

Book review –
Takuma Melber (2017): *Zwischen Kollaboration und Widerstand. Die japanische Besatzung in Malaya und Singapur 1942-1945*
[Between Collaboration and Resistance: The Japanese Occupation in Malaya and Singapore, 1942-1945].
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Introduction

In 2014, I designed and taught a class called “World War II in Southeast Asia” in the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, Goethe University of Frankfurt am Main. I had a prior interest in the Japanese occupation of Malaya and decided to start researching the topic again. Being new to the country and to the university I was worried, to say the least, about teaching a class on World War II and possibly getting into issues that might be too hot to handle. However, in my first class, I found out that I need not have worried; upon asking my students, who were mostly German, what they knew about World War II in Asia and the Pacific, they said, “we only learn about Germany and Europe in school”.

This lack of awareness, though not to say interest, in the Asia-Pacific side of World War II in Germany, is precisely what Takuma Melber’s book addresses. The modest level of knowledge typifies not only European students, but also those who study the European side of the war generally. In a recent 2017 talk on the Japanese occupation given at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, the Netherlands, scholars knowledgeable on World War II asked basic questions about the way Japan took over large parts of Southeast Asia and whether the reaction of the Japanese to their impending defeat was similar to, or different from, the German.² Melber’s goal is to disseminate scholarship on World War II in Malaya to the German-language academic community and, hopefully, spark interest in the comparative aspects such scholarship can offer to those more familiar with the European case.

¹ ISBN 978-3-593-50817-7 ,648 S., € 49,-.

² MANICKAM, Sandra Khor, IIOKA Naoko: “Rethinking ‘occupation’ and ‘colonialism’ in Malaya: The case of Japanese migrants and the medical profession in the Malay Peninsula”. Talk at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam (Center for Historical Culture) on May 18, 2017.

With German academia as his target audience, the issues Melber addresses in his book are captured by the title: *Zwischen Kollaboration und Widerstand. Die japanische Besatzung in Malaya und Singapur 1942-1945* [Between Collaboration and Resistance: The Japanese Occupation in Malaya and Singapore, 1942-1945].³ In his introduction, Melber explains why the Japanese occupation in general, and that of Malaya specifically, should be of interest to German academics. To begin with, Japanese and German leaders were themselves learning about and comparing themselves to the other. Melber's introduction begins with a vignette of the Japanese ambassador to Berlin visiting German occupation areas in order to learn from the latter's administration. Melber also notes that Joseph Goebbels wrote about how "sagacious" the Japanese occupation government was. Very rarely are German and Japanese occupations compared in the historiography of World War II and Melber wants to make possible a transcontinental comparison of occupations. (Pp. 18–21).

How exactly this can be fruitful is expanded upon in the next section, "1.1 Approach, sources and current state of research". In international works, occupation of various Asian areas has been studied, but not in German history writing (p. 21). Melber asserts that Japan should be included in German studies of the war because the conflict was a global war. He sees this book as a contribution to German and international research on war and argues that many parallels can be drawn between the resistance in Malaya and, for instance, that in Belarus during the same time (p. 23). However, he mostly leaves comparison to future scholars and concentrates on explaining how the war came to Malaya, understanding why groups collaborated and how resistance movements developed. He raises the questions:

How did the Japanese occupying power proceed, i.e. what actions did it take, at the beginning of the occupation with a view to curtailing or combating the resistance? [...] Which mechanisms and organs of control and (forced) collaboration did the Japanese occupiers deploy in the Malay Peninsula and Singapore in order to control the occupied area, ensure peace and order to the greatest extent possible, and induce the civil population to cooperate? Why did the KMM [*Kesatuan Melayu Muda*, an anti-British Malay nationalist group], but also members of the paramilitary units deployed, offer themselves to the occupiers as – at least at first glance – willing collaborators? Which interests did the actors pursue, that is, the occupiers, but also the occupied? (Pp. 27–28).

To scholars already familiar with the Japanese occupation of Malaya and Singapore, there is little that is new in these questions. The motives of local collaborators and the origins of

³ Translations of German in quotes and all titles were undertaken by Dr. Hilary Howes, Australian National University. Any errors in reading and interpreting the book remain solely the responsibility of the author.

resistance movements are well known (the KMM hoped for independence, possibly joining Indonesia⁴; resistance was already in the making with anti-Japanese movements and further exacerbated by occupation conditions⁵; while motivations for collaboration and resistance needed to be understood based on shifting loyalties and self-preservation⁶). That the author is asking these things is not to say that he has not done his homework; instead he does not take these things for granted as most of us who are familiar with the issues do. This truly is a book for a new audience, one that has little interest or knowledge in Malaysia and/or Singapore but is interested in occupation, World War II and the Japanese in that order.

