

Mary Margaret Steedly. *Rifle Reports: A Story of Indonesian Independence*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013. 414 pp.

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In this fascinating picture of life in the Karo Batak area of North Sumatra during the first three years of the Indonesian Revolution, Mary Steedly moves away from the conventional narrative histories of the period, which have generally reflected the perspective of male revolutionaries and leaders, to a more deeply textured portrayal of the experiences of ordinary people during the independence struggle. While she dedicates her book to the “eager girls and daring boys of Karoland’s 1945 generation, who imagined independence in myriad ways ...” (v), it is the women’s wartime experiences that she places at the heart of her story.

Steedly has a deep knowledge of the society of this area of Sumatra based on her years of anthropological research there in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which found its first expression in her pathbreaking *Hanging without a Rope*.¹ In *Rifle Reports*, she aims to give an ethnographic history of the early years of independence, drawing in particular on the interviews she conducted during the late stages of the Suharto period with elderly Toba Batak women who recalled their youthful participation in the post-war struggle that led to Indonesia’s independence. The transcribed texts of her interviews form the core of this book, but, recognizing the limitations of her pool of informants, she has arrayed around them “a range of other fragments: my own comments and reflections, pieces of published histories, newspaper accounts, fiction and poetry, items fished from colonial archives, literary criticism, [and] anthropological commonplaces, the theoretical touchstones of academic legitimacy” (68).

The area with which she is concerned has its center in Kabanjahé, north of Lake Toba. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the economy of this region has been based on plantation agriculture (tobacco, rubber, palm oil), and in 1904 the Dutch incorporated it as a district in Sumatra’s East Coast Residency. *Rifle Reports* focuses on events there in the months between Indonesia’s declaration of independence in August 1945 and the signing of the Renville agreement in January 1948. During this period the Batak people witnessed the departure of the Japanese occupiers, the internecine warfare between the new Republic’s regular forces and the much stronger local militias, and, ultimately, the forced massive evacuation of most of the indigenous population through the highlands in the closing months of 1947, as Dutch troops spread out from their Medan base of operations. (After the Renville agreement was signed, the struggle shifted to a different plane, one about which the author is less concerned.)

In tracing the history of the region between 1945 and 1948, Steedly is interested in the “form” as well as the “content” of what she hears, allowing her informants to determine the starting and ending points of their stories. This method leads to personal accounts of the women’s experiences and the specific tasks they fulfilled, rather than a

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¹ Mary Margaret Steedly, *Hanging without a Rope* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

straightforward narrative of the course of the struggle. Two major series of tasks or events seem to have dominated the memories of these elderly women: the burying of a cache of guns, seized from the Japanese prior to their departure; and the forced trek of the Karo population through the highlands during the first Dutch “police action” in the latter months of 1947. These events form the main foci of the narrative.

In the first of these episodes, Steedly narrates at length how Piah Manik, wife of TKR (Tentara Keamanan Rakyat, People’s Security Army) commander Slamet Ginting, took over responsibility for organizing the burial of a cache of guns seized from the Japanese, and hid them until her husband could pressure the politicians in Medan finally to declare independence on September 30, 1945. While military accounts of these events focus on their contribution to the independence struggle, Steedly emphasizes how Piah Manik views them principally as part of a “sequence of assigned tasks,” and in her recounting of the women’s [or “the villagers’”] performance braids this strand of the Republic’s history “into a chronicle of village life” (110–11).

More multilayered is the author’s account of the violent and protracted retreat of Indonesian troops and civilians through the Karo highlands in the latter months of 1947, sometimes as far as Aceh and Tapanuli, in the face of the Dutch advance from Medan. Her account emphasizes the people’s suffering and the destruction of their property during these months, when more than a quarter of a million were displaced and thousands may have died. These events were largely unknown outside north Sumatra, although the extent of the suffering and destruction seems to have equaled, if not exceeded, that during the much better chronicled events in Java, when Bandung, portrayed as a “sea of fire” (*lautan api*), became a symbol of Republican resistance to the reimposition of Dutch rule. In north Sumatra, the equally destructive flames of the less known “sea of fire” spread throughout the highlands, and in Steedly’s view acted as a catalyst to unite “soldiers, peasants, politicians, and evacuees in the passion of independence” (242).

