

BOOK REVIEW

Japan's Occupation of Java in the Second World War: A Transnational History

By Ethan Mark

Bloomsbury Academic, 2018
xii + 386 pages.

Reviewed by Takuma MELBER



In spring 1942, only a few months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the “opening shot” of the Asia-Pacific War (1941–1945), the empire of Japan started occupying much of Southeast Asia. As in its other occupied territories, the Japanese installed a propaganda squad (*Jawa sendenhan*) on the island of Java hoping to win the hearts and minds of the Indonesian population and convince Indonesians of the virtue of Japan’s official war aim, the “liberation of Asia” from Western subjugation. “Asia for the Asians” and the establishment of a “Greater East-Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” (*Daitōa kyōeiken*) were just two catch phrases of Japanese wartime propaganda.

In the propaganda squad, which accompanied the invading Japanese Sixteenth Army, were so-called *bunkajin*. These “men of culture” (p. 6), a mixture of Japanese artists, philosophers, writers, filmmakers and other intellectuals, remained with the Sixteenth Army on Java for a little less than four years, with the aim of producing cultural propaganda for the Indonesian masses.

This study by Ethan Mark, historian of modern Japanese and Indonesian history at Leiden University, focuses mainly on the Japanese-Indonesian encounter: namely, the exchange of ideas between the aforementioned *bunkajin* and Indonesian political and national leaders. Among the latter were prominent figures such as the founding fathers of the Indonesian nation: Sukarno, the first president of an independent Indonesia after the war, and his vice-president, Mohammad Hatta, who cooperated and collaborated during the war with the Japanese occupying power. The fact is that Indonesian politicians and students cherished the hope that Japan, as some kind of “Asian big brother,” would help Indonesians cast off the yoke of Dutch rule, and fulfil their dream of becoming an independent Indonesian nation.

Japan's Occupation of Java in the Second World War offers an analysis of Japanese wartime propaganda, of the strategy behind it, and of Indonesian reactions to it. The author shows how the ignorant and brutal behavior of the Japanese towards the Indonesians gradually undermined their optimism and their hopes. Even if some Japanese had an honest desire to liberate Asian nations, the occupation policy was all in all subordinate to the primacy of the military and military-strategic war aims. Ethan Mark argues that the Japanese considered the island of Java, its population and raw materials, as nothing more

than a resource for war and exploitation. It was only when Japan's defeat was clearly in sight—mainly as a consequence of the Battle of Midway—that Indonesian ambitions for national independence were promoted and began to gather steam. It is well-known that Japan's occupation led eventually, after Japan's surrender, to an independent Indonesian nation. Unfortunately, Mark does not sufficiently elaborate the legacy of the particular Japanese-Indonesian wartime encounter which he is describing in his book.

Mark's study covers the first months of the Japanese-Indonesian wartime relationship in a satisfactory and concise manner, but leaves just fifty pages to discuss the "turning point," the time from late 1943 to the war's end (pp. 241–292). This gives his study a lack of chronological balance. At the same time, and in contrast to other experts in the field, Mark does not avoid consideration of the fierce contestation within China. This reviewer shares with Mark his conviction that the ignorance and brutality which the Japanese displayed in Java had their roots in the war theater of the Second Sino-Japanese War (pp. 11–23). Furthermore, Mark skillfully sidesteps the pitfall of over-determination. He does not overstress Eurocentrism/Western-centrism, orientalism, or nation-centrism, and he avoids the dangers of black-and-white-narration.

This book claims to be a "transnational history," but its treatment of the fate of Allied soldiers who became POWs and forced laborers of the Japanese empire, and of the fate of civilians, women, and children, falls short. The author also fails to address the "prisoners' camp," which existed on Java. Furthermore, he treats the story of indigenous forced laborers (*rōmusha*) in less than fifteen pages. This is inadequate in both length and depth. After all, thousands of *rōmusha* were transported to other Japanese occupied territories, for example the Malay Peninsula and Singapore, and their presence places the history of occupied Java into a real transregional framework. Of course, the book meets the requirements of a "transnational history," but perhaps it is ultimately more "binational" in its exclusive focus on the Japanese-Indonesian relationship. The author missed a trick to exploit the story to its full potential.

Moreover, Ethan Mark fails to provide his readers with a sufficiently clear understanding of Japan's occupation politics, methods, and structures in Southeast Asia. For whatever reason, he shies from seeing the bigger picture. He does not sufficiently embed his case study in the overall history of Southeast Asia under Japanese rule. His study really needed to point to similarities, to draw parallels, and to show differences between the example of Java and other Japanese-occupied Southeast Asian territories. The Pan-Asian dream of an independent "Indonesian empire," for example, circulated in the neighboring Malayan Peninsula as well, but Mark does not mention it.¹ One remaining unanswered question for readers unfamiliar with the topic is: To what extent was the occupation of Java unique within occupied Southeast Asia?

The fact that Mark's study remains mainly on the micro level does not mean that it is of little importance—far from it. Mark's book is without doubt a very well researched and detailed study based on English, Japanese, Indonesian, and Dutch primary and secondary sources. It is a welcome contribution to academic research on World War II, and helps to sharpen the overall picture of Southeast Asia under the rising sun. This monograph is recommended reading for experts on Pan-Asianism or Southeast Asia under the Japanese

1 Melber 2017, pp. 242–251.

occupation. However, it is in parts overwritten and somewhat convoluted. Also, it does not provide the reader with a satisfying historical overview of Java's "Japanese episode" from 1942–1945, as some readers might assume on reading the book's title and blurb. The book is, in the end, a good addition to Sato Shigeru's groundbreaking study of Java under Japanese occupation (Sato 1994), and Peter Post's comprehensive *The Encyclopedia of Indonesia in the Pacific War*.

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