In the following sections, I will touch on several aspects of Melber's book and how it relates to the academic study of the Japanese occupation of Malaya as it has been dealt with in mostly English and Malay academic literature. Melber himself notes that a main shortcoming of most literature is its reliance on Allied and English-language sources, while Japanese-language sources are often not consulted due to lack of access or the language barrier (pp. 31–32). I will return to the issue of sources in the last section of this review to see what has been gained by the inclusion of Japanese sources.

Establishing a similar narrative

Melber's book does not offer a dramatically different narrative of the Japanese occupation of Malaya on the subject of resistance and collaboration. He combines the sources already known about the occupation and supplements them with Japanese sources. Only in some parts of his book is Japanese material the sole source. In keeping with his emphasis, discussion of resistance and collaboration is scattered throughout the chapters. Chapter 1 sets out the reasons for academic interest in the occupation of Malaya, and Chapter 2 provides crucial background information about the political, economic and social conditions on the Malay Peninsula prior to the Japanese invasion. Here readers learn that Malaya was prized as a source of raw materials which the Japanese would eventually want

⁴ MANICKAM, Sandra Khor (2017): "Wartime imaginings of an archipelagic community: Fajar Asia and the quest for peninsula Malayan and Indonesian unity". In: *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. Vol.18, No. 3: 347–363; MANICKAM (2017): "Corrigendum". In: *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. Vol. 18, No. 4: 643–643; CHEAH, Boon Kheng (1979): "The Japanese Occupation of Malaya, 1941-1945: Ibrahim Yaacob and the Struggle for Indonesia Raya". In: *Indonesia*. Vol. 28: 85–120.

⁵ *Ringkasan sejarah tentera anti-Jepun rakyat Malaya*, diterjemah dan diadaptasi oleh Indrajaya Abdullah (2014). Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre; CHEAH, Boon Kheng (2014): *Red Star over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict during and after the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, 1941-46*. Singapore: NUS press.

⁶ AHMAD, Abu Talib (2003): *Malay-Muslims, Islam, and the rising sun: 1941-1945*. Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.

to access, and that Malaya's society comprised of Malays, Chinese and Indians who were economically and socially divided. (Pp. 73, 78).

In Chapter 3, Melber details the development of the Malayan Campaign of Japan's 25th Army which culminated in the capture of Singapore. It also surveys the available literature on resistance movements and outlines the initial collaboration groups. While seeking generally to explain why there would be groups who collaborated with the Japanese, the military resistance of the Chinese in Malaya, formed into anti-Japanese groups, is given a longer background with boycotts in Malaya linked eventually to organizing militarily against the Japanese and the general sympathy towards the anti-Japanese cause. (Pp. 163–174).

Structure of government bodies

The more interesting material starts in Chapter 4 with information on how Malaya and Singapore were administered under the Japanese. He begins with the division of the Southern region, roughly corresponding to today's Southeast Asia, between the Army and the Navy. As he writes, "territories under army administration were termed Gunsei, 'military administration' or 'military government', while the term Minsei, 'civil administration', was used for areas administered by the navy. In reality there was no discernible difference between Gunsei and Minsei." (Pp. 186–187). Based on Japanese sources and British intelligence reports, Melber explains that the Malaya-Singapore-Sumatra region was important for the resources it could offer Japan and as a center of communication. Of note is that he provides further evidence from guidelines announced during an Imperial Diet sitting on May 31, 1943 in Japan that the area was meant to be maintained as a colony for strategic reasons, even though this was not necessarily made public knowledge. (Pp. 189–190).

Japan's lack of preparedness to govern Malaya is underlined by Melber. On November 20, 1941, Japan's aims were announced: to maintain law and order and to maintain the existing system of government. (P. 190). The administration began immediately to gather information about Malaya and Singapore, demonstrating how little knowledge they had to begin with, an exercise in which British documents were collected and translated into Japanese. Japanese researchers were still collecting and translating material, as well as conducting research, well into the occupation, as the Research Department reports (Chōsabu) uncovered by Gregg Huff and Shinobu Majima indicate.⁷

Melber provides a timeline of the occupation along with the massive changes in administration:

⁷ HUFF, Greg, MAJIMA Shinobu (2018): *World War II Singapore: the Chosabu Reports on Syonan*. Singapore: NUS Press: 99.

