

“British Imperial Collapse in Asia” (A Review of Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper’s *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-45*), *International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter* 41 (Summer 2006): 21-22.

Scorched memories: British imperial collapse in Asia, 1941-45

Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper. 2005. *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-45*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 616 pages, ISBN 067402219X

G.S. Sahota

In all but popular and military forms of modern historiography, the World Wars of the 20th century often simply mark the end of one period or, like a capital letter of a sentence, establish the syntax for the following one. Political pressures of an era come to a head and afterwards the pieces fall in newly determined patterns. We sense only vaguely the chaotic developments or the vast destruction, violence and barbarity of the modern war event in most historical accounts. In *Forgotten Armies*, a masterful reconstruction of the collapse of British Asia during the war years, Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper reveal at once the mundane and sublime qualities of all-out modern warfare.

Considering issues such as mass casualties, genocide and the dropping of the atomic bomb, the representational constraints of the historical discipline are made apparent. More modernist genres arguably have greater flexibility for dealing with events of this intensity.¹ In any case, only an Olympian calm of distanced irony could convert the terrifying spectacle and chaos of modern warfare into something historically explicable. How, then, can the exceptional conditions of world war, the totality of the event and its violence be referenced in a representational mode that must reduce everything to normality in order to narrate it? In rethinking the oblivion of World War II’s eastern front, *Forgotten Armies* answers this question using archival fragments in most intriguing ways.

Sublimity surfaces unexpectedly in *Forgotten Armies*. It is the uncanny moment or the absurd turn of event. It is captured, for example, by descriptions of ‘ever-present gorgeous butterflies’ that would settle ‘on people near to death’ in ‘the green hell of mud, human excrement and chaos’ of the Hukawng valley in 1942; (pp. 183, 185) or of the ‘glorious ochre sunsets’ produced by the smoke of fires set by arsonists in Rangoon after the Japanese invasion (p. 62). Sublimity surfaces as well in brutal ironies. In the year after the great artificial famine of Bengal in 1943, agricultural production broke previous records, but because of the famine, not enough labouring hands were still alive to harvest it. Juxtapositions evoke the vast disturbance of war. The explosion of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima produces in the words of Matsushige Yoshito ‘a brilliant flash of immaculate white’ (p. 456). Destiny as black humour and aesthetic recompense for human horror: in *Forgotten Armies* these are the themes that bring into scope the unrepresentable enormity of World War II. It is as if all the evil and terror come of nothing other than the stupidity of human designs for power and domination, as if the world is one vast board game upon which human folly and the struggle against fate is the source of delight for ancient gods. *Forgotten Armies*’s return to narrative history in the grand tradition seems to return the reader to a chronotope of the ancient world itself.

Each of the chapters of *Forgotten Armies* chronicles a year of the war, revealing the precipitous breakdown of British rule. Alongside the collapse, all kinds of contingencies and aleatory circumstances slowly bring into focus a new order and geographical imaginary. It was perhaps inevitable that Japanese imperial ambitions, known benignly as the ‘Greater East Asian Co-

prosperity Sphere', would target the great crescent stretching from Bengal to Sumatra. As the powers of the late imperial age were well aware, the region was rich in resources, the seat of weakly protected cosmopolitan metropolises such as Singapore, and the base of modernising urban and peasant labour forces. At the moment when Japanese imperialists were strategizing, the idea of national liberation and politics based on ascriptive affinities had already spread with severe consequences. Between the struggles of Japanese and Western imperial powers emerge the forgotten armies. Their fleeting appearance and the telling of their histories serves the purpose of the book: to get beyond the micro-specialisations of contemporary historiography and to rethink the fragmented nature of public memory surrounding the great events of the World War II, 'to reassemble and reunite the different, often unfamiliar but connected narratives of these epic events and to put the stories of the great men and the great battles of the period into the context of the histories of ordinary Asian men and women' (p. xxxii).

The diversity of the forgotten armies reveals the intertwined nature of the great crescent: its kaleidoscopic societies are not only tied to one another but also to broad national and imperial formations around the world. The men of the Indian diaspora, who joined the Indian National Army to escape Japanese labour camps, appear here, as do the members of the Singapore Overseas Chinese Volunteer Army under the leadership of the business tycoon Tan Kah Lee. Likewise, different tribal groups such as the Nagas of Assam, essential to Allied victory, make their appearance, as do the Orang Asli who helped to establish the ephemeral communist hegemony in Malay.

Yet, Bayly and Harper capture with their heuristic category some rather unexpected units of oblivion's armies, including the huge 'silent armies' of officially commissioned Japanese 'comfort women'. These sex slaves were dispatched with colonizing missions at the ratio of one for every 40 soldiers, along with over 32.1 million condoms. We also have the abandoned lepers of Sungei Buloh who established 'a centre of support for guerrilla resistance to the Japanese' (p. 125). Most surprising, the 70,000 or so Japanese soldiers who withered away in the valleys around Assam after the legendary battles of Imphal and Kohima are mentioned briefly as one of the forgotten armies. They, too, despite being the invaders, are among the forgotten figures buried in the soil of the great crescent, abandoned as the lost subjects of an increasingly improbable empire. One gets a sense in instances such as these of how much *Forgotten Armies* departs from more conventional nationalist or ethnically motivated accounts of the region's history. The complex detritus embedded in the very land surely make problematic the claims of the region's nationalist – or fascist – ideologies concerning the purities of blood and soil. Such claims continue to hold sway in the official histories of the region.

