

# Japan's Power in East Sumatra and South Sumatra

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to focus on the historical relationship of the Japanese occupation in East Sumatra and South Sumatra. Various policies continued to be implemented in accordance with the conditions of war at that time. For three and a half years, the policies carried out were to provide land for planting food commodities, mobilisation of Romusha, giving opportunities for figures to occupy important positions in the government until the promise of independence for Indonesia. After Indonesia's independence (1945), a new round of Indonesian-Japanese relations began. The relationship between the two countries became collaborative and more fluid, and continued to develop until the present day. Japan remains one of Indonesia's important partners in various fields, especially in the field of economy trade.

**Keywords:** Asia-Pacific War; East Sumatra; Japanese occupation; South Sumatra

Japan's ambition to become Asia's leading power was proven by its planned and relatively swift domination in the Pasifik arena in WWII. The control of natural resources in Southeast Asia was executed by commandeering raw materials and taking over mining areas, especially in the Dutch East Indies. Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, united under the control of the Japanese twenty-fifth army military government based in Singapore, were described as "the nuclear zone in Southern Area," because of their strategic importance as well as their economic value as sources of oil, rubber, tin, coal and bauxite.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Japan saw the conquest of Sumatra as the key to critical control of all Indonesian regions.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the country was in a very strategic location. To conquer Sumatra, Japan

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1 Anthony Reid, "The birth of the Republic in Sumatra," *Indonesia* no. 12 (Oct. 1971): 22.

2 The Japanese occupation period in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, was more concise compared to Western colonialism. It was only about three and a half years, 1942–1945. The propaganda of Japan when she landed in the region was to build "Greater East Asia." To realize that, Japan tried to win support from as many population as possible in the occupied territory, so that she cooperated with those who influenced the grassroots level with the objective that mobilisation would be successful. The Japanese military administrators realised the importance of Islam as a power factor in the Indonesian. Therefore, Japan used ulama or kiyai (religious leaders/scholars) as its main agents of propaganda. See Harry J. Benda, *The Crescent and the Rising Sun: Indonesian Islam under the Japanese Occupation 1942–1945* (The Hague: W. van Hoeve, 1958).

first occupied Palembang (one of the most important areas of the Netherlands outside Java) and its entire territory at the end of February 1942. Furthermore, Japan confiscated all Dutch colonial relics such as Royal Dutch shell oilfields, suppressed all political actions and existing social organisations. The Japanese made Palembang the most important base in its occupation in the western part of Indonesia. After occupying Palembang, Japan successfully invaded the regions of Aceh, Medan, Padang and Lampung.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the invaders conquered Java and other regions. All Dutch East Indies' territories were officially subdued by the Japanese military government in the Kalijati Capitulation on March 8, 1942.

Japan's conquest of East Sumatra took place on March 12, 1942 through an amphibious landing in Tanjung Tiram. On the following day a group of Japanese army troops successfully entered Medan using bicycles taken from the local residents. When they entered the city, the Dutch Police Chief Commissioner, P.H.J.M. Maseland, who married a Japanese woman, greeted the Japanese troops sympathetically. Meanwhile the major, the sultan and other important officials waited at the police station.<sup>4</sup>

The first action taken by the Japanese military government in Medan on March 13, 1942 was to broadcast strict regulations throughout the city.<sup>5</sup> In addition to these regulations a curfew was imposed, from 7.00 p.m. to 6.00 a.m. Anyone who did not comply with the ban and was found on the road or outside their houses would be punished and given a warning shot beforehand.<sup>6</sup>

During the reign of Japan, Sumatra Island was divided into ten residencies or *shu*. Each *shu* was led by a *chokan*. Medan and Palembang were two cities under the control of each *chokan*. By 1939 under the aegis of the Dutch Medan had been identified as a *Stadsgemeente* (City Council). However, under the Japanese rule on March 13, 1942 the Medan City Council became the Medan *Shi* headed by a Medan *Sityo*, Mayor of Medan. His government ended on August 24, 1945 when Japan surrendered to the Allied powers. The structure of municipal government in Medan at that time was as follows:

<sup>3</sup> Mestika Zed, *Kepialangan Politik dan Revolusi Palembang 1900–1950* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 2003), 226–233.

