

## ISA REGIONAL GUEST LECTURE

**CZECH MAVERICK: THE LIFE AND WORK OF  
HARRY J. BENDA, A HALF-FORGOTTEN LEGEND OF  
SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES**

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This talk aims to share the fascinating life story of Harry J. Benda (1919—1971), a Czech-Jewish-American historian of Indonesia, whose fate was uncompromisingly molded by the tragedy of the 20th century. Despite the brevity of his career, Benda had made a tremendous contribution to the development of Southeast Asian Studies in the United States (Yale University) and in Singapore where he served as the founding director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS). Due to his Jewish origin, his well-to-do father dispatched young Harry from then Czechoslovakia to save him from the Nazi threat, which landed him in the Netherlands Indies, and also a Japanese war camp. Altogether, he spent seven formative years in Java, which determined the further course of his life. The revolutionary turmoil in Indonesia made him flee again, this time to New Zealand where he obtained two university degrees. While still in Wellington, he applied for a prestigious doctoral stipend in Southeast Asian Studies at Cornell, and the rest is history. Benda's main research topics included the role of Islam in Indonesian society, Japanese imperialism, Communist movements, as well as decolonization and nationalism in Southeast Asia. He authored and co-authored a number of books and dozens of articles, with *The Crescent and the Rising Sun* (1958) being his most acclaimed work. Arguably, one of his main intellectual contributions to the field was an attempt to curb the West-centric approach and highlight the "indigenous" perspective.



Tomáš Petrů is Research Fellow at the Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences. Previously, he was Head of the Department of Asian Studies at Metropolitan University Prague (2009–2014). Currently, he is also Assistant Professor of Indonesian Studies at Charles University in Prague. In his research, Dr. Petrů has been studying the interaction of politics, ethnicity, and religion in Indonesia and the Malay world. He co-authored the first monograph on the history of Indonesia in the Czech language, *Dějiny Indonésie* (2005). His latest publications include the edited volumes *Imagines and Historiographies of Contested Regions: Transforming Centers and Peripheries in Asian and Middle Eastern Contexts* (2020, together with Martin Slama), and *Graffiti, Converts and Vigilantes: Islam outside the Mainstream in Maritime Southeast Asia* (2018).