

*War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore.* Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2012. Pp. 459. US\$35.00 paper.

*War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore* reveals how individual, communal, and state-crafted memory emerge in conflicting claims to post-colonial World War II national belonging that involve selective amnesia. The authors argue that while Malay “deathscapes” remake the past into nationalist stories of Malay warriors, Singaporean state-craft incorporates a multiracial approach in which the ethnic Chinese *sook ching* massacre victims of the Japanese occupation came to stand in for collective suffering. Blackburn and Hack provide careful explanation of prisons turned into tourist destinations, cenotaphs dedicated to soldiers killed, military cemeteries, memorials dedicated to fallen soldiers, commemorations, and monuments of battles support the argument. Martial post-war memory does the cultural work of forming a sense of nation and belonging crafted through ethnic communal lens. This book will be of most interest for those studying post-war memory in Southeast Asia, as well as comparative accounts of Japanese occupation.

The Malay Peninsula was a British colony with complex communal ethnic conflicts. British-imported Indian and Chinese labour for the rubber and mineral industries economically displaced Malays from their resources. However, British imperialism figures lightly in the book. In the book, the Japanese invasion and occupation (1941-1945) are dominant post-war memories. Because the Japanese war strategy was one of rapid conquest and development in their territories, the peoples living in the Malay Peninsula suffered enormously from Japanese repression, mass violence, and displacement in work camps to places like New Guinea and the Burma-Thailand Railway. The authors demonstrate how numerous nationalist tensions emerged between Malay nationalists (both pro-capitalist and communist), Indian nationalists, Eurasians and British colonialists, and a fractured Chinese community (between capitalist and communist revolutionaries). After WWII, while countries like Indonesia were able to wrestle away from Dutch rule, the Malays returned to British rule with a promise of eventual independence in 1957. After a series of communal race riots between Malays and the Chinese in 1945-1946 and again in the 1960s, the peninsula split between Muslim-Malay rule of Malaysia and Sino-Malay establishment of Singapore.

These ethnic communal tensions, accompanied by Cold War contexts of anti-colonial nation-building and the minority status of Europeans and Indians in the peninsula contributed to a series of different episodes of forgetting and remembering. For example, the Chinese Malayan Communist Party soldiers had a memorial unveiled on 1 September 1946 to commemorate the lives lost due to a Japanese ambush precisely four years earlier. But with changing geopolitics, these communists shifted from hero-martyrs to villains. The Malayan communists were plotting against the return of British rule, then against the Malay state. The public was denied access to commemorations and the memorial was put in storage. As communist insurgents, they were configured in public memory as undeserving of public memorials until 2003 when insurgency was no longer at issue [112,120, 278-279]. Another clear example would include how the

suffering of Europeans is the subject of ‘Changi Prison tourism’ and championed by the Singapore Tourism Board [79-94]; but although imprisoned Indians had communal commemorations, they have no public site of memory in either country [180, 205-206]. These are the origins of literal nation-making that take place alongside the very different national memory projects of war-time suffering and heroism.

One of the challenges of studying memory is that over time, historical complexities and conflicts bring about many moving parts. But Blackburn and Hack manage the multiple conflicting narratives by layering individual accounts, communal commemoration, and nation-state projects. While the non-regional expert may be overwhelmed by the details in the first two sections, the “Nations and States” section is a fascinating account of how divergent Malaysian and Singaporean state-craft can be. By the 1970s-1980s each country’s restructured economy became intertwined with Japanese investments and the demand for Japan to recognize and pay for its war crimes became more vexed and complicated. Confronted by similar diplomatic pressures to maintain Japanese economic investments each treated Japan’s refusal to offer direct apologies for war-time atrocities and rape very differently—wilful amnesia in Malaysia, selective remembering in Singapore. In Malaysia, the government’s marginalization of war-time suffering is suggested through Premier Mahathir’s ‘Look East Policy’. The highlights of this policy included the unencumbered welcoming of Japanese direct investments in the Malay auto-industry, the 1980s exhuming of mass graves for development projects (rather than claims for restitution or recognition), and the Premier’s appeal for Japan to stop apologizing [258-260]. In contrast, the Singaporean state has promoted closely regimented massacre re-enactments, textbook projects, and state-sponsored commercial films, education, and war-tourism projects directed both at domestic and European and Australian tourism. Of note, the over-enthusiasm of lay actors’ first re-enactment of Japanese war-time cruelties resulted in the traumatization of the entire group (most of whom were school children), physical injuries from being chased by the actors, and the hospitalization of several from the audience [305].

The book argues that both countries have marginalized the deaths and survivors of minor ethnic groups by focusing on the most politically and economically powerful groups. For example, the following groups have been marginalized from state sponsored projects: the Burma-Thailand railway conscripts, of which 182,000 Asians and Eurasians (mostly Indian rubber tappers transplanted from the Malay peninsula) [199], tens of thousands of Indians sent to New Guinea in forced labour camps (of which 51% died due to harsh conditions and disease) [203], the losses of the communist Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army (the MPAJA were mostly Chinese), and European heroes and victims of the Japanese occupation in Malaysia. These omissions from dominant forms of post-war memory are unsurprising. Outsiders to the region can imagine the difficulty the authors’ face in providing an all-encompassing account that avoids reproducing dominant hegemonic state narratives. Scholars of war trauma have pointed to the importance of perspectives of perpetrators, gender analysis, and ethnic/racial minority identities in understanding strategic amnesia. And the book would benefit by including more discussion of

Japanese, women's, and Indian minority memories to examine the role of social amnesia and how it operates in nation-building projects. War-time memory of soldiers and "freedom fighters" are figures of sacrifice, martyrdom, and heroism are incorporated into Malay nation-building projects. In contrast, Singapore co-opts suffering as a unifying force [340-341]. To kill for independence from the Japanese is an honor for the sake of the post-colonial nation, but to die in work camps or massacres requires a restorative justice that leaves room to question the ambivalence of collaboration with the Japanese occupation or British colonialism. One of the most important accomplishments of the book is that it leads to scholars toward new directions in social forgetting by focusing on what is not included in state commemorations and memorial projects.

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