All in all, the High Command in Malaya and Singapore fluctuated greatly during the war, with the result that the Malay Peninsula experienced a total of five High Commanders over approximately three-and-a-half years of Japanese occupation: the two commanders of the 25th Army, Yamashita Tomoyuki and Saito Yaheita; the commander of the South Army, Field Marshal Terauchi Hisaichi; and the commanders of the 7th Army, Doihara Kenji and, at the end of the war, Itagaki Seishiro. (P. 192).

Chapter 4 ends with a review of the structures of control such as the police, the *kempeitei* and neighborhood organizations as a way to further explain why people joined such organizations and what protection was offered in an uncertain situation. Briefly Melber comments on the topic of comfort women in Malaya and the difficulty of researching this area. Some information on this group is mentioned in a footnote, which underscores how little scholars know about its occurrence in Malaya (pp. 282–283, note 451).

Sook Ching and Japanese violence during the occupation

In many ways, Chapter 5 is the crux of the book even though it does not deal with collaboration and resistance. In the prologue of the book, Melber begins with a quote from Kawamura Saburō's journal written on June 24, 1947 shortly before he was executed for his role in the massacre of Chinese in Singapore and Malaya during the first months of the occupation period. Kawamura was an infantry brigade commander who was put in charge of the Singapore Garrison Army which was subsequently ordered to carry out a purge of anti-Japanese elements.⁸ He was found guilty for the massacre during the post-war War Crimes trials, and executed on June 26 (p. 11, note 1). His diary, kept during his time in Malaya, forms the basis for much of this section. The main question Melber asks is why was there a massacre of Chinese in Singapore and Malaya? In other circumstances where the Japanese found themselves occupying places with a substantial Chinese population, such as Java, no massacre occurred. The difference in how various Chinese populations fared during the occupation period is something that other scholars have focused on, with the observation that the repressive measures found in Malaya were not introduced in Java or Thailand.⁹ Melber argues that the experiences in China of the leaders who ordered the massacre, and of those who carried the orders out, were the main reasons for the violence.

⁸ HAYASHI, Hirofumi (2009): "The Battle of Singapore, the Massacre of Chinese and Understanding of the issue in Postwar Japan". In: *The Asia-Pacific Journal*. Vol. 7, Issue 28, No. 4: 1.

⁹ REYNOLDS, E. Bruce (1997): "'International Orphans': The Chinese in Thailand during World War II". In: *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. Vol. 28, No. 2: 365–388; TOUWEN-BOUSWMA, Elly: "Japanese Policy towards the Chinese on Java, 1942-1945: A Preliminary Outline". In: KRATOSKA, Paul J. (ed.)

Melber agrees with scholar Hayashi Hirofumi that the reasons given for the massacre during the War Crimes trials, ostensibly as a preventive measure to curb anti-Japanese resistance and maintain law and order, were invalid because the plans to purge Singapore had been thought of even before Singapore was conquered (pp. 311–312). Melber uses Japanese sources to show several sides of Japan's anti-Chinese propaganda that culminated in aggression towards Chinese in Malaya and Singapore. From the very beginning, Chinese were seen as hostile and Japan wanted to be on the side of the Malays as evidenced by invasion documents given to the soldiers (p. 293). Other material given to the 25th Army came from the Manchurian Research Bureau which issued documents on the history of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. This material contained negative stereotypes of Chinese men, painted Singapore as a Chinese city and described the Chinese as devious and as being successful at business at the expense of other races. (Pp. 294–297). While these ideas were known to scholars before, the inclusion of material from Japanese sources as evidence of such viewpoints is a welcome addition to the scholarship.

The last sections of this chapter are of particular interest as Melber focuses on the viewpoints of the leaders behind the order for the purge: 25th Army Chief of Operations and Planning Staff Colonel Tsuji Masanobu, Malaya Military Administration architect, Colonel Watanabe Wataru and 25th Army Commander Yamashita Tomoyuki's. Melber concludes:

The racist characterisation discussed here of the overseas Chinese in Malaya and Singapore, as well as their ideological views, thus formed an important component of the frame of reference of the 25th Army's military leadership. Taking this into consideration, it may be less surprising that the Army's decision-makers turned to a radical crackdown on the overseas Chinese following the military defeat of their main enemy, the armed forces of the British Empire. (P. 305).

These measures were not alien to Yamashita who had undertaken similar actions in China. The fact that two-thirds of Japanese soldiers in Malaya had seen combat in China meant that they already had negative experiences dealing with Chinese and were inclined to treat the Chinese with suspicion and violence (pp. 360–361).