<sup>4</sup> Tengku Luckman Sinar, *Sejarah Medan Tempo Doeloe* (Medan: Perwira, 1991), 100.

<sup>5</sup> The announcement contained: closure of banks and the post office, prohibition of Dutch Indies radio broadcasting, prohibition of radio broadcasting with other countries, confiscation of weapons by police and maintenance of order via use of weapons if necessary by police. See M.A. Loderichs, D.A. Buiskool, B.B. Hering et al., *Medan: Beeld van Een Stand* (Purmerend: Asia Maior, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> M.A. Loderichs, D.A. Buiskool, B.B. Hering et al., *Medan: Beeld van Een Stand* (Purmerend: Asia Maior, 1997).

Mayor ( <i>Sityo</i> )	Shinichi Hayasaki
Secretary	Mr. Mohd. Jusuf
Vice Secretary	Mr. Loeat Siregar and S. M. Tarigan
Treasurer	Jap Gim Sek and Nakafuyi

Meanwhile, in accordance with its main objective of controlling strategic resources, Japan demonstrated its authority through uncompromising and indiscriminate eradication of the Dutch. For example, the Palembang resident secretary was killed and the head of Bukit Asam Meijn coal company committed suicide. As a result of Japan's draconian policies, various Indonesian political movements and organisations that had developed during the Dutch era gradually retreated to the heartland. Many nomads in Palembang returned to their hometowns in order to save their families.<sup>7</sup> Yet, after several months of this stringent practice the Japanese military government changed its strategy and invited Dutch movement leaders to take part in activities.

Despite harsh practices, the Japanese government in Indonesia generally maintained the structure of the established Dutch colonial system. While names of official polices and programs were changed there was no change to the Dutch government structure. One unique example of this took place in Medan, where the head of the city administration (*Medan Sityo*) was a Japanese, Shinichi Hayasaki, but the one who carried out the daily practice of the Medan administration was Mr. Mohd. Jusuf who was assisted by his secretaries. Residents considered Jusuf as mayor of Medan.<sup>8</sup>

The Japanese military government viewed East Sumatra as a rich source of raw materials for the needs of the war, especially the rubber plantations and oil mining at Pangkalan Brandan. During the occupation, plantations with export commodities such as tobacco received less attention because Japan was focused on the logistics of the war. In fact, tobacco lands were given to workers and other residents to plant food. For instance, much of the Deli Tua Tobacco Plantation was not used for tobacco because Japan ordered locals to grow food crops such as rice, corn, sweet potatoes and to develop other industrial crops, such as fiber, nuts and jatropha. With tobacco lands requisitioned for food and tobacco production at a sharp decline, this industry descended to a possible

<sup>7</sup> Mangkualam Asnawi, *Padamu Terletak Qadar Sebuah Autobiografi* (Jakarta: CV. Mirasari, 1997), 43; Nurhamidah, "Perkembangan Kota Medan 1909–1951," in *e-USU Repositor* (Medan: Universitas Sumatera Utara, 2004), 21.

<sup>8</sup> Karl J. Pelzer, *Toean Keboen dan Petani: Politik Kolonial dan Perjuangan Agraria* (Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1985), 153. Also see Nasrul Hamdani, *Komunitas Cina di Medan dalam Lintasan Tiga Kekuasaan 1930–1960* (Jakarta: LIPI Press, 2012), 115.

nadir during the Second World War. The Japanese government authorised the Deli Tua plantations to grow only 100 hectares of this tobacco; whereas the amount of tobacco production in 1943 reached 40,000 bales, the following year recorded a drastic decline of approximately 1,000 bales. Meanwhile in Palembang, Japan controlled the oil refining centers in Plaju and Sungai Gerong. The latter was the biggest oil refinery in terms of producing the largest quantities of oil to meet Japan's war needs in the Pacific and other regions.

