

Book review: Gregg Huff: World War II and Southeast Asia - Economy and Society under Japanese Occupation

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enjoyable – reading on one of the region’s most striking developments in the field of religion and cosmology.

Guido Sprenger

GREGG HUFF, *World War II and Southeast Asia. Economy and Society under Japanese Occupation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Xxx, 523 pages, £90.00. ISBN 978-1-107-09933-3

Even though Southeast Asia was the site of the most intense battles between Japanese and Allied Forces during the Second World War, no comprehensive overview of events or developments during that crucial period has been written. Instead, general chapters in histories of Southeast Asia or books like Nicholas Tarling’s *A Sudden Rampage: The Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia* (London: Hurst, 2001) had to fill the gap, and often did so in a rather general manner. Gregg Huff’s substantial and well-researched volume is the first attempt to produce an extensive and analytical study of the period.

Huff’s book looks mainly at the economic performance of Japan and Southeast Asia during the war. After an introductory chapter, the first chapter deals with the control of people in the occupied territories by the Japanese administration, which was dominated especially by the needs of the military. The next chapter then investigates the financial arrangements that were put into place between Japan and the states it occupied. Monetary extractions were substantial, which was in part possible because inflation remained moderate and only turned into hyperinflation towards the end of the war. This, however, was only half the story, as Southeast Asian GDP values fell by half (or even more, as in the case of Malaya and the Philippines) during the war years. Chapter 4 starts the investigation of this phenomenon with a look at agriculture and mining. All over Southeast Asia, production dropped considerably, again to about half of the amount recorded for 1938, and although Japan acquired virtual monopolies in the case of rice and rubber, for example, their transport to Japan was much hampered by the Allied superiority in the air and on the sea, which made shipment almost impossible.

Industrial production and transportation present a similar picture (chapter 5). Transport, whether public or private, came to a standstill due to war-time requisitions on the one hand and the lack of fuel or spare parts on the other, and industrial production, which had been limited in any case, ceased almost completely. Instead, shortages and rationing dominated daily life in the occupied areas, as chapter 6 details. The people of Southeast Asia had to make do with whatever was available, usually substituting home-made articles when

possible. A good example is soap, which was made of locally sourced ingredients, including coconut oil, ash and bark from local plants. The Japanese authorities tried to organise a market-style system with heavily controlled prices, but quite often barter trade on black markets evaded this arrangement.

At this point, halfway through the book, Huff leaves the mainly economic analysis behind and turns to the social consequences of the war. Chapter 7 begins this different focus with a consideration of food supplies and the famines that plagued wartime Southeast Asia. The two largest of the wartime famines may have occurred in China and India, but inhabitants of Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia and Vietnam, were also hit hard by food shortages and the malnutrition they caused. The chapter offers a good analysis of the causes (such as the typhoon that ransacked Vietnam in 1944) but also lays bare Japan's difficulties in distributing the available rice to the people and regions affected by the shortage. In Java, the main issue was the decline in the area used for the cultivation of rice, which could not be made up for by the increased production of sweet potatoes and cassava. Other areas where food supplies were severely limited, although not to the extent of famine, were the Philippines and Upper Burma.

The book then examines the living standards in urban Southeast Asia, referring mostly to the capital cities of the modern nation-states. The war generally drove urban populations back into the countryside, where food production and hence survival were more easily achievable, whilst life in the cities became more difficult. This can be seen in both the decreasing birth rates and falling wages in the cities. A chapter on labour relations follows, which attempts to assess the system of coerced labour the Japanese put in place across the areas they occupied. Railway construction – on the Thai-Burmese border, across Java and in Malaya – figured prominently. For lack of reliable data, Huff doesn't attempt to quantify the extent of the problem, although his estimates show that forced recruitment was especially strong in Java, where some 2.1 million workers (*romusha*) were conscripted, and in Burma, where a National Labour Service was applied to a large part of the population. This chapter also includes an – albeit rather brief – section on the system of sex slaves kept by the Japanese Army, which referred to them as “comfort women”.

Chapter 10 and the conclusion aim to provide an over-arching but mainly economic interpretation of the war. Japan's economic power, the author asserts here, did not match that of the United States, and the longer the war dragged on, the more apparent this mismatch became. The pressure on production and transport inflicted by the war further aggravated the economic difficulties instead of resolving them and eventually rendered all the Japanese war efforts futile. On the other hand, the legacies that the Japanese left behind were tremendous and influenced the fate of the Southeast Asian nations long after the war had ended. They affected the path of industrialisation (import

substitution instead of manufacture for export), state interventionism (especially in Burma) and also the return to relatively high exchange rates, which hampered the national development of the countries of Southeast Asia after the war.

Huff's analysis of the economic data is both exhaustive and impressive, and his book will serve as a reference work in the years to come. This is the true value of the book. It must be said, however, that the social and cultural (let alone religious) attitudes and developments that affected the people of Southeast Asia during the war are treated rather summarily or are ignored altogether. "Society under Japanese Occupation", as the book's subtitle proclaims, is not fully its subject, despite the chapters on living standards or hunger and famine. The short section on the comfort women, on whom a whole library of scholarly and political literature has been written, is a notable case in point to illustrate this. However, if we read the book as a depiction of the economic measures undertaken by the Japanese during the war, and their devastating effects, we have before us a densely argued, deeply analytical and well-written account of that subject.

Tilman Frasch