

Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper. *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–1945*. Belknap: Harvard University Press, 2005. 555 pages.

Andrew C. Willford

Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, two Cambridge, UK-based and well-regarded historians of South Asia and Malaysia, respectively, have produced a moving and harrowing account of Britain's darkest hour in Asia, as Malaya, Singapore, and Burma fell to the Japanese in the early years of the Pacific War. *Forgotten Armies* tells the story of this fall in both a scholarly exacting way, drawing upon hundreds of diaries, letters, archives, and interviews, and with great narrative flare. A reader of this narrative experiences the pre-war cosmopolitanism of Singapore—a city of clubs, modern cleanliness, air-conditioned cinemas, and gin-swilling intelligentsia, where one might meet intellectuals like Jean Cocteau, or budding political leaders and writers like Tan Kah Kee, Ibrahim Yaacob, Lee Kuan Yew, or Tan Malaka. Bayly's and Harper's masterful setting of the colonial stage in the late 1930s gives way to horrific and vivid accounts of suffering in the wake of Singapore's occupation, the exodus of Indians out of Burma, the famine of Bengal, and the gradual and painful accounts of disillusionment felt by Japanese soldiers left to languish and ultimately perish in Burma during the last parts of the war.

In addition to weaving a narrative of great historical value and compelling momentum, the book presents a sharp indictment of a colossal British failure of nerve. The authors underscore, in great detail, the colonialists' many arrogant blunders, which cost so many thousands of Asian lives. At the same time, the authors do not spare the Japanese in this history. The atrocities committed by the occupation force are carefully recorded, and much time is spent detailing the execution of 70,000 ethnic Chinese in Malaya and Singapore, and the deaths of 14,000-plus allied prisoners working on the infamous Thai–Burma railroad. Perhaps one of the most significant achievements of this book, however, lies in its tracing of the impact of colonialism and Japanese militarism and imperial ideology on the origins of Burmese and Malaysian nationalism, with their unfortunate legacy of ethnic divisiveness. While many studies have emphasized the former, the latter seems a special contribution of this book.

Forgotten Armies unfolds chronologically with a sense of foreboding. We meet several key figures early on who will come to play large roles throughout the book and in the emergence of the anti-colonial nationalisms in the region. Aung San is introduced to the reader right from the outset, and we learn that, with Japanese help and “false teeth” fitted by a dentist in Tokyo, he was smuggled past the British intelligence and into Rangoon in March 1941. There, he organized the “Thirty Comrades, the Knights of the Round Table of Burmese independence...” (13). With this sort of mixture of cloak-and-dagger and romantic swagger, the authors weave a slow-motion tragedy of action and suspense. We next confront one of the most complex and tragic figures in this book, Subhas Chandra Bose, the Cambridge, UK-educated leader of the Indian National Congress, who, “stung by racism,” had left the civil service for politics and, ultimately, for revolutionary struggle. Bose, who clashed with Nehru and Gandhi over questions of violent tactics and ultimately resigned from his post in the Indian National Congress, was later to lead the Indian National Army, a ragtag group comprising a large contingent of Malayan Indian plantation workers, against the

British. That confrontation resulted in a tragic defeat at Imphal, on the Burma–India border. Though he collaborated with the Japanese, his ambivalence about their imperial designs pained him greatly. This ambivalence is echoed in other stories of collaboration and of uneasy, if not unholy, alliances throughout the book. Some figures—unlike Subhas Chandra Bose, who comes across as tragic—remain mysterious, though the authors make it clear that their historical importance and roles within the unfolding narrative are important. Chin Peng, the eventual leader of the Malayan Communist Party and successful collaborator with Spencer Chapman’s special forces and the Malayan Peoples’ Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), remains enigmatic in this story. Ibrahim Yaacob, the pan-Malayanist, who at different times appeared to have fallen under suspicion too, as he was distrusted by both the British and Japanese with whom he collaborated, remains opaque, his true intentions, as the authors put it, “lost in a fog of ambiguity” (28). He appears and disappears in the narrative several times, up to the time when he flees to Indonesia under a cloud of suspicion. Indeed, one wonders what really motivated Ibrahim Yaacob, given his call to “Bangsa Melayu” and his editorship of the influential *Warta Malaya* and *Utusan Melayu*, both periodicals instrumental in shaping a sense of “Malay” identity and both supported by Japanese financing. Ibrahim Yaacob mixed with a circle of Arab and Indian Muslim business leaders, we learn, and it was in such an entrepreneurial context, paradoxically, that central questions of ethnic and national identification emerged among those who proclaimed a new national “Malay” identity, as Anthony Milner has observed.¹ In the context of Japanese nationalism, and the emergent and translocal claims of Malay civilization, Ibrahim Yaacob dreamed of a “Greater Indonesia.” Others, like Tan Malaka, the communist writer based in Singapore, also shared aspirations that transcended the British Malaya–Dutch Indonesia divide.