The Japanese took over all Indonesian trade activities including the supervision of clothing/textiles and comestibles such as rice, sugar, salt, kerosene, cooking oil, soap and matches. All types of valuable assets (motorcycles, cars, boats, motorboats and goods made of iron/steel) belonging to residents had to be reported to the Japanese military government. The government recorded all wealth, including the amount of rice/field production that was handed over to the Japanese authorities without compensation. Not only tobacco lands but also tea and coffee plantations were requisitioned for the cultivation of *jatropha*, quinine and other crops supportive to the war effort. *Jatropha* plants were needed for lubricating Japanese military machines, while quinine plants were used for making anti-malarial drugs. At that time malaria was a prevalent and debilitating contagious diseases. Japan fully controlled the residents' basic needs and established predetermined prices and venues at which supplies could be bought and sold. Residents in Palembang, for instance, were only allowed to buy their daily necessities in a place called Toko Gabungan (Joint Store). In the rural areas, the distribution of basic needs was carried out through the heads of clans and villages. Because they were awarded in relatively small quantities, the prices of these necessities skyrocketed. Supply and prices were adversely effected, moreover, by the manipulations of various clan and village officers. Under such conditions, it became increasingly difficult for the indigenous population to obtain daily necessities.<sup>9</sup>

During the Japanese occupation, *jatropha*, quinine and rubber became the most essential plants as a result of Japan's wartime needs. Farmers and other residents were mobilised to support food procurement programs for war and to step in as reserve soldiers. Such a condition was supported by an unadvanced political movement in Sumatra which was another benefit received by Japan.<sup>10</sup>

Various policies were carried out by the Japanese occupation government regarding land and land ownership issues in East Sumatra. Plantation land was

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 154; Ministry of Information of the Republic of Indonesia 1954. South Sumatra Province, 72; K.H.O. Gajahnata, et al., *Sejarah Teknik Minyak Plaju (APTEMIP) 1942-1945* (Palembang: Universitas Sriwijaya, 2000), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Nasrul Hamdani 2012, 115.

confiscated and became Japanese property. As a result, the privileges held by the traditional rulers and the land lease rights they enjoyed were abolished.<sup>11</sup> East Sumatra's plantation area was eventually divided into five divisions, each of which was governed by a body called *Syonan Gomu Kumia*.<sup>12</sup>

Japan's power during the occupation continued to diminish the dignity and the domination once enjoyed by indigenous noblemen. During the celebration of local memorial services and holidays, local sultans had to share the stage with the politicians, and were encouraged to sing the praises of Japan. A tragic scene took place when the noblemen of the sultanate had to demonstrate the way to hold a hoe, in order to show the occupying forces how to farm. Local elite were asked to involve the Japanese in *gotong royong* (working together in a field), an awkward event for both parties. Though the Japanese were the rulers and Sumatra's noblemen the elite, even they had to serve Japan and make a living.<sup>13</sup> We see evidence of this in an article in the daily newspaper "*Kita Sumatora Sinbu*" headed "*Soeltan Asahan Toeroet Berladang*" with one translation of a quote mentioning that: ". . . The Sultan of Asahan joined working in the field. Locals certainly never expected that their Sultan of Asahan would work in the field together with other farmers until they saw it themselves. The Sultan was told to interact with farmers in order to motivate other indigenous elite to work in the field of agriculture."<sup>14</sup>

In addition to harnessing local workers, Japan also tried to regulate administrative arrangements by dividing Sumatra into several divisions. However, this division did not significantly alter the partition of territory established during the Dutch East Indies period. In effect, the Japanese military government merely changed Dutch terms into Japanese terms (Table 1).

Japan facilitated propaganda by overseeing what was published in Indonesian newspapers in every *shu*. In East Sumatra, for example, the newspaper "*Sumatra Sinbun*," published in November 1942, changed its name to "*Kita Sumatora Sinbun*" in August 1943. This newspaper was published by *Syonan Sinbun Kai*, whose head office was in Medan.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Michael van Langenberg, *National Revolution in North Sumatra: Sumatra Timur and Tapanuli 1942–1950*, doctoral thesis, University of Sydney, 1976, 229.

