

Book review: Ashley Jackson: Ceylon at War, 1939-1945

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to function in a context of ongoing political anarchy has been dealt with too briefly and that this resilience should have deserved more space in the book.

Community Forestry in Nepal is a highly competent and professional effort to take stock of the development and performance of CF in Nepal up to the present, and to sketch out possible future pathways. It is a profound source of information and insights due to the professional experience of its contributors and to the combination of a thorough literature review with the results of primary research presented in the text, as well as in numerous tables. The provision of maps, on the other hand, is rudimentary. Readers with some familiarity with Nepal would have welcomed a map or maps showing the location not just of districts but also of the many places mentioned in this book. This lack notwithstanding, the publication is remarkably cohesive for an edited volume, mainly due to the close professional ties among its contributors and to the excellent synthesis in chapter 9 – “Community Forestry Reinventing itself in Nepal” – which ties the various narratives together with references to each relevant chapter.

Dietrich Schmidt-Vogt

ASHLEY JACKSON, *Ceylon at War, 1939–1945*. Warwick: Helion and Company, 2018. 240 pages, £35.00. ISBN 978-1-9123-9065-6

This book is another addition to the growing body of studies that look at WWII through the lens of a nation-state, even if one in the making, as in this case. The works on India by Yasmine Khan and Srinath Raghavan represent two excellent examples of such studies with comprehensive treatment of the military, political, economic and cultural impact the war could have upon a country. It would of course be daring to compare the small island of Ceylon (as it was known in colonial times) to the subcontinent that is India, whose contribution to the Allied war efforts was indeed massive by almost any measure. But once this difference in scale is adjusted, Ceylon’s contribution can be reassessed and re-appreciated. The island’s importance rested largely on becoming the home of a major base of the Royal Navy at Trincomalee (or Trinco, in short), which was a crucial factor in Mountbatten’s decision to move the headquarters of the Southeast Asia Command from Delhi to Peradeniya and Kandy.

Jackson’s study begins with this story of an island becoming a site of decision-making. Chapter 1 explains the rise in importance of the naval base at Trinco as a result of the fall of Singapore, which made Ceylon a “surrogate Singapore”. The next chapter discusses a lesser-known aspect of this defeat: the influx

of refugees from Southeast Asia to the island. Unfortunately, this flow of refugees is not quantified, though the number of refugees appears to have been small. Chapter 3 returns to the military strand of the history, depicting the measures taken for the defence of the island. Jackson here emphasises the significance of appointing Admiral Layton as the sole Commander-in-Chief, which avoided the repetition of the mistake made at Singapore, where overlapping and partially conflicting responsibilities of civilian and military office-holders contributed to the city's fall.

When the Japanese attack finally came (chapters 4 and 5), the British were not only well prepared but also forewarned, having intercepted Japanese communications regarding its date. The course and results of the attack are presented as a mosaic of various and often extensive quotes from eyewitness reports and personal experiences, without much comment. Jackson also highlights some of the secondary consequences of the raid, notably the flight of the Tamil labourers ("coolies") from Trinco, which hampered reconstruction work, as well as (and somewhat curiously included in this chapter) the decline of the island's banking system and money circulation. Chapter 6 describes the circumstances that led to the establishment of the Southeast Asia Command at the city of Kandy. Mountbatten, himself a commander in the Royal Navy, advocated a naval strategy for the war against the Japanese and the re-conquest of the lost British colonies in Asia, for which the naval base at Trinco was indispensable. Together with the opening of a military intelligence office dedicated to code-breaking, and a broadcasting station serving British and Allied troops stationed in the Southeast Asian theatre, Ceylon indeed became an "island of headquarters" (p. 133), despite much of the central decision-making remaining concentrated at Delhi.

In the two chapters that follow, the focus shifts from the military to the social and cultural sphere, beginning with the question of how the soldiers deployed to the island – including African regiments as well – settled in and spent their time. The most notable troop entertainer to visit the island was Noel Coward, who arrived at Mountbatten's special invitation, though his style of humour did not go down as well with the servicemen. Aspects of the island's social history are again addressed in chapter 8, which discusses issues of race and gender. Chapters 9 and 10 finally move away from the military stationed on the island and put the local population into the foreground. Descriptions of the way the people lived are blended with piecemeal economic data, e.g. on inflation (p. 206), hospital beds (p. 219) or rubber production (p. 207), the latter representing around 60 per cent of the production in areas controlled by the Allied countries. There is some repetition regarding the transformation of Kandy (p. 228), whilst on the other hand the island's domestic politics are treated with extreme brevity: only a few sentences on the question of independence and the Soulbury Commission (established to make

suggestions for Ceylon's post-war constitution) and a slightly longer passage on the activities of the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaj Party.