Through the sheer, majestic scope of their history, the authors have exposed one small, and perhaps unavoidable, weakness in the book (perhaps one that readers of this journal might be more attuned to than would be the general reader). That is, by revealing some of the conditions that allowed for the imagining of a greater Malay world, or a “Greater Indonesia,” the authors’ narrative makes the absence of more cross-Straits movement and more interaction between the Dutch and English colonial contexts all the more striking. There are exceptions, of course, where the authors note cross-Straits interactions, but one imagines a more fluid colonial boundary must have existed between the many pan-Malayanist nationalist writers who were imagining possible futures for the region, some of whom were traveling between Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Medan, and Jakarta. One also imagines that under Japanese rule, Malaya and Java were more coordinated in their administrative activities than this book describes. And, one might imagine that allied coordination in defeating Japan involved more cross-Straits cooperation than is revealed here. But this is a small criticism, given the enormous detail and richness of the book.

As mentioned above, *Forgotten Armies* describes the prewar years in Rangoon and Singapore beautifully. When the book focuses on cosmopolitan Singapore, it tells the story of Cheng Lock, an influential Chinese businessman, whom the authors describe as the “champion of Malayan interest.” Bayly and Harper are able to capture a sense of

¹ “Ideological Work in Constructing the Malay Majority,” in *Making Majorities*, ed. Dru Gladney (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 151-172.

the alternative "Malayan world" that was emerging among the cosmopolitans of this most global of towns in the 1930s. This "Malayan interest" is self-consciously cosmopolitan and hybrid in aesthetic, so that Confucian values were able to flourish alongside "Plato, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche" (39). The converse of this ideal was the "insidious apartheid of Malaya" (62), characterized by racial divides that were reinforced both formally and informally in the civic life of prewar Singapore.

This more ignoble side of empire was even more visible during the fall of Singapore and Rangoon. Concerning the fall of Singapore, Tan Malaka noted that the British decision to arm the "Singapore Overseas Chinese Volunteer Army" (one of the "Forgotten Armies") and dispatch it to fight the Japanese was mischievous: "Did it not look as though the British were trying to wipe out both their enemies, domestic and foreign, by sacrificing the Communist Party and the radical Chinese youth to the Japanese Army?" (136). Another local leader, Tan Kah Kee, was also distressed by this action, noting that this clash would not only produce thousands of initial deaths, but also lead to reprisals against the Chinese rebels inflicted by the Japanese army in Singapore. Rangoon's fall under the advance of the Burma Independence Army produced no less hardship, though it was perhaps less dramatic since it involved fewer public executions than had occurred in Singapore and Malaya. The exodus of the British and of the Indians living in Burma followed an escape route that led toward Assam, India. But due to poor coordination and colonial excesses, the disaster suffered by these Indian and Anglo-Indian refugees was staggering. The authors tell of certain colonial officers who had porters carrying loads of "inessential personal belongings while Indian women and children died by the roadside (182)." Harper and Bayly have unearthed valuable, if not absurd, accounts of cruel incompetence in this story of the exodus from Burma. For example, the escape routes were often racially segregated, as were relief camps and supplies. "European" canned foods were withheld from Indian refugees on the grounds that "tinned beef" would be objectionable to the starving marchers. What's more, Indian refugees were refused entry into camps designed for Europeans on the grounds that they would spread cholera and dysentery. The authors persuasively show how "these policies effectively condemned thousands of Indians to death" (187). Similar incompetence and indifference is brought to light in this book's account of the "armies of the destitute and dying" (288) during the Bengal famine of 1943.