<sup>12</sup> *Syonan Gomu Kumia* was the body in charge of coordinating plantation yields. This body was based in Singapore. F.J.J. Dootjes, *Kroniek 1941–1946*, 49.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Reid, *Sumatera Revolusi dan Elite Tradisional* (Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu, 2011), 153.

<sup>14</sup> *Kita Sumatora Sinbun*, September 6, 1943.

<sup>15</sup> The head of this newspaper was Djamaloedin (Adi Negoro), while the business manager was M. Zainoeddin. In addition to his job as a journalist, Djamaloeddin (Adi Negoro) was also one of the advisory members of Mayor of Medan, Hayasaki. See Anthony Reid 2011, 154.

**Table 1:** Transition from the Netherlands' Indies bureaucracy to Japan's bureaucracy. Mestika Zed. 2005. *Gyugun Cikal Bakal Tentara Nasional di Sumatera*, Jakarta: LP3ES, 21; Ma'moen Abdullah et al. 1984/1985. *Kota Palembang sebagai Kota Dagang dan Industri*, Department of Education and Culture, Director General of History and Traditional Values, IDSN Project, 109–110.

No.	Administration Unit of Dutch Period	Position Holder	Administration Unit of Japanese Period	Position Holder
1.	Residentie	Resident	<i>Shu</i>	<i>Tyo-kan</i>
2.	Afdeeling	Assistant Resident	<i>Bunshu</i>	<i>Bunshu-tyo</i>
3.	Onder-afdeeling	Controller	<i>Fuku-bunshu</i>	<i>Fuku bunshu-tyo</i>
4.	District	<i>Wedana/Demang</i>	<i>Gun</i>	<i>Gun-tyo</i>
5.	Onder-district	<i>Vice Demang</i>	<i>Fuku-gun</i>	<i>Fukugun-tyo</i>
6.	Clan/Village	Head	<i>Son</i>	<i>Son-tyo</i>
7.	Sub-Village ( <i>Dusun</i> )	Head of <i>Nagari/Dusun</i>	<i>Ku</i>	<i>Ku co</i>

Though the news covered in “*Kita-Sumatora-Sinbun*” was diverse, all accounts contained propaganda for both domestic and overseas consumption. One of the headlines for news published in Indonesia, for example, was “*Toean Tozyo sekali lagi mengoetjapkan djandjinja jang memberi pengharapan kepada bangsa Indonesia di Djawa*,” which translates as: “Once again, Mr. Tozyo fulfilled his promises by awarding appreciation to the Indonesian people in Java.” The article described how Mr. Hideki Tozyo, the Japanese Prime Minister, had invited the people of Java to jointly assist the Japanese military in fighting allies and destroying British and American influence in Greater East Asia.<sup>16</sup>

Few local journalists and politicians were employed in “*Kita-Sumatora-Sinbun*.” Therefore, some of them worked in *Sendenhan*, the Japanese Propaganda Bureau. Mohammad Said (*Penjedar*) and the Gerindo leader, Saleh Umar, were employed there after being released from Japanese custody for their alleged involvement in the Aron incident in Pancur Batu. *Sendenhan* produced propaganda for various cultural activities including concerts, art exhibitions, lectures and anti-Western drama performances.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, the art that was encouraged and therefore developed in Palembang was restricted to performances in cinemas, which functioned mainly as Japanese political propaganda

<sup>16</sup> *Sumatra Sinbun*, (1943), 13.

<sup>17</sup> Anthony Reid 2011, 155.

platforms. Almost every week such performances took place in Saga and Elite cinemas. The only movies played were those that portrayed Japanese heroism of Japanese military success in various battles.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, songs performed were Japanese and full of enthusiasm (*sinsin*). Such songs were also taught at schools in order to indoctrinate the young of all things Japanese. In this way Japan's eminence would be fast spreading from the youngest generation (school-aged children) to the oldest generation. Thus, there was a planned effort to erase the memory of the Indonesia's own history and culture.

