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Christopher Bayly, Tim Harper. *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945.* Cambridge: Bellknap Press, 2005. xxxiii + 555 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01748-1; $20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-02219-5.

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War: Prelude to Decolonization

In 1939, Britain's Asian Empire ringed the wide crescent of the Bay of Bengal, and was seen as a source of strength for the allies in the coming contest against the forces of fascism. Along the Western side of the crescent lay India, with its vast resources of manpower. Extending partway along its eastern littoral was Burma, noted for its oil and rice export. Crowning its eastern tip was the "industrial diamond" of the imperial crown: the multi-ethnic patchwork of British Malaya and the commercial entrepot of Singapore, with its "impregnable" naval base (p. 33). Yet in lightning fashion, from December 1941 to May 1942, Japan shattered British power along this "mare nostrum," and India itself was under threat.

Although by 1945, the Allies had "liberated" this imperial crescent from the Japanese, Harper, an expert on Malayan decolonization, and Bayly, one of the most eminent historians of colonial South Asia and the British Empire, effectively argue that the die was already cast for decolonization to occur. This was because the old imperial certainties of British superiority and prestige had been severely and irretrievably damaged. Therefore, despite the word "armies" in its title, the book is much more than a straight military history. It is a history of polyglot colonial societies at war and under occupation.

And what a history too! Bayly and Harper begin by impressively depicting the colonial societies of the crescent in the period immediately before the Japanese conquests. This was a region on the cusp of change. It was, superficially, the world of W. Somerset Maugham and Jean Cocteau, where British officials and the "planterocracy" ruled with smug self-confidence, and "koi-hai" types held elaborate society "do's" atop racially segregated colonies.[1] Yet, the authors demonstrate that tensions were simmering, especially among the indigenous populations, where the forces of nationalism were beginning to chip away at the imperial edifice.

These indigenous populations are the "forgotten armies" of the title, and the treatment of them is masterful. For instance, we are treated to concise pen-picture analyses of, among other things, a Malay nationalism that was beginning to define itself ethnically by asking the question "Who are the Malays?"; the often frosty relations between the ethnic Burmese and the Indian expatriates who had settled in Tenasserim and Rangoon under

the aegis of the British; and politics in India, where nationalist politicians were angered when the Viceroy committed India to war on Britain's side without even bothering to go through the motions of consulting them, and where, even after the Atlantic Charter pledge proclaiming the right of all peoples to liberty, there was no sign of progress toward self-government for India (pp. 49-50; 91-96; 78-81).

The book carefully delineates how the Japanese exploited this wave of nationalist sentiment in British Southeast Asia. Their chief strategy was to pose as leaders of a pan-Asian nationalism, an "Asia for Asians," free of Western domination. Their other tactic was to sponsor armies of national liberation: Aung San's Burma Independence Army and the more famous Indian National Army, commanded from mid-1943 by the fiery Bengali nationalist "Netaji" Subhas Chandra Bose.[2]

Yet Harper and Bayly correctly contend that the success of the Japanese conquest was mainly due to British unpreparedness and mismanagement rather than Japanese propaganda. Stunned by Japanese military ability, British and Empire forces–for the majority of forces in Malaya and Burma were Indian–collapsed like a house of cards. This dealt a deathblow to the imperial prestige upon which much of their rule rested. Racial attitudes only exacerbated tensions, as British expatriates cravenly "pulled rank" in their eagerness to escape the Japanese onslaught. The memory of this would color relations between the expatriates and the "natives" in the region for years after the war.

The Japanese chased the British and Indian forces out of Burma, but then stopped. This was not due, as the authors contend, solely to the monsoon, but to the fact that the Japanese were themselves conflicted about whether to push on into India. However they knew that, for the moment, at least, the thoroughly defeated and demoralized British could do little to dislodge them.

As the authors ably detail, British India had its own problems. First, an increasingly vocal and uncooperative Indian nationalism led by Gandhi and Nehru was unwilling to soldier on for the Empire without a firm guarantee of self-government. This discontent led, in August 1942, to the Quit India disturbances.

Also, in 1942-43, there was a terrible famine in Bengal. Harper and Bayly ably detail how a devastating cyclone (hurricane), wartime dislocations, and the particularly callous attitudes of British officials conspired to bring on truly horrendous conditions in Bengal. Their descriptions of the plight of ordinary Indians are truly heart-rending. To top things off, there was also the problem of the Indian National Army (INA), a force formed from the roughly 45,000 Indian troops who had surrendered at Singapore, whose purpose was to gain India's freedom with Japanese sponsorship. Subhas Chandra Bose, an Indian nationalist who favored armed force to eject the British from India, eventually led the INA. However, this, like similar Japanese efforts among the Burmese and Malayans, soon fell victim to the brutality and abuse of their own rule. Soon, the native populations of these regions hated the Japanese even more vehemently than they did the British.

The failure of the U-Go and Ha-Go offensives in the spring of 1944 made "British Asians" aware that Japanese fortunes were dimming. Undaunted by the prospects of a British imperial return, they were now actively strategizing and preparing to throw off the imperial yoke. Here the authors illustrate both how much the experience of war had changed the region. They contend that the "Asia for Asians" slogan, and the creation of "allied armies" such as the INA and the Burma Independence Army, though only insincere propaganda devices employed by the Japanese, were nevertheless taken to heart by nationalist Asians. This, the authors argue, spelled the eventual and inevitable end of the empire east of Suez. They also ably demonstrate the head-in-the-clouds British blindness to these changes.

However, their reliance on anecdotes, however rich from a human-interest perspective limits their book, especially in comparison with earlier works such as Christopher Thorne's *The Issue of War: States, Societies, and the Far Eastern Conflict of 1941-1945* (1985), which covers the French and the Dutch empires as well. Curiously this book does not appear in their otherwise comprehensive bibliography. Also, some of their judgments strike this reviewer as dubious. Their labeling of the Allied India Command's desire to plan for the reconquest of Burma, right after they had been ejected from it, as "an admirable piece of wishful thinking" shows a signal ignorance of what a military does (p. 190). Similarly their depiction of Subhas Bose as "the greatest military hero of India's modern history" is farcical (p. 29). Perhaps the average Indian sees him as a military hero, but any objective historian would not think so.

On the whole, Bayly and Harper have provided a useful well-written history of the impact of the Second World War in British Asia and its role in decolonization. They impressively cover high policy, as well as the im-

pact of the war on common folk.

Notes

[1]. Literally, "Who's There?!" in Hindustani. Though defined as "the popular distinctive nickname of the Bengal Anglo-Indian (read English expatriates living in "the colonies" east of Suez)," it was, by the 1940s, a term of derision, leveled at those English expatriates who seemed haughty, self-centered, and imperious to fellow Britons of lower social rank, and especially to "the natives." See H. Yule and A.C. Burnel, *Hobson Jobson: a Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases* (1886; reprint, Calcutta: Rupa, 1990), p. 750.

[2]. On Aung San and the Burma Independence Army, see Louis Allen, *Burma, 1941-1945: The Longest War* (London: Dent, 1984). An assessment of the Indian National Army's combat record is Chandar S. Sundaram, "A Paper Tiger: the Indian National Army in Battle, 1944-1945", *War and Society*, 13.1 (May 1995): pp. 35-59.

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