Bayly and Harper have also produced a very rich and fascinating account of life under the Japanese occupation. Although, as mentioned earlier, the horrors of Japanese militarism are detailed here, there is also much attention paid to the development of ideological messages communicated through idioms of Buddhist and Shinto "cosmocracy" and notions having to do with the "the great wheel of Kinship" (219). The impact of these policies on impressionable Malay sultans and nationalists like Ibrahim Yaacob and Ba Maw, or Burmese "Thakins" like Aung San, is a central theme of the book. The authors demonstrate that the Japanese policies and ideologies that influenced these Malay nationalists were protean, contradictory, and always being challenged by local interests. The tensions and conflicting ambivalences between the "Asia for the Asians" forms of anti-imperialism, on the one hand, and Japanese imperial designs, whose advocates marched under the banner of a greater Japanese cosmocracy, on the other hand, are brought to life quite skillfully in the arresting account of Subhas Chandra Bose and the story of the Indian National Army.

There are so many “forgotten armies” discovered and noted in this book—sex workers, smugglers, upland tribes, communists, special forces, and so forth—that I cannot mention them all. It is worth mentioning, however, that the slow but eventually successful guerrilla campaign against the Japanese occupation in Malaya was built upon an alliance among the MPAJA, communists led by Chin Peng, special agents like Spencer Chapman, and Orang Asli societies such as the Temiar. The Temiar “armies” are mostly forgotten in accounts of the Malayan campaigns. Sadly, one consequence of these uneasy alliances, the authors note, was the gradual racializing of the political landscape in Malaya, particularly with regards to Malay–Chinese relations, as both ethnic groups were to feel threatened by (and resentful of) the other’s past and present alliances with the Japanese and British, respectively.

Finally, when their narrative describes how the tide of war turned against the Japanese, the authors also present Japanese soldiers’ narratives that have survived in one form or another. The sense of despair and disillusionment is made real. In one account, we hear a delirious captured soldier cry what must have been the most monstrous of realizations, namely, that the war venture was misguided: “Lieutenant Hazaki, where are you, you bastard? Shoot me with your pistol! Come and shoot me, you useless fool! For the sake of the Emperor we came to these filthy hills to be disgraced!” (389).

Forgotten Armies is a book that should be read by all students of modern Southeast Asian history. Aside from its meticulous indictment of colonialism and imperialism, its elegiac honoring of the forgotten victims of war and its compelling narrative quality—indeed, this is a scholarly book that I trust would appeal to general audiences—demonstrate how Japanese ideologies of “race,” “language,” and “nation” were influential in the rise of pan-Islamism, Malayan nationalism, and Burmese nationalism. This is an enormously significant topic, as the consequence of this influence is still being felt in the politics of Malaysia and Burma, where the racializing of politics in postcolonial nationalism bears a Japanese imprint (though British colonialism has certainly produced its own genealogies of racialized thinking, which the authors do not discount). The Japanese ideological project and its influence on the Ibrahim Yaacobs, Subhas Chandra Boses, and Ba Maws of the world is worth the attention it receives in this book. The various struggles against the Japanese occupiers and their collaborators set in motion a racialized dialectic that would pit “Chinese” against “Malay” in the postwar years, with “Indians” caught between a rock and a hard place. These divisions hardened the more fluid interactions between these ethnic groups that had been commonplace earlier, interactions that might have enabled all to identify themselves, together, as “Malayan.” The cosmopolitan “Malayan” ideal of prewar Singapore is a forgotten dream. By resurrecting these prewar ideals, the authors have also made a timely contribution to the debates about nationalism and pluralism that continue to intensify in both Malaysia and in the wider region.