

Book Reviews

War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore, edited by Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack, Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2012, 476 pages (Softcover ISBN: 978-9971-69-599-6)*

With re-writing of history textbooks an issue of current concern in this country, *War Memory* edited by Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack is a very timely publication. This is a well-researched and readable study explaining how events of World War Two and the Japanese Occupation are remembered differently by various people, and how some of these memories alter with the passage of time. The writers argue that individuals, communities and the state shape, and reshape war narratives and that efforts to create a collective memory out of divergent recollections have not been easy. *War Memory* is a cogently argued reminder that history is constructed out of a multitude of sources and how data are selected and used determine the slant and contestability of the resulting perspectives.

Drawing from the recollections of those who lived through the war years, *War Memory* revisits momentous events of the Japanese Occupation. There was the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942 and the surrender of more than 100,000 Allied troops. Then in the months following, there were the massacres by Japanese troops of thousands of Chinese in the terror-filled *Sook Ching* (*Su Qing*) or “purging campaign” against those suspected of pre-war anti-Japanese activities. In Johor alone, it was claimed that some 25,000 were executed by the Japanese. No one is sure of the total number of those massacred but, as *War Memory* points out, the scale of brutality and killings is beyond dispute. No less tragic were the tens of thousands more, mostly Indians but also Malays, who were taken from rubber estates and sent to build the Thai-Burma Railway where diseases, lack of food, and hard toil killed many.

There were chilling accounts of young men being picked up by Japanese secret police and never to be seen again, and of young girls seized from respectable families to work as comfort women for the Japanese military. More poignantly and often forgotten were the thousands left as widows and orphans when their menfolk were taken away and had to fend for themselves, mostly in poverty. For the rest of the population, life under Japanese rule was one of hardship with shortages of food and essentials.

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There are other memories of the war, of acts of bravery even as Japanese troops marched down Malaya. Allied forces that included Indian soldiers, the newly-formed Malay Regiment and the Dalforce unit consisting of local Chinese, were portrayed as putting up a valiant fight. Sustained resistance against the Japanese was carried out in the jungle by members of Force 136 and the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army that was linked to the Malayan Communist Party.

But there were those who co-operated with the Japanese. As *War Memory* reminds us, such collaboration was often the result of coercion and of desperation to survive. Others, however, were driven by pursuit of separate nationalist goals. Those in the Kesatuan Melayu Muda embraced Japanese promise of political independence while Indian Nationalist Army (INA) members in Malaya and Singapore expected Japanese liberation of India from British rule.

At the end of the war, the returning British in efforts to restore imperial pride and power reconstructed a war narrative where the 1942 surrender and British war prisoners were depicted with imageries of stoicism and heroism. For the post-independence Malaysian state in later years seeking to consolidate Malay unity and nation building the emerging theme in the war narrative was Malay nationalism. In the Malay Regiment and Lt Adnan Saidi who resisted the invading Japanese were found war heroes held up as embodying the Malay martial tradition of Hang Tuah.

But in the narrative set out by the state, where is to be placed the communist-led resistance movement, once war allies of the British, but whose ideology especially during the Emergency was deemed a threat to the country and to nation building? And what about other individuals and communities who want their experience of victimhood to be acknowledged and compensated? And with Japan emerging as a major economic power, how did governments deal with demands for war compensation arising out of war memories without harming growing Japanese trade and investments?

There is therefore not one memory but multiple historical narratives, divergent and seemingly irreconcilable, of the Japanese Occupation period. And even these have, over the years and in changing circumstances, undergone revision when facts were either exaggerated or suppressed and myths created.

War Memory draws attention to this continuing contestation of state and the non-state narratives. But the intensity of the debate, the book notes, has lessened in recent years with the observance of what is described as plural commemoration of World War Two anniversaries. Those left out of the official commemoration are able to organize private memorial services for *Sook Ching* victims and there is some public and unhindered discussions of the role of left-wing anti-Japanese resistance movements. But noticeably neglected in this plural

commemoration are victims and survivors of the “Death Railway” and this is because, as *War Memory* suggests, the dominant memory of the war among many urban Indians is that of the INA-inspired national awakening.

As an exercise in history writing, *War Memory* demonstrates how the use of a variety of research approaches enables and enriches the reconstruction of the past. The writers taught at the Nanyang Technological University of Singapore and in their courses encouraged students to interview and collect stories of the Second World War from those of an earlier generation. The writers also organized forums where war survivors spoke of their experiences. Beyond these, they examined artefacts such as films, memorials, monuments and literary works to capture the moments and meaning of an era that is fast fading from the memory of many.

The war years was a defining period in Malaysia’s history and how events of those times were remembered has determined the course of nation building in this country and will continue to do so. In this excellent study *War Memory* brings out the persistence of multiple memories and the challenge of constructing a national narrative that is inclusive yet authentic. It is a book of high scholarly standard and should contribute to an informed discussion of history-writing in Malaya.

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