The selection and composition of the topics covered by Jackson represent the author's expertise in military and more narrowly in naval history. In this respect, the book provides a comprehensive account of major wartime events concerning Ceylon, often presented with longish quotes from the sources, as in chapters 4 and 5 mentioned above. Other aspects of the war in Ceylon – or life in wartime Ceylon more generally – receive less attention and are treated randomly and unsystematically. Most notably, the political developments on the island would have deserved more space and substance, possibly even by way of a separate chapter. Take the attitude of Ceylon's main party, the Ceylon National Congress (CNC): the loyalist and conflict-avoiding stance it adopted from its inception and throughout the interwar years contributed to making the island a "model colony" of the Empire, a position not least shown in the introduction of universal adult franchise in 1930. This relatively calm political climate, which persisted even after war had broken out, was one of the reasons that Mountbatten chose to move his headquarters to Kandy. Of course, the CNC for its part expected that in return for its loyalty, Ceylon would be granted independence after the war, and at the same time, the CNC used its relative political freedom to turn against the South Indian (Tamil) workers employed on the island's tea plantations, demanding their "repatriation" to India. This anti-Tamil agitation continued throughout the war and escalated immediately after independence, when the active expulsion of the Tamils began – a move that contributed substantially to the alienation between Sinhalese and Tamils and the eventual outbreak of civil war in the 1980s. Whilst there are no signs that the British or Allied authorities on the island actively supported the CNC in these actions, they did not actively intervene to stop them either.

Besides politics, a second field inadequately treated by the book is the island's economy. There are a few references to inflation, rationing or agricultural production, which mainly concern rubber, as Ceylon supplied almost two thirds of the Allied rubber production. But these references are quite patchy, unconnected and provided without explanation or interpretation. Rice imports and rationing, for instance, are randomly mentioned on pages 159–160, 206 and 231; the question of labour and labour shortages on pages 98 and 205. This dispersal of information across chapters in turn results in an occasionally odd composition of chapters. Chapter 8, for example, starts off with a discussion of race, sex and gender relations between Allied troops and the locals, but then continues to discuss the transformation of the city of Kandy/Peradeniya, its entertainment industry (which was also briefly described before, on p. 123), before eventually outlining the activities undertaken in the areas of broadcasting and print publications. The subsequent two chapters continue in similar

fashion, providing bits and pieces from “The Home Front” without much focus or coherence.

Curiously, it should have been quite straightforward to write a coherent and informed economic and political history of Ceylon during the war as a background (or possibly even foundation) for the military events that besieged the island, given that a good number of relevant sources are easily available in printed or online editions. These include the four volumes of the *Documents of the Ceylon National Congress, 1929 to 1950* (edited by Michael Roberts, Colombo 1977), but more importantly the comprehensive, data-rich yearbook *Ferguson’s Ceylon Directory*, the publication of which began in the 1870s and continued for more than a century until the 1980s. Most of its volumes have been digitised and are now easily available online. And not to forget the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaj Party, which enjoyed glorious moments of anti-colonial resistance in 1940 and again in 1942 and duly commemorated those activities in a post-war publication (*Britain, World War 2 and the Samajists*, ed. by Wesley S. Muthiah and Sydney Wanasinghe, Colombo 1996). Those broader considerations apart, the book is welcomed as a useful, geographically focused contribution to our understanding of WWII in the East, its course and its consequences.

Tilman Frasch

HELENE MARIA KYED (ed.), *Everyday Justice in Myanmar: Informal Resolutions and State Evasion in a Time of Contested Transition*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2020. 388 pages, 1 map, 34 illustrations, £70.00. ISBN 978-87769-4281-6

This recently published edited volume addresses the important topic of legal pluralism and contested versions of authority and justice in the daily lives of minority ethnic communities in Myanmar. The work brings together a number of chapters that address how ethno-communal sources of justice typically supplant the state and its institutions in the country. The reason for this development is the conscious willingness of those involved in disputes or crimes that require arbitration and settlement to choose such ethno-communal sources of justice in order to avert and circumvent state power and its intrusion into minority communities. The state and its related agencies are generally regarded by ethnic minorities in the country as complex, expensive and ineffective purveyors of justice; official mechanisms are described as being costly, confusing and corrupt, and thus intimidating. Additionally, minority communities are anxious to avoid the negative image that might befall any individuals who refer their