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The contested legacies of historical events, although by no means a new concept in the scholarly realm, have grown to take on ever more overt prominence in cultural and political spaces as well. As a result, an accessible work that offers a fresh perspective about another country’s contested legacies can represent an interesting and valuable opportunity for reflection. Fred Lanzing’s memoir of life in the Japanese-occupied Netherlands East Indies during World War II is an engaging example.

The Netherlands was a small European country with a vast and lucrative empire that included some holdings in and adjacent to the Caribbean Sea as well as the expanse of modern Indonesia, and it is here that the book is focused. Colonized gradually starting in the early seventeenth century and consolidated by the dawn of the twentieth, the Netherlands East Indies were enriched by plantation agriculture and strategic materials exports. This brought little of material benefit to the archipelago itself, so the 1942 invasion by Japan was first met with varying degrees of enthusiasm on the part of the islands’ native populations. Occupation sank in popularity as Japan’s presence brought still more depredations and led to the death of several million Indonesian people, largely in connection with malnutrition.

For the small number of people with European ancestry and for the considerable number of “Eurasians” with shared European and indigenous parentage, Japan’s occupation meant dispossession, internment, and worse. These people, who after World War II would also be targeted as Indonesia’s independence war erupted, generally relocated to the Netherlands postwar, even though it meant abandoning the part of the former empire that had been their homeland. In historiography of the subject over the past seven decades, a lot of writing has revolved around comparisons of the suffering by interned Dutch (including mention, in various degrees, of Eurasians) in the Indies with the occupation hardships endured by Dutch subjects in the Netherlands after its swift conquest by Nazi Germany in 1940. The Axis occupations indeed brought significant challenges to ordinary people, and some people were particularly targeted and persecuted. Postwar narratives frequently bore political implications by how the experiences were characterized and compared.

Lanzing, who was a child of a well-placed member of the Indies administration, has for decades recounted his interned experiences for the
purpose of counterbalancing what he has deemed as being overblown complaints (and political-economic claims) by other people who had lived under internment during Japan’s occupation. This book, taking its title from a diary entry made by his mother in 1943, assertively rejects the kind of victimhood mentalities that he perceives in much of the literature on the topic. “The word *victim* is beginning to disturb me more and more,” he writes (p. 111). The sentiment applies across the work, and although his memoir is overwhelmingly focused on his personal experiences and vantage point and therefore gives the most detail about the experience of Dutch children (touching also on the situation of women with whom smaller children were interned together), his discussion into Japan’s nuclear memorials on pages 57-58 is fascinating.

Lanzing argues for moving forward with life, declaiming efforts at remuneration for past injustices. He pointedly notes that, if the Dutch have financial claims of mistreatment by the Japanese in World War II, then so too Dutch imperialism could prompt claims by Indonesians in turn. The issue of contested legacies and historical traumas is nothing unique to the Dutch, although different nations, societies, and individual people all have different experiences. The Ohio University publishers, who in 2017 published the English-language translation of this work a decade after its first appearance in Dutch, bring an intriguing voice into discourse about topics similar to those that have gained further traction in the United States.

An interesting, and complicating, point about Lanzing’s work is that it is after all the story of his individual experience as a youth. As a result, occupation policies that curtailed economic participation and education and other activities affected him differently than they did other people of different ages. “I was living life as if in a boys’ adventure book,” Lanzing explains (p. 65). He certainly claims to have felt so at the time, and since. However, his own personal interpretation of his experience cannot reliably be used as a stand-in for the experience of all others, for whom internment meant dispossession and isolation long before the more general experiences of malnutrition were meted out across the interned populations as a whole. A close reader is left with philosophical quandaries, since Lanzing argues against the claims of victimization, but he does so based on experiences that were not shared by the victims around him. A reader will also notice a recurring detachment in Lanzing, partly in reference to episodes of depredation and abuse that he personally did sustain, and also in his evoking only a relatively abstract empathy for the travails of adults, including his own parents. This detachment forms a discomforting contrast to his retrospective recognition of the crude selfishness of his own parents in their apparent unconcern in the postwar era for the fate of a Eurasian relative.

Lanzing’s accusation against the self-limiting effects of a victim mentality constitutes a powerful message in the book. He rejects the notion that “*all* their subsequent troubles, existential or not, [can be] traced back to those three years of internment” (p. 91). Lanzing’s message is an existentialist one that assails many sentiments in vogue early in the twenty-first century. Taken as a whole, the memoir (which is only ninety-one pages long and complemented by a twenty-three-page addendum reciting his contemptuous message to the Foundation for Japanese Debts of Honor from the 1990s) is a surprisingly complicated book for its length. *Camp Life Is Paradise for Freddy* allows English-language readers to peek into part of the debate about Dutch imperial and World War II legacies. It also opens the door to reflection about the reparation debates in other national and cultural contexts. And, as memoirs often do, it unconsciously challenges the reader to think about perspective, experience, and meaning.
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