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More Trees than Forest in this Study of Japan's Wartime Role in Southeast Asia

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Nicholas Tarling, editor of the influential four-volume *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* and author of several other books on the region, provides a detailed examination of Japan's wartime domination of seven separate areas of Southeast Asia (Borneo; Burma; Indo-China including Vietnam; Malaya and Singapore; Netherlands India; the Philippines; and Thailand). That is a lot of territory to cover, and yet surprisingly, there is a surfeit of detail in this book.

The book's main focus, as the subtitle indicates, is Japan's "occupation" of Southeast Asia during the five years of the Pacific War from 1941 to 1945. The first two chapters deal with an earlier period, providing historical background. Tarling writes in his preface that "[t]he occupation is best seen in the context of Japan's relationship with the outside world over the longer term" (p. ix). Chapter 1, "Equality and Opportunity," actually seems to support an opposite conclusion. In this wide-ranging chapter Tarling provides a historical overview of Japan's relationship with Southeast Asia, the West, and colonial policy from the Meiji period on. Is this background really the proper context for understanding Japan's invasion of Asia during World War II? Are the policies of the 1930s and 1940s not discrete phenomena from Japan's pursuit of independence in the nineteenth century? Portraying events as far back as Hideyoshi's sixteenth-century invasion of Korea as pertinent background for a book on the Pacific War is especially problematic.

It is not that Tarling crudely equates Japan's World War II aggression with the Meiji search for "equality." The links he posits between the era of Hideyoshi and the Meiji period with the 1930s and 1940s are more subtly drawn. For example, after a survey of Meiji policies in pursuit of independence in a hostile world, Tarling's reference to the World War II period is nuanced, if not sarcastic: "A rather different line was to be adopted in

Manchuria and in Southeast Asia, but remnants of the Meiji approach persisted" (p. 20).

Another way in which Tarling's historical survey provides questionable "background" is when he suggests that during both the Meiji era and the World War II period, pragmatic, and even materialistic goals drove Japanese policy: "The object was not to build an empire, but to acquire resources" (p. 21). Was the alleged need for economic resources not more a justification than an actual reason for the invasion of China and Southeast Asia? Although this chapter draws too solid a line between earlier eras and the Pacific War period, and lays too much stress on the economic dimension of imperialism, it is a matter of degree. Tarling's careful approach is certainly a far cry from some recent, more simplistic works that endorse a monocausal material motive for the Pacific War.[1]

Chapter 2, "Diplomacy and Force," chronicles Japan's road to hostilities, referring to key events in the European theater such as the fall of France, the "moral embargo" of the United States, and Japan's largely unplanned WWII-era expansion into Southeast Asia. Tarling persists in casting the 1930s expansionism as the pursuit of "open-ended" goals of Meiji foreign policy: "strength and prosperity and ... equality with other nations" (p. 40). But he also notes some significant new factors in both domestic politics and the international arena, such as the role of Konoe at home and the rise of Chinese nationalism abroad. Like most of the book, this chapter consists, for the most part, of top-down, diplomatic history, with countries as the subjects of many sentences ("The United States became anxious" [p. 76]). An astute observer, Tarling provides some keen insight into the realities of Japanese diplomacy: "It was characteristic of Japan's policy-making that little thought was give [sic] to the means of concluding the new conflict" (p. 77).

Pearl Harbor and the coming of war with the United States begins chapter 3, "War and Peace," an overview of

the Pacific War and its major battles, culminating with Japan's surrender in 1945. Although the material here is familiar to students of the Pacific War, Tarling's emphasis on the role of Southeast Asia provides fresh insight. For example, there is more stress here than in most accounts on Japan's alliance with Thailand, and we also learn something of the perspectives of the leaders in the Philippines, Netherlands India, and Burma on the diplomatic and military vicissitudes of this period. Typical of the degree of detail which Tarling provides is the following passage on the advance of the Japanese under General Iida into Burma: "The 33rd Division pushed up the Irrawaddy valley through Prome, Yenangyaung, Monywa and Kalewa, while the 55th went up the Sittang through Toungoo, Meiktila, Mandalay, Bhamo and Myitkyina" (p. 98).

