

Tjokropranolo. General Sudirman. The Leader Who Finally Destroyed Colonialism in Indonesia. Translated by Libby Krahling, Bert Jordan and Steve Dawson. Canberra: Australian Defence Studies Centre, 1995.

Lucian M. Ashworth

Volume 16, Number 2, Fall 1996

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs16_02br02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Ashworth, L. M. (1996). Review of [Tjokropranolo. General Sudirman. The Leader Who Finally Destroyed Colonialism in Indonesia. Translated by Libby Krahling, Bert Jordan and Steve Dawson. Canberra: Australian Defence Studies Centre, 1995.] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 16(2), 137–138.

Tjokropranolo. *General Sudirman. The Leader Who Finally Destroyed Colonialism in Indonesia.* Translated by Libby Krahling, Bert Jordan and Steve Dawson. Canberra: Australian Defence Studies Centre, 1995.

Every now and again seemingly ordinary people find themselves flung into an epoch-making event. Sudirman, a school teacher in the then Dutch East Indies, found himself called upon to lead the Indonesian army during the Indonesian war of independence against the Dutch. The story of how Sudirman, who was dying of tuberculosis at the time, led the Indonesian army in Java against the Dutch is an epic of Hollywood proportions. Sadly, this book, despite its title, does not delve very deeply into Sudirman's career or character, although it has other strengths to recommend it.

Arguably, the best part of the book is Tjokropranolo's account of Sudirman's guerrilla campaign against the Dutch in 1948. Tjokropranolo served as commanding officer of Sudirman's bodyguards, and accomplished a number of clandestine missions for the general. There is, however, a strong tendency for the author to distance himself from his subject, to the extent that Sudirman is presented as a rather one-dimensional hero. This contrasts with Tjokropranolo's accounts of his own adventures, during this and other campaigns, in which his story-telling abilities come in to their own. Much of the rest of the book consists of summaries of the political situation leading up to the war, with a strong Indonesian nationalist bias. It also includes a wealth of primary data appendices, which would be useful for scholars interested in this period of Indonesian military history. Generally, though, this eclectic collection of themes and subjects gives the book a disorganized feel. It is fair to say that Tjokropranolo has produced something more akin to a personal history of the period than a biography. Two views stand out in the author's narrative: firstly, that the idea of Indonesia, and Indonesian unity, pre-dates the Dutch colonial period. Indonesia is, therefore, an organic entity with a past stretching back to the dawn of time. It is not, in Tjokropranolo's account, a creation of a modern and Europeanized world. Secondly, he believes that "[t]hroughout history there has never been successful diplomacy without the strength of armed forces and the support of the people." (p. 77) In other words, the prophet must be armed, and Sudirman, in this sense, was the armed prophet of the Indonesian war of independence. This second point, with its undertones of Machiavelli's political theory, demonstrates the author's commitment to a particular strand of Indonesian nationalism. During the war with the Dutch the Indonesian nationalists were divided between two approaches to the struggle. One group advocated a full-blown military conflict aiming at complete military victory. The other hoped to use the military situation and sympathy abroad to strike a deal with the Dutch. Tjokropranolo, and his subject Sudirman, represented a particular wing of the latter group. While he supported the endeavors of the Sukarno and Hatta leadership in their efforts to negotiate a settlement, he argues that it was the strength and success of the Indonesian nationalist forces, led by Sudirman, that was the only safeguard against Dutch bad faith. This is why he can describe Sudirman as "the leader who finally destroyed colonialism in Indonesia."

Perhaps, then, this book can be regarded as a mixed bag. A personal history that, while rather disorganized, gives a flavor of what it was like to live through the Indonesian war

of independence. Unfortunately, the hagiographic style reveals little about one of the great guerrilla commanders of this century, and the reader is still left unenlightened about the man behind the myth.

Lucian M. Ashworth

University of Limerick