In the memories of Steedly’s informants, the years she describes are split into two distinct periods: the revolution (*repubusi*) and the struggle (*perjuangan*). They use the word *repubusi* not to refer to Indonesia’s revolution for independence from colonial rule, but, rather, to the sporadic outbreaks of violence that occurred in the area between 1945 and 1949, generally among the Karo Batak people themselves. Her informants’ use of this vocabulary reflects the national perspective during the Suharto era, when the years following World War II were no longer seen as a period of “revolution” conducted by the Indonesian people against their colonial oppressors but as an “independence struggle” headed by the Republic’s official military forces (variously the TKR [Tentara Keamanan Rakyat, People’s Security Forces], TRI [Tentara Republik Indonesia, Indonesian Republic’s Forces], and TNI [Tentara Nasional Indonesia, Indonesia’s National Forces]). Consequently, Steedly’s informants’ use of the word *perjuangan* or “struggle” for the anti-Dutch revolution reflects the fact that the women’s remembrances have been colored not only by their own lifetime experiences, but also by the retrospective application of the Suharto-era worldview concerning events of the revolutionary period. At the time of Steedly’s interviews, when the Suharto regime had been in power for nearly thirty years, the “people” were not seen as central actors in the fight for independence, but either as “compliant followers” of

their military and political leaders, or as “a potential source of disorder and danger” (203).

This retrospective view of the period from the standpoint of the late-Suharto era stands in sharp contrast to the perceptions at the time, reflected in Sukarno’s concept of the “golden bridge” over which the Indonesian people would cross from colonial subjection to national independence. The golden bridge is a recurring image running through Steedly’s book. She notes that “Sukarno’s passionate rhetorical invocation of the ‘golden bridge’ to independence inspired young men and women of the ‘45 generation to step forward, even if they were unsure where they were going” (314). Sukarno’s use of the term “golden bridge,” Steedly emphasizes, left the end of the journey unspecified, “because he felt it was important for Indonesians—that still-imaginary community—to move into the future united by a willing and patriotic spirit rather than divided by their various visions of what might lie on that farther shore” (324).

The inspiration they drew from Sukarno’s rhetoric would seem to answer the puzzle of why the Karo, who had felt little of colonial oppression, enthusiastically joined in crossing this golden bridge. But Steedly wishes to retain her “puzzlement” at the question, letting it act as a guide to tracking events through the memories and stories produced around them. The interwoven strands of these stories made up “Karoland’s golden bridge to the future,” and possess the anticipatory quality of Sukarno’s concept. Some of her informants saw education as an important means by which they could contribute to their country’s independence (178), while others imagined their forced displacement in 1947 as a step across Sukarno’s golden bridge, “even if the destination of the journey remained uncertain and the goal unreached” (282).

While gathering her Karo informants’ recollections, Steedly notes that they drew strong parallels between the 1947 evacuation of the highlands and the situations of ethnic violence in central Africa in 1994 that they were witnessing on television at the time of her interviews. However, in telling the story of their flight, she focuses in particular on a sung narrative composed in the immediate aftermath of the struggle by a woman named Sinek (Silent) *beru* Karo. She contrasts the story of the refugees’ flight that appears here with military veterans’ accounts of the events. She has translated long excerpts from Sinek’s song and uses this narrative to illustrate why the women in the 1990s remember the evacuation in a particular way—“as a progress rather than a panic, a break with the past rather than another step in the long history of Karo journeys” (308). She also recalls the time when the song’s performance played a part not only in sparking memories, but also in anticipating the future fruits of independence in a time “less vacuous, richer in public speech than the New Order, with its pinched pieties and casual brutality” (309).

Steedly’s exploration of events in a region far from what is viewed as the center of the independence struggle adds an interesting dimension to the many narratives of the conflict that have previously appeared. In her account, the time at which she conducted her interviews is of particular importance, and she is conscious of how it influenced the memories of her informants. The drastically different political context and ideological climate in the late-New Order period when the interviews were conducted colors the memories of these Karo women and influences their perception of

the broader context in which their tasks were carried out nearly fifty years earlier. But the character of these “eager girls,” who continued to view their actions merely as tasks they were called on to perform, rather than as ways to enhance their own roles in the conflict, attests to the validity of their memories, and adds texture and depth to this portrait of the Toba Batak area during these formative years in Indonesia’s history.