The Japanese justification for its war in Asia is the subject of chapter 4, "Conquest and Liberation." Basically, Tarling examines the rhetoric and reality of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and finds it wanting. In part, Tarling argues, the suffering of the Southeast Asians under Japanese rule stemmed from wartime conditions and inadequate planning. Yet he also firmly castigates the Japanese for their unnecessary cruelty. The occupation of Southeast Asia was not in Tarling's view the result of a long-term policy, but of an accidental turn of events. And ideas of liberation or "Asia for the Asians" were only belatedly added to the mix; initially, at least, "military requirement for raw materials was to have priority" (p. 131). Indeed, military necessity was the determining factor even in the introduction of liberation ideology, as stated in an official Army document which referred to the employment of these ideas to mobilize the local populace, "so that they will be available for use in our operational schemes" (p. 132).

The nitty-gritty details of colonial rule emerge in chapter 5, "Control and Mobilisation." Here, Tarling finds some significant differences in Japanese policy in the seven regions mentioned above. These differences depended more upon the role of these territories in Japan's war objectives than on any particular sensitivity to local conditions. Tarling obviously harbors no illusions about the real motives behind Japanese activities in these regions. For instance, he quotes a Japanese staff officer, Colonel Ishii, in stating that the plans for a new regime in Burma "shall have on the surface the appearance of independence, but in reality ... shall be induced to carry out Japanese policies" (p. 151). In other words, though Burma attained independence in the early post-war (1948), it was not thanks to the Japanese, but rather because "[t]he Burmese had scooped independence out

of the war" (p. 159).

One of the main strengths of Tarling's work is the manner in which he distinguishes between Japanese policy in different regions. For instance, where the Japanese encountered fairly developed political systems, as in Burma and the Philippines, they promoted the idea of independence. The situation was very different in the fully colonial case of Netherlands India. Japan did not encourage independence in this area, in part because of the important oil resources of Borneo and Sumatra. Japanese racial discrimination, that subsumed Southeast Asian peoples in an inferior position, also played a role. As Tarling aptly puts it: "While the Japanese claimed equality with other nations, they did not regard other nations as their equal" (p. 175). Despite being greeted as liberators in many parts of the former Dutch colonial territories, the Japanese leadership did not invoke the idea of independence for these regions until 1944, when the war had turned decisively against Japan.

The economic dimension of empire and the true nature of the "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere" are the focus of chapter 6, "Demand and Supply." Tarling considers the Sphere to have been both an ideological and economic policy, the product of the global crisis which divided the world "into more or less autarkic spheres" (p. 218). He argues that Japan's "co-prosperity" policies were built upon severely flawed economic principles, and were thus bound to fail. As if the blatant destructiveness of Japan's military invasion of Southeast Asia were not enough, the bloc economy it sought to create only made things worse, as the region's economies were immediately wracked by inflation and bungled implementation. Indeed, Japanese ineptitude comes across as at least as big a factor in the hardship of local peoples under Japanese rule as the Co-Prosperity Sphere itself (which was of course exploitative and unfair).

Japanese incompetence was also a major theme in Shigeru Sato's study of wartime policies in Java.[2] One of Tarling's most powerful quotes in chapter 6 comes from Sato: "As a consequence of Japanese misrule numerous people suffered and died in their villages, at their work places, or on road sides; many without ever seeing a Japanese" (p. 231). The degree of suffering in local areas under Japanese rule seems proportional to how much Japan sought to exploit their economic resources. In the Philippines, where there was little expectation of economic contribution to the Sphere, Japanese rule was relatively less harsh, whereas in Vietnam, one or two million died in famines as Japanese diverted rice to the home islands (p. 251). So much for "co-prosperity"!

Chapters 5 and 6 constitute, for me, the heart of the book, where Tarling's measured and thorough approach yields useful information for persistent readers.

Finally, in chapter 7, "Memory and Legacy," Tarling seeks to draw some general conclusions from the historical story he has traced. By far the shortest chapter of the book, at seventeen pages, this conclusion summarizes Tarling's observations about Japanese imperialism in wartime Southeast Asia. To his credit, Tarling does not shy away from a frank assessment of Japanese rule in Southeast Asia and its human costs. Tarling neither demonizes the Japanese nor overlooks their sometimes inexplicable violence and cruelty toward the very people they were claiming to "liberate." At the beginning of this brief chapter, Tarling notes that, even in the context of the unprecedented violence of World War II, there was something about Japan's violence that set it apart, "though atrocities were not peculiar to them, theirs still stand out" (p. 252).