Various Japanese policies in Palembang restricted and monitored local or national events. Yet perhaps because of the needs at that time, the occupying force began to loosen their strict supervision by allowing the establishment of the "*Barisan Keamanan Umum*," the Public Security Front organisation. As the name suggests, this entity was aimed at maintaining the security of the people. There followed the establishment of other Indonesian intelligence organisations, i.e. "*Tokkokan*" and "*Boeroeng Hantoe*."<sup>19</sup>

At the same time as the establishment of such organizations, Ir. Soekarno arrived in Palembang on his trip from Padang to Jakarta, after he was released from Dutch imprisonment. On that occasion, a meeting between the youth who were members of the Indonesian Movement (Gerindo) and the members of Raya Indonesia Party (PIR) took place. The meeting resulted in an agreement/commitment regarding the direction of the Indonesian struggle, stating that "1) unity among all leading local figures in dealing with Japanese fascism should be maintained, 2) community relations should be maintained, 3) steps taken both legally and illegally should be regulated."<sup>20</sup> This meeting indicated that there was a consolidation in various political movement groups in Palembang.

Due to diverse and numerous difficulties caused by Japan's occupation, resistance occurred in the villages of Banda, Puninjawa and Baturaja in August and September 1942. Opposition actions against Japan also occurred in Air Itam Marga Penukal. Since the Dutch colonial period, this area had become the base of Indonesia's resistance through the Sarikat Islam organisation ("Sarikat Abang" in 1917/1918). Toward the end of 1944 the group was led by Abdul Saleh Mattjik and Hamzan Kuntjit (activists of Partai Serikat Islam Indonesia, the Indonesian Islamic Union Party). Their efforts were brutally crushed by the Japanese and leading figures including Mattjik and Koentjik were imprisoned. In addition,

<sup>18</sup> Makmun Abdullah et al., *Kota Palembang sebagai Kota Dagang dan Industri* (Department of Education and Culture, Director General of History and Traditional Values, IDSN Project, 1984/1985), 114.

<sup>19</sup> Mestika Zed 2003, 239–240.

<sup>20</sup> Ministry of Information of the Republic of Indonesia (1954). South Sumatra Province, 182.



more than 92 people were put behind bars. Most of them died in prison, brutally murdered. Only five of them survived including Koentjit and Mattjik.<sup>21</sup>

By mid-1943 the war had shifted directions. Japan, which had been the attacking party, now sought to “survive” from the strengthening Allied counterattack. The country changed its colonial pattern by offering “promises” of independence in order to get support from Indonesian fighters and local citizens. Through the “*Badan Pembantu Pemerintah*” (Government Assistance Agency), the occupying forces recruited indigenous peoples to build roads, bridges, military barracks, defense holes,<sup>22</sup> airports and the Musi Harbour, and to work on large plantations and government buildings. This forced labour practice, known as “*Romusha*,” provided no actual pay or health insurance. In general, the population of South Sumatra at that time lacked both food and clothing, and struggled with the heavy workload levied by the Japanese. Those few who were paid, like other plantation workers, received limited funds and were obligated to plant more food for the needs of war.<sup>23</sup>

During this time Japan founded youth organisations that were engaged in the military, including “*Heiho*” (Auxiliary Soldiers) and “*Gyugun*” (People’s Army). Both groups were trained militarily in special camps (Lahat, Pagaralam) for between four and four and a half years by the Japanese military. After graduation, participants were assigned heavy and rough tasks, for example maintaining security and moving military equipment and food items. Recruitment to *Gyugun* was more selective than to *Heiho*: *Gyugun* members were expected to be fit and ready to fight.

