



Christopher E. Goscha, Christian Ostermann. *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945-1962*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. XI, 450 S.

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C. E. Goscha u.a. (Hrsg.): *Connecting Histories*

This volume undoubtedly breaks new ground in several respects. First of all, its scope is breathtakingly panoramic. The essays written by the book's fifteen contributors cover not only Vietnam, Indonesia, Burma, Thailand, Malaya, and other Southeast Asian countries but also the policies the U.S., Britain, France, the Netherlands, Australia, the USSR, China and India pursued toward this region.

Secondly, the book is aimed at exploring connections between such fields of historical research which previous authors often studied more or less in isolation from each other. Particular emphasis is being laid on investigating how the outbreak of the Cold War influenced the process of decolonization in Southeast Asia. The history of Vietnam and Indonesia is linked to over half a dozen states; Burma, Thailand and Malaya appear less frequently in the limelight, but still each is covered by at least one essay.

Furthermore, a number of authors investigate how the domestic policies of the various Southeast Asian countries influenced diplomatic decision-making and how international events affected the domestic sphere. This interdisciplinary approach yields various remarkable discoveries. Among others, Daniel Fineman points out that "the most prominent critics of Bao Dai in Thailand were staunch anticommunists." (p. 284). Michael W. Charney and Rémy Madinier describe how Burmese Premier U Nu and the Indonesian Masjumi party explained their opposition to Communism by stressing their commitment to both religious and democratic values, whereas Richard Mason and Christopher E. Goscha highlight that Indonesian parliamentary debates consid-

erably influenced the forms and extent of U.S.-Indonesian cooperation. Goscha, Mark Atwood Lawrence and Martin Thomas demonstrate that while the Communist nature of Ho Chi Minh's government discouraged India and Indonesia from recognizing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), the unrepresentativeness of the French-controlled Bao Dai regime alienated not only Asian nationalists but initially even American and British diplomats.

It might be beneficial to apply this approach to some additional cases. For instance, Anne L. Foster convincingly explains that post-1945 Dutch intransigence was deeply rooted in the trauma of Nazi and Japanese occupation, but it may be added that even in the interwar era, Dutch colonial officials had been less willing to regard Indonesian nationalists as negotiating partners than their British and U.S. counterparts in India, Burma, and the Philippines, respectively.

Due to its focus on guerrilla warfare, the Domino Theory was also based on the conception of interlocking internal and external factors. Critically re-examining this theory, whose limits he readily admits, Ang Cheng Guan provides a nuanced overview about Communist strategies and tactics in Southeast Asia. Still, his observations on the diplomatic and military developments, from which he draws the conclusion that the Domino Theory was valid for the region after all, could have been combined with a more detailed analysis of the socio-political conditions in the various Southeast Asian countries.

The attitudes the Southeast Asian non-Communist

governments adopted toward the Communist powers were shaped by various factors. For instance, threat perceptions could inspire not only hostile reactions but also policies of accommodation. Fineman and Charney describe that while Chinese Communist criticism of Thai Premier Phibun Songkhram induced him to draw even closer to the U.S., U Nu concluded that forging an alliance with Washington against Beijing would increase, rather than reduce, the risk of Chinese aggression. Since the Trade Union Conference of Asian and Australasian Countries, held in Beijing in November 1949, condemned the Thai “military clique” and the “fascist” Burmese government in equally harsh words, the contrast between Phibun’s and U Nu’s attitude appears quite striking, all the more so because Thailand, unlike Burma, faced no Communist insurgency at that time.

As Goscha and Mason point out, the recent trauma of colonial rule – a problem absent in Thailand – greatly motivated Indonesian and Burmese reluctance to side with the West against the Communist powers. This common element of nationalism may explain why these two countries took a similar stance, since otherwise U Nu’s non-alignment was rooted in Burma’s geographical proximity to China, whereas the Indonesian leaders felt that their country should stay neutral precisely because it “did not share a common boundary with any of the Cold War belligerents” (p. 40).

In contrast, one’s commitment to a pro-Western foreign policy could produce a restraining effect on nationalism. While Madinier notes that Masjumi opposed the Indonesian government’s forceful attempts to annex Irian Jaya on the grounds that this would lead to a break with the West, Mason and Fineman describe how U.S.-Indonesian and U.S.-Thai relations were shaped by a prolonged bargaining over the amount of aid to be provided and the nature of the diplomatic concessions to be made in exchange.

Ilya V. Gaiduk, Chen Jian and Tuong Vu analyze the strategies and tactics of three Communist powers: the Soviet Union, China and Vietnam. Gaiduk correctly observes that in Stalin’s global strategy, incomparably less importance was attributed to Southeast Asia than to European affairs. He aptly illustrates the dictator’s tactical flexibility by describing how in 1951 Stalin discouraged the Indonesian and Indian Communist leaders from launching a guerrilla war against the local “bourgeois” governments. Stalin’s arguments, such as the unfeasibility of creating “liberated areas” in countries which had no common borders with Communist states, certainly made

sense, but one may probe somewhat further in explaining his motives. After all, in the same period the Kremlin encouraged the Japanese Communist Party to pursue armed struggle, though such logistical obstacles were even more insuperable in Japan than in India and Indonesia.

Both Gaiduk and Chen highlight Stalin’s readiness to allow China to “play a major role in promoting revolutions in the East” (p. 145). This decentralized conception of international Communist strategy may illuminate the aforesaid differences between Soviet attitudes toward the Indian, Indonesian and Japanese CPs. That is, the Soviet leaders probably wanted to concentrate their efforts on certain countries and avoid a simultaneous involvement in other regional crises.

While Chen emphasizes the role of Sino-centrism in Mao’s strategy, Vu claims that the Vietnamese Communist leaders adopted a consistently pro-Soviet, rather than nationalist, standpoint, both during and after WW II. He convincingly demonstrates that the “the development of the Cold War [...] was in fact welcome by many top Vietnamese leaders” (p. 173). As long as they had no other potential ally to rely on (Indonesia, as Samuel E. Crowl points out, could expect support from India, the Middle East and Australia), they had to pin all their hopes on Moscow. Still, one may consider independent priority-setting a more significant component of Vietnamese Communist policies than Vu does. After all, Chen notes that as early as during the Geneva conference, the Viet Minh’s designs for Laos led to disagreements in Sino-Vietnamese relations.

Similarly to Vu, Edward Miller seeks to refute common stereotypes by stressing that the foreign policy of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem was more independent and less America-centric than it has been generally thought. For instance, he reveals that despite Pakistan’s staunch anti-Communist stance, Diem made greater efforts to cultivate ties with neutralist India. Nonetheless, India’s relations with the two Vietnams underwent several successive changes, which are not given emphasis in Miller’s essay.

All in all, this volume is a truly indispensable work for those studying modern Southeast Asian history or Cold War history. Its contributors have done extensive research in various – American, British, French, Russian, and Chinese – archives, and its bibliography is composed of a wide range of secondary sources published in ten languages. To the credit of its editors and contributors, this book brings new perspectives into scholarship in a remarkably non-polemical way.

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