The claim of fighting to liberate Asia from Western imperialism continues to obfuscate the true nature of Japan's wartime depredations to this day. (Hayashi Fumio's infamous 1968 *Dai Toua Sensou kouteiron* is still read in this light by some Japanese counterparts to European holocaust deniers.) Tarling makes it clear in his preface that he will brook no such revisionism, noting that "on balance ... it must be concluded that the peoples of the region 'liberated' themselves, taking advantage of the interregnum" (p. ix). In his conclusion, Tarling treads more carefully, calling the bringing of independence (to Burma, the Philippines, and Indonesia) "Japan's major achievement," and even cites Ba Maw's statement that "Nothing can ever obliterate the role Japan has played in bringing liberation to countless colonial peoples." But he goes on to remark that "Even so, it cannot be said that the Southeast Asian states owe their independence to the Japanese ... securing independence ... [was] very much the work of the Southeast Asian elites themselves" (pp. 256-257).

If not liberation, what, after all, drove Japan's policy in Southeast Asia? At several points Tarling argues it was an unplanned, makeshift policy. He also, more than once, claims that Japan tended "to fall back on devices derived from the Manchurian experience and from the Manchurian-influenced wartime measures adopted in the homeland itself" (p. 254). The Manchurian model for Southeast Asia is an interesting but undemonstrated idea. Tarling writes that the model "applied to structures of political control and mobilisation and to the interventionist approach to the economy," but provides no spe-

cific examples to back up this case (pp. 254-255). Nor does he make reference to recent studies of Japan in Manchuria, such as Louise Young's highly regarded work (which does appear in his bibliography).[3]

So where does Tarling's work fit within the literature on Japanese wartime colonial rule? Certainly it is a worthwhile addition to the three chapters on Southeast Asia in the volume on *The Japanese Wartime Empire, 1931-1945* edited by Peter Duus, Ramon Myers, and Mark Peattie.[4] Tarling's sole authorship of *A Sudden Ram-page* imparts a more consistent and even approach than these chapters.

Tarling states from the outset that he relied upon secondary works rather than on original sources. A ten-page bibliography provides a useful overview of the English-language literature, but there are no foreign-language sources, save a few translated works. A diligent scholar, Tarling never cites these works out of context or summarizes them inaccurately. Occasionally, though, the very diversity of these sources impart a roughness to Tarling's narrative, especially when he jumps from studies published decades ago to other, much more recent, material.

Overall, though, Tarling's contributions are limited chiefly because of his tendency to focus on the trees rather than the forest, providing great detail about specific events and diplomatic machinations without enough of an overarching framework of analysis. Tarling rarely links together the details he provides with a clear argument or interpretation. The following passage on Indonesia is typical of his preference for specificity (and for dates without years):

"On 1 March Harada announced the formation of a committee to investigate preparations for independence. Then in late March he had to persuade his colleagues in Sumatra and his superiors. Tokyo, which had meanwhile offered independence to Cambodia and Vietnam, also assented. A list of members was announced on 29 April. Nationalists predominated over *priyayi* officials and Muslim representatives. A conference in Singapore on 20 May approved convening the first meeting. That took place at the end of May." (p. 189)

This quotation deals with undeniably important topics, including the role of Indonesian Muslims in wartime politics and the often contentious issue of whether Japan would permit or condone independence movements. But one's eyes glaze over after a few pages of such specific information. Frankly, I would have preferred a different balance, giving more room for the forest (analytical overviews and Tarling's perspicacious generalizations)

and less for the trees (details and minutiae).

The shortcomings of the book as a work of analytical scholarship are regrettable, because Tarling clearly is a knowledgeable observer who could have said much more. His reserved approach reflects, perhaps, the stance of a “gentleman scholar” at the peak of his career. But, unfortunately, the result is that this book cannot provide a satisfactory answer to the question that is implicit in its title: *why* did Japan’s policy toward Southeast Asia become a “sudden rampage”?

Notes

[1]. Jonathan Marshall, *To Have and Have Not: South-*

east Asian Raw Materials and the Origins of the Pacific War (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

[2]. Shigeru Sato, *War, Nationalism and Peasants: Java under the Japanese Occupation, 1942-1945* (Armonk and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1994).

[3]. Louise Young, *Japan’s Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1998).

[4]. Peter Duus, Ramon H. Myers, and Mark R. Peattie, eds., *The Japanese Wartime Empire, 1931-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

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