Likewise, so many other events of the British collapse, such as the horrific mass flight from Rangoon in 1942, can be understood through an analytical incorporation of diverse social elements, including the subordinated and marginalized. The mosaic that accordingly emerges of the war years through the device of the 'forgotten armies' is one that is radically de-centring. It produces the right juxtapositions for making the age come across as quintessentially modern and global. This is accomplished primarily by the sources Bayly and Harper bring to their disposal. Gleanings from the numerous archives of several nation-states, the major newspapers of the region, photographs and the personal accounts of all kinds of people make for a strikingly authentic account. Building almost exclusively on primary sources, the account gives a sense of the age as it was considered by its contemporaries. These were the days when the Malayan Planning Unit was concocting elaborate war strategies 'in almost complete ignorance of the situation on the ground', when Lord Mountbatten was dreaming up fantastic invasion schemes called 'Dracula' or 'Zipper' and officials such as the exiled Governor General Reginald Dorman-Smith were engaged in debates where the basic premise was that 'the British Empire in Asia

would be rebuilt as surely as day followed night' (pp. 420, 241). The manner in which local figures were strategically engaging with the blindness of British ideology was essential. The shadowy figure 'Lai Teck', the best known alias of the man who climbed the ranks to become secretary general of the Malayan Communist Party and erstwhile spy for the British, only makes sense 'in the context of the fluidity of the social world he inhabited, a world where most people were strangers' (p. 55). Such characters abound in the scenarios of *Forgotten Armies*, where the minor and ghostly presence of the commoner reveals itself to be just as significant as that of a British official, where reversals of power are quite regular. The book's excellent organisation, including several maps, a list of key characters and an extensive index, helps the reader sort through any difficulties in keeping track of them.

The book's unusual picture of the modern experience can be considered the result of its shifting the narrative of World War II from the western to the eastern front and from the sphere of officialdom to the translocal worlds of the forgotten armies. Combinations of the most discrepant phenomena seem to have characterized the era, and in bringing them to light Bayly and Harper verge on the fantastic in their depictions. The non-western world of the mid-20th century is one of bizarre *bricolage*. We see animal-based armies alongside state of the art war machines and we witness how the 'most advanced scientific techniques of killing were deployed alongside almost medieval patterns of bravery and brutality' (p. 393). The notion of a 'triumph of the will' was strong among many fighting forces and Emperor Hirohito 'still believed that the Allies could be denied victory if his samurai were brave enough' (p. 393). The most technologically advanced instruments of destruction were employed by the likes of kamikaze bombers who espoused quasi-ancient ideologies of sacrifice. The techniques for expressing domination also seem to be of a strangely pre-modern sort. The Japanese probably incited the most hatred and spurred anti-imperial struggle with their notorious habit of face-slapping. The newly re-colonized subjects of Burma and Malay found this to be the most intolerable aspect of their subjection.

The fruit of long and arduous archival labour, *Forgotten Armies* is an achievement that helps one rethink broad subjects such as modernity and modern warfare. It is also a great example of the theory of nationalism and regionalism that Bayly has previously published. According to him, geo-political formations in modern times are born through the crucible of war. The vast transformation that was World War II can be seen to have produced the region we understand today as Southeast Asia. The very term 'Southeast Asia' was coined only after 'the whole area from the borders of Bengal and Assam almost as far as the Australian Sea was united by the Allies for the first and only time in a single, interconnected administration' (p. xxxii). The seeds of a new order were being planted amidst the mayhem. Thus the vast cosmopolitan perspective that they bring to their narrative reveals 'the terrifying spectacle of change which destroys everything and creates it anew, and destroys again', which was central to Friedrich von Schiller's notion of the historical sublime.²

Destruction can thus be productive. The exceptional circumstances of modern warfare can potentially help bring into focus the seething struggles, unsettled disputes and unresolved contests over power that endure quietly under normal conditions. The aftermath of explosions across a vast terrain leave the possibility for realignments of geo-political boundaries, the invention of nations and the formation of new regional blocs. Underneath the scorched remains, the ramshackle readjustment to normality and the refurbishing of historical trajectory lie the memories of vastly discrepant, yet interconnected, experiences. Such remains can be unearthed to reveal profound moments pregnant with possibility. Bayly and Harper are like archaeologists digging into the historical record to bring scraps back from oblivion and reassemble them in ways that may shed light on and enhance the meaning of our present. One issue that certainly comes to light is the potential discrepancy between the way the past is officially commemorated and the

different ways it can be recollected in regions as diversely populated – in the past and in the present – in what we today call ‘Southeast Asia’.

Notes

1. Hayden White. 1987. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
2. As quoted in ‘The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation’. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

Bali Sahota

(Bali Sahota is a research associate in the Department of Asian Languages and Literatures at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.)

sahota@umn.edu