The section on the Sook Ching lends itself naturally to comparisons to the eradication of Jewish people in Europe and if there were any similarities with the Third Reich's murder of Jews. What was the character of the racism against the Chinese, and how can it be compared to the racism that was implemented and led to the concept of the "Final Solution"? Melber writes that the murder of Jewish people in Europe was very different from the Sook Ching. While the former was done through extensive organization, the latter

(2002): *Southeast Asian minorities in the wartime Japanese empire*: London: RoutledgeCurzon: 55–64.

was not organized throughout Japan's whole occupation area and whether violence occurred depended on the personages involved and the China experience of the soldiers. (Pp. 581–582). Melber mentions the views of Japanese scholar Tanaka Yuki who argues that there was a culture of Japanese violence from the time of Japan's invasion of China in 1937 and the end of the war in 1945 (p. 583). This perspective is tempered by the fact that Chinese communities were treated very differently in the areas occupied by the Japanese, suggesting that the targets of violence were not always the same.

Chapter 6, the last main chapter of the book, discusses several instances of resistance primarily by Chinese and by British soldiers and considers the reasons for the resistance. While the book deals with collaboration and resistance, the structure itself puts emphasis on the early stages of the occupation. From the table of contents, the reader gets the impression that it focuses on the beginning of the Malaya campaign in December 1941 until the purge of Singapore which took place in February 1942. Upon closer inspection, each chapter also mentions changes in the whole period up until 1945, but the emphasis is still on the early days of occupation. Further study of resistance groups comes at the very end in Chapter 6 and tries to answer the question of whether or not the resistance really posed a significant threat to the Japanese occupation government (it did not) and explaining the motivations of various resistance groups that might have been working with the British, but not for the British. (Pp. 546–547, 555).

Sources

I end this review with a consideration of the sources used in Melber's book. In the last section of the first chapter, Melber expands on the prevailing scholarship on the occupation. As a historian of the Japanese occupation of Malaya, who can read sources in English and Malay but not in Japanese, I was anticipating the wealth of information from Japanese sources a book such as Melber's can bring to the field, even if it is via German. I have written elsewhere about the struggle to find a balance between reading sources in a language one knows while at the same time allocating resources to translate sources from a language one does not. In many cases, partnerships arise between a non-Japanese speaker (hopefully one who also reads a local language), on the one hand, and a Japanese speaker on the other, in order to get the best of both worlds.¹⁰

Melber's book has fulfilled some expectations in this department, though not all. His bibliography of Japanese secondary sources collates many works written in Japanese on

¹⁰ MANICKAM, Sandra Khor, IIOKA Naoko (2016): "Preface". In: *Translation of Japanese Entries in the Bibliography on the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, Singapore and Northern Borneo, 1941-1945*. (Online Publication, <http://manickam.nl/onewebmedia/Translation%20of%20Japanese%20entries%20FINAL%2011%20Oct%20SKM%20Published.pdf>; accessed 05.12.2018).

the occupation of Malaya and the translation of titles offered in German is a welcome addition for those of us who can read German but not Japanese. At the same time, his use of the secondary Japanese sources is confusing when trying to see what “new”, in terms of information or perspectives, is brought to the table. For instance, when giving contextual information on 1930s Malaya on pages 73–74, he includes Japanese books written in the war years with present day academic works to describe the situation (see note on p. 74). The mixture of sources makes it confusing to discern how the inclusion of Japanese sources changes the narratives of the war and how Malaya was seen. The contribution of Japanese sources to the overall war narrative is patchy; it provides valuable information on some topics (the actions and the motives of Japanese leaders in Malaya, for instance), but not for others.

While pointing out that established scholars in the field, such as Paul Kratoska and Cheah Boon Kheng, sketch an incomplete picture of the war because they rely on allied sources and not Japanese (pp. 31–32), he seems not to read any of Malaya’s local languages. The extensive bibliography includes sources in German, English and Japanese, but does not include any sources in Malay, Tamil or Chinese. Furthermore, material from the National Archives of Malaysia also appear to be absent while material from the National Archives of Singapore is minimal. Accessing local material is important when discussing reasons for collaboration and resistance, and this perhaps accounts for the straightforward discussion of these themes in comparison to the complex discussion about the motives for the Singapore purge by the Japanese.

All in all, Melber’s book fulfils its role of introducing the Japanese occupation of Malaya to a different audience, and hopefully spurs interest in other scholars to take up the call of furthering research into comparisons between German and Japanese histories of war.

For interested scholars who might want to translate specific sections of Melber’s book, I am including an English translation of the table of contents for their perusal.

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