Toward the end of Japanese rule in Palembang (South Sumatra), the occupied forces relaxed their manner of conduct to accommodate the desires of the independence fighters and the indigenous people. This new policy was realised by the appointment of the Palembang native Raden Hanan as mayor. It was an extraordinary event; Hanan was the first and the only native Indonesian appointed as a mayor during the Japanese military administration. Another accommodating measure was permission to establish “*Chuo Sangi In*,” an Advisory Board for the

<sup>21</sup> Sejarah Militer Daerah Militer IV Sriwijaya, *Kenangan 30 tahun, daerah militer Sriwijaya* (Palembang, 1975); Ministry of Information of the Republic of Indonesia (1954). South Sumatra Province; Ma'moen Abdullah et.al. (1984/1985), 114; Ma'moen Abdullah et.al., *Kota Palembang sebagai Kota Dagang dan Industri* (Department of Education and Culture, Bagian Proyek inventarisasi dan Pembinaan Nilai-Nilai Budaya Propinsi Sumatera Selatan, 1991/1992), 142 and 157.

<sup>22</sup> Defense holes are used for the defense of Japanese soldiers, the storage of weapons and ammunition, and activities such as the meeting army and imprisoning and torturing the prisoners of war.

<sup>23</sup> Ramadhan K.H., *Ibnu Sotowo Saatnya Saya Bercecerita!* (Jakarta: National Press Club of Indonesia, 2008); Ma'moen Abdullah et.al. 1991/1992, 158–159.

Sumatra region. This situation, which later changed its name to the "People's Representative Council" of Sumatra, strengthened the country's unity by allowing leading figures such as A. K. Gani, Adi Negoro and Mohammad Syafei to conduct safaris to various regions in Sumatra sanctioning the need for an "Indonesian Independence Investigation Committee" from June to early August 1945. This was a true step towards independence and emerged at the same time as other independence movements from various regions in Indonesia.<sup>24</sup>

After Indonesia's independence (1945), a new round of Indonesian-Japanese relations began. Based on the Treaty of San Francisco (1951), Japan had to pay war reparation of 800 million US dollars to Indonesia. This sum was realised on January 20, 1958.<sup>25</sup> In addition, various relationship agreements were established, including the Treaty of Amity and Commerce (1961), and the "Air Relations Agreement" (1962). In the meantime, there was a change in Indonesia's government system; the fall of the government of President Soekarno (Old Order) made way for the New Order under the leadership of President Soeharto. The government of Soeharto needed huge funds to restore the economy, which at that time was so crippled that the inflation rate had reached 500%. Japan took advantage of opportunities to further strengthen its position in Indonesia by providing soft loan funds of 30 million US dollars. As a result, Indonesia's exports to Japan reached the highest figure, i.e. 53%, while the import figure was 29%. Japan also invested heavily in Indonesia in the form of factories, especially in Java. The overwhelming dominance of Japan gave rise to people's jealousy because those who enjoyed the benefits were some of the ruling elites. The feeling of antipathy towards Japan gave rise to increasingly more aggressive actions resulting in the "*Malari*" (January Fifteenth Disaster) in January 1974, which was a riot that began with massive demonstrations by students and the community, and culminated in the burning of buildings and some 800 Japanese-made cars. In addition, shops that sold Japanese products were looted.

There were ultimately many positive effects of the "*Malari*." Indonesia-Japan relations became more open, not only in the economic field, but also in other fields such as science and technology. Japan-Indonesia societies emerged, such as the Japan-Indonesia Association, *Nihon-Indonesia Yukodantai Kyogikai*, *Tokyo Kai* Songs and others. As a result of these first steps, the relationship between the two countries became positive and fluid and continued to develop.

<sup>24</sup> Mestika Zed 2003, 263–264, 272–274.

<sup>25</sup> The Japanese paid compensation for their three and a half years of occupation of Indonesia 13 years after it ended. The Netherlands, which treated Indonesia as its colony from the 16th to the mid-20th century, did not pay any compensation for it.

To this day, Japan remains one of Indonesia's important partners in various fields, especially in the field of economy.

