

Ooi Keat Gin, *Post-War Borneo, 1945–1950. Nationalism, Empire and State-Building*. (Routledge Studies in the Modern History of Asia, 65). London / New York: Routledge, 2013. XXIV, 199 pages, £ 85.00. ISBN 978-0-415-55959-1

On the eve of the Pacific War the vast landmass of Borneo comprised a patchwork of peoples, cultures, economic activities, landscapes, and colonial regimes. This monograph, a work of synthesis, is a concise and well-written dissection of post-war outcomes, based on an analysis of the *status quo ante bellum* and the effects of a Japanese occupation lasting around three and a half years. Seneca's dictum that "every new beginning comes from another beginning's end" is taken as a guide (p. x).

The Japanese surrender marked one such "new dawn". It produced full independence for some, tighter colonial control for others, and, in the case of Brunei, substantially a continuation of the pre-war regime. Whereas the British were just about strong enough to re-impose their rule on northern Borneo, the Dutch (themselves emerging from five years of foreign domination) found it harder in the rest of the island. Between 1945 and 1950 Borneo exhibited elements of nationalism, empire, and the groundwork of state-building. The choices made then, Professor Ooi Keat Gin writes, influenced developments in the following decades; Borneans "proved resilient and managed to seize opportunities and overcome obstacles in journeying forward" (p. 150).

The primary agenda of this book, the fruit of many years' research in archives across three continents, is to evaluate the causal factors contributing to the multiplicity of responses of the peoples of Borneo (p. xvi). A comparative pan-island approach, punctuated by case-studies, is adopted in an attempt to achieve a greater understanding of the directions that developments took following 1945.

Professor Ooi (Malaysian Science University) is in his element when examining the Japanese interlude, having written extensively on this topic elsewhere. Occupied Borneo "endured a harsh, uncompromising and often brutal military regime whereby coercion was the underlying principle of governance", he says, and "any infraction of rules and regulations was met with almost barbaric and inhumane punishment" (p. 17). On the other hand, the Second World War effectively terminated regimes such as Brooke Sarawak, the British North Borneo Company, and the Straits Settlements (Labuan). The Japanese onslaught removed the myth of European superiority and provided a demonstration effect that an Asian country could humiliate the Western colonial powers. Indigenous leaders gained "invaluable experience" and banished any sense of inferiority.

Chapter three examines controversies in connection with the Allied re-occupation: the reluctance of Australia to become involved; the dubious military significance of the Bornean theatre; the failure to rescue prisoners-of-war at Sandakan; and the time of reckoning for "wartime misdeeds". The charge list against the Japanese comprised 3,000–4,000 killed following the Kinabalu Up-

rising in October 1943; the deaths of the aforementioned (2,400) Allied detainees; and the murder of 1,500 civilians in Southern Borneo (p. 44). It is judged that the post-war trials “remained steadfast to the principle of fairness” (p. 48).

In chapter four Ooi deals with Allied military administrations between September 1945 and July 1946. Whereas the Australians “only wanted to go home”, the Nederlandsche Indische Civil Administratie (NICA) was eager to regain full control, thereby arousing indigenous hostility when their intentions became plain. There was actually a secret Anglo-Dutch pact signed at Chequers on 28 August 1945 with the ultimate objective of the prompt restoration of Dutch rule over the Netherlands East Indies.

The sore of wartime collaboration is given a forensic examination, particularly with regard to Sarawak. The question raised too many difficulties and inconsistencies for the British and in the end little was done to bring the perpetrators to justice. But the quisling issue impacted adversely on inter-ethnic relations; differential Japanese policies had accentuated the problem; this led to Sino-Malay clashes in the towns whilst Ibans in the interior took Chinese heads (because of earlier *towkay* visits, accompanied by Japanese soldiers, to commandeer rice stocks). Meanwhile, several new patriotic organisations in South Kalimantan confronted the incoming NICA; there were tensions between Chinese and local people in West Kalimantan; and in East Kalimantan there was a nationalist upsurge against the restored NEI government.

The problems of post-war reconstruction are among the issues discussed in the long chapter five, whilst chapter six turns to “old” Dutch and “new” republicans. In Borneo as a whole the 1940s marked a “pivotal transformation” in the outlook of the inhabitants, manifested in the awakening of national consciousness and of ethnic awareness. It found expression in a guerrilla war in Kalimantan and the cession dispute in Sarawak. In the final analysis, the occupation was indeed a watershed for Kalimantan: the attempt at re-establishing Dutch colonial rule failed; the approach of a federal system was equally unsuccessful; and the younger generation wanted a complete break with the past. Kalimantan’s incorporation initially in the Republic of the United States of Indonesia (1949) and subsequently in the unitary Republic of Indonesia (1950) was “an unqualified nationalist triumph for its multiethnic inhabitants” (p. 149). For British Borneo, by contrast, the war and its aftermath was more like a “pause” or a “rude interruption”.

A work of insight and balance, refreshingly free of animus, *Post-War Borneo* is state-of-the-art research. It is to be hoped that Professor Ooi will now turn his attention to the “challenges ahead”, such as the issues faced by newly-independent Kalimantan and the rise of communism in Sarawak during the 1950s.

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