men dressed in tuxedos.⁹⁹ Towards the end of his stay, Arman, who had liked listening to gramophone records when he was growing up in Indonesia, was no longer sure if he understood or felt inspired by classical music after attending several symphony orchestra performances as part of his official engagements in Europe. These experiences, taken together, meant that Czechoslovakia contributed to his education about a socialist workers' state in unexpected ways.

Travel became an irritant rather than a way of experiencing utopia. The notebooks showed that there was dissonance between positive impressions of Eastern Europe, some held from afar, and the Indonesians' experiences in the region. Besides their

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 21.

experiences of being treated as a novelty by the people they met, there were a number of unsettling experiences. Arman's and Suhadi's feet sweated endlessly and stank, even though the weather was not warm. Suhadi arranged for his feet to be washed at a Prague department store to get rid of the smell. Arman reflected on how and why their feet were wet all the time, but that maybe this was not uncommon if there were foot-washing places in the department store.¹⁰⁰ He was also tired of being gifted apples wherever he went; in general, the food needed seasoning, and the meat was tough. The Germans served him rice though it did not taste anything like it did in Indonesia:

But when beside the other food, the rice was presented too, Arman and Suhadi dared not to eat the rice because it was not well done. It seemed that it was rather difficult for the hotel cooker to cook rice well.¹⁰¹

As activists, they tried to analyse politically what these shortcomings might have signified, but without ready answers, being away from home simply became an accumulation of irritants.

Towards the end of their stay, Soepardjan wrote of their homesickness, which led to their decision to avoid travelling to the USSR. They briefly contemplated a visit there but declined the invitation eventually. They felt too homesick (despite the occasional Indonesian meal in Prague with the SOBSI representative, Sugito, who was based at the WFTU secretariat). They were needed back home to organize and attend events such as the wedding of their relatives.¹⁰² Despite being revolutionaries, the two trade unionists appeared to have given greater priority to the needs of their biological families. Given the centrality of the USSR in the Cold War, this lack of enthusiasm for visiting could be interpreted as a subtle critique of the country and attests to the PKI's pro-PRC alignment.

The Indonesian delegates' return journey to Indonesia by air involved nine airports, showing how difficult and expensive it was to travel from the Global South to Europe in the 1950s. They flew from Prague to Zurich, then to Geneva, where they had to spend one night before flying on to Rome. From Rome, they flew and landed in Cairo, Teheran, Karachi, Bangkok, and Kuala Lumpur before finally touching down at Jakarta's Kemayoran Airport.¹⁰³ The travelogue ends with Arman embracing and kissing his four children and "his beautiful wife" when he reaches "home sweet home" in Surabaya.¹⁰⁴

Yet, Adam Soepardjan, the author of these books, as outlined in his autobiography, "no longer had a home in Surabaya" after his release from prison in 1978, a long journey in itself. He was sent back to his family in Kediri, a small town in East Java with "no material wealth of any kind".¹⁰⁵ He was forced to depend on his siblings at first before he started giving private English lessons. As a former political

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁰¹*Travels Abroad*, Book II, p. 86.

¹⁰²*Travels Abroad*, Book III, p. 41.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, pp. 63–69.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁰⁵Soepardjan, *Mendobrak Penjara*, p. 320.



Figure 3. Adam Soepardjan in his home office, Surabaya.

Source: Collection of the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. Despite our best efforts we were unable to locate a copyright holder for this photograph.

prisoner, he could not travel without permits from local authorities. In 1980, he remarried and moved to Surabaya, where he established a small language school, Adam College, and a translation bureau at home (Figure 3). There are no indications in his papers at the IISG nor the autobiography as to how he used the contents of the small notebooks in his English teaching or how these stories that he wrote in prison were received.

The end of the New Order regime in May 1998 enabled many former political prisoners to speak out about their experiences and to urge the new democratic government in Indonesia to address the injustices they suffered under the regime. Soepardjan became active in an advocacy group for victims and survivors of the 1965–66 political violence, YPKP (Yayasan Penelitian Korban Pembunuhan 1965–66, Research Foundation for the Victims of the 1965–1966 Killings). He advocated, in particular, for the more than 500 detainees who died of starvation in Kalisosok Prison in 1968, their deaths coinciding with a PKI attempt to reorganize in South Blitar, East Java.¹⁰⁶ Based on his own research and firsthand experiences, he also addressed students and non-government organizations on the history of the trade union movement in Indonesia.¹⁰⁷ In these efforts, he sought to couple

¹⁰⁶Soepardjan, *Mendobrak Penjara*, pp. 268–277. On the PKI South Blitar base, see Vanessa Hearman, *Unmarked Graves* (Singapore, 2018), chs. 5 and 6.

¹⁰⁷Soepardjan, “Dengan Gerakan Buruh yang Memiliki Kesadaran Kelasnya Menuju Masyarakat Sosialis”, 24 October 2000. Paper presented to the Workshop-Training tentang Manajemen Serikat Buruh

mourning with militancy through an activist engagement with the younger generations who had few memories of Indonesia's left-wing past.

Conclusion

Trade unions were significant social, political, and economic organizations in Indonesia in the twentieth century, including as major educational institutions for the working- and lower classes. The decolonization struggle against the Dutch spurred the consolidation of workers' organizations and the development of SOBSI as a national trade union federation. Trade union-sponsored travel in the 1950s and 1960s was part of the pedagogical experience of workers and trade union officials and a form of discipline in enacting the Cold War. Indonesian trade unionists travelled by invitation from the WFTU as well as national trade union federations affiliated to the WFTU, such as the FDGB in the GDR and the *Revoluční Odborové Hnutí* (ROH, Revolutionary Trade Union Movement) in Czechoslovakia. The expectations for them to report positively in official organs on what they saw during these travels left little space for reflection in more nuanced ways about what they did see. Unofficial sources, such as Adam Soepardjan's prison notebooks, are part of Cold War subaltern archives that reflect the grassroots experiences of trade union-sponsored travel to the Eastern Bloc. His travel accounts nuance the official organizational histories of international visits and meetings in the 1950s and 1960s undertaken by left unionists from what is today referred to as the Global South. Along with his memoir, these travelogues, as a type of proto memoir, show that in his writings, both during and after the New Order, he remained committed to the goals espoused by the Indonesian left in the 1960s and sought to contribute his knowledge and experience to what he hoped would be the regeneration of a new movement for social justice and democracy. They constitute Soepardjan's struggle to restore our collective memory about left-wing organizations in Indonesia and the people who belonged to them in the face of the New Order regime's attempts to erase these experiences and memories. Yet, these accounts also raise doubts about claims of working-class solidarity and solidarity between the socialist states and the Global South when travel became deeply alienating as travellers came face to face with paternalism, racism, ignorance and inequality.

organized by Kelompok Kerja Humanika Surabaya in Kaliurang, Yogyakarta 26–29 October 2000. Adam Soepardjan Papers, ARCH02469, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

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