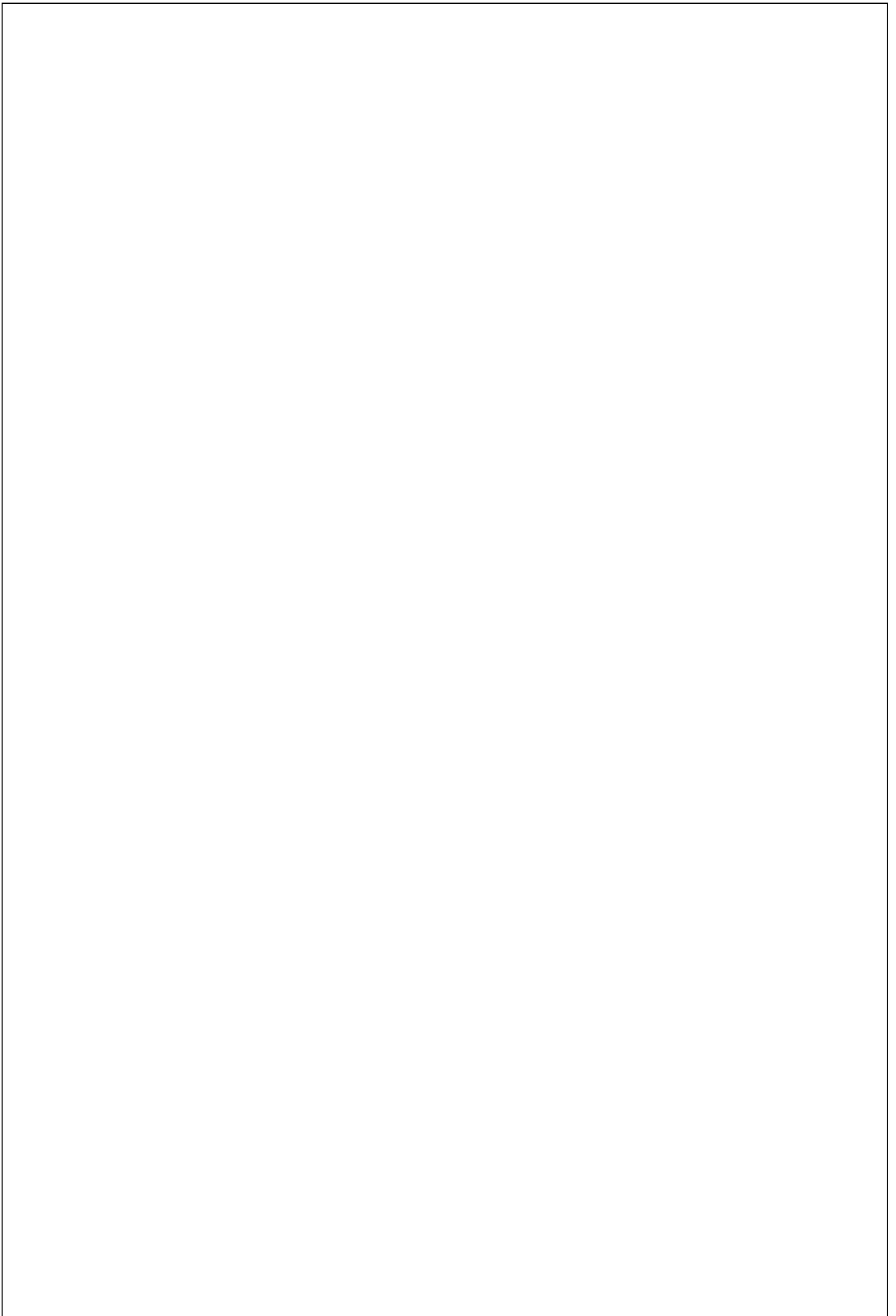
## Glossary

- Badan Pembantu Pemerintah** Government Assistance Agency  
**Barisan Keamanan Umum** Public Security Front  
**Chou Sangi In** Central Advisory Board  
**Gotong Royong** Mutual Aid  
**Gyugun** People's Army  
**Heiho** Auxiliary Soldiers  
**Malari** January Fifteenth Disaster  
**Medan Sityo** Mayor of Medan  
**Romusha** Forced labors during Japanese occupation  
**Sendenhan** Japanese Propaganda Bureau  
**Stadsgemeente** City Council  
**Syonan Gomu Kumia** Agency that regulates the plantation area in East Sumatra

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