H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Indians in War and Revolution in the Asia-Pacific Region. International Research and Documentation Center War Crimes Trials (ICWC), University of Marburg; in collaboration with the Australian National University (ANU), 20.02.2017–21.02.2017.

Reviewed by Takuma Melber

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (September, 2017)

In the turbulent years after 1941-42, when the Japanese imperial forces rapidly conquered much of Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific, Indians in the region had an unusually large number of roles. They were combatants, deserters, prisoners, labourers, rebels, and prison guards and, after the war, occupation troops, journalists and diplomats, as well as judges, investigators, informants, witnesses, lawyers, and victims in war crimes trials. On 20 and 21 February 2017, historians from Germany, Australia and India met at the Australian National University to discuss the role and experience of Indians in the vast Asia-Pacific region east of India during the Second World War and its aftermath. The workshop was organized and sponsored by the International Research and Documentation Center War Crimes Trials (ICWC), University of Marburg with financial support from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) in collaboration with the Australian National University (ANU). Lead centres were Marburg's ICWC and ANU's Southeast Asia Institute. Co-conveners of the workshop were Wolfgang Form (ICWC) and Robert Cribb (ANU), with support from Kerstin von Lingen (Heidelberg University) and Sandra Wilson (Murdoch University). The workshop opened a new phase of collaboration among the ICWC, the Cluster of Excellence Asia and Europe in a Global Context (Heidelberg University) and researchers funded by the Australian Research Council from ANU, Murdoch University and Curtin University.

After introductory remarks on "Indians in War and Revolution in the Asia-Pacific Region", given by WOLFGANG FORM (Marburg) and ROBERT CRIBB (ANU), the workshop started with the panel "Indians in Southeast Asia in Time of War". SANDRA WILSON (Perth) focused in her presentation on Indian soldiers who became prisoners of war (POWs) of the Japanese military. She illustrated how the treatment of Indian soldiers as POWs put Japan´s propaganda slogan "Asia for Asians" to the test. The Japanese authorities made a clear distinction in the treatment of European/US-American and Asian POWs: While "white" POWs automatically became forced labourers of the Japanese empire, Asian POWs – according to the Japanese propaganda – should be liberated. However, the Indians were an exception among the Asian POWs for the simple reason that they could not be repatriated to local communities or easily assimilated to the Japanese empire. So many former Indian soldiers had to suffer as forced labourers under Japanese rule or joined auxiliary troops of the Japanese Army later. TAKUMA MELBER (Heidelberg) showed the ambivalent role of Indian soldiers in Japanese-occupied Malaya and Singapore: With the special effort of the Japanese intelligence unit Fujiwara Kikan, the Indian National Army (INA) was

formed immediately after Singapore fortress fell on 15 February 1942. While thousands of Indian soldiers kept faith with the British Empire and became POWs, thousands upon thousands joined the INA – in the main for pragmatic reasons. Melber presented their story in his talk. However, it became very clear that Indian collaboration with and resistance against the Japanese in the occupied Southeast Asian territories remain until today comparatively under-researched subjects.

In the more recent past several studies were published about Burma as a battlefield and theatre of war operations (the Japanese capture and then the British re-capture of Burma, Battle of Imphal etc.) as well as the Japanese occupation period of Burma. However, HELEN JAMES (ANU) drew the attention to a largely unknown topic in her aim to address a research gap. For a very long time after the bombing of Rangoon at the end of December 1941, little was known in the West about the fate of Burma´s Indian minority. In her vivid presentation, James gave an introduction to "the Dunkirk of the East", when in spring 1942 thousands of Indian civilians fled over mountainous territory into India, when the Japanese troops arrived in this region. Further research on this rarely told story of Indian refugees in the Second World War looks very promising in view of the fact that clear parallels can be drawn to our times and the political debates on the refugee crisis in Europe.

MILINDA BANERJEE (Munich) focused on three Indian characters during the 1940s: Girja Shankar Bajpai, Agent General for India in Washington DC, Radhabinod Pal, the Indian judge at the Tokyo Trial, and Gopal Haldar, a leading Communist intellectual. Banerjee underlined how the three actors grappled with the manifold paradoxes of Indian victimhood and agency, whereby Indians were both nodes in various imperial political, economic, and military projects across Southeast Asia, as well as (sometimes) champions of anticolonial politics. Bajpai used Indian military role as well as victimhood in the Asia-Pacific to argue for a more pro-active international role for the Indian state, thereby territorializing an (historically, transregionally-framed) 'Indian' identity. Pal grappled with Japanese atrocities against Asians, including Indians, as well as with the rising tide of Southeast Asian nationalisms, especially in Dutch Indonesia and French Indochina, by producing new ideas of anti-colonial justice and sovereignty. Haldar's Bengali novels dealt with Indian refugees from Burma to construct Communist-inflected ideals of resistance to all forms of imperialism (European or Japanese), in which human beings across ethnic borders (in this case, Indian or Burmese) would converge to forge internationalist solidarities based on novel ideas of 'humanity'.

The second panel, comprising HEATHER GOODALL (University of Technology Sydney) and LISETTE SCHOUTEN (Heidelberg), focused on Indians in Indonesia in the 1940s. Goodall foregrounded the ways in which Indian actors (from journalists and political activists to soldiers and labourers) felt attracted to anti-Dutch Indonesian nationalist militancy, and demonstrated the intersections between anti-colonial activism in South and South-East Asia. In the main Goodall presented the so-called post-war situation in Indonesia (in reality, the war situation was not over) from the perspective of P.R.S. Mani, who served as a war correspondent in the Southeast Asian region. Because of his own socialist background, Mani, who was a follower of Nehru´s independence movement, understood fascism as well as the Empire of Japan as ideological enemies. As expressed in the discussion in the plenum, Goodall gave the impression that Mani may have tendentiously interpreted the situation on the spot in Indonesia, motivated by his dream to unify the Indian and the Indonesian struggles for independence.

Schouten focused on the complex questions of loyalty felt by Indian troops in Java and Sumatra, as imperial-military structures of allegiance, anti-

colonial aspirations, and anxieties about Partition interacted to create complex political-mental landscapes for these actors. Schouten underlined especially the heterogeneity of the Indian community: The Indian "deserters", in reality not volunteer deserters, but captured by the Indonesians and now detained in camps, were a very diverse group in religious and political terms. In consequence, the interpretation of "Free India" or "Free Asia" differed greatly even inside this group. In the third panel, WOLFGANG FORM (Marburg) offered a combination of empirical-statistical groundwork and exemplary case studies to highlight the (now largely-forgotten) cases of Indian victims of Japanese atrocities across the Asia-Pacific. Thereby Form showed the clear difference between 1918 and 1945: The decision to build the United Nations Commission for the Investigation of War Crimes was taken in October 1943, many months before the end of the Second World War – in stark contrast to the First World War and as one result of a learning process after 1918. Thereby India became from the beginning part of the international war crime trial movement. Form pointed to Indian persons like Samuel Ranganathan (last High Commissioner of India, 1943-1947). According to Form, 147 war crime trials are known with Indians as victims, judged in the main in Singapore (43 cases). However, Form urged for much more detailed research to be done on Indians in war crime trials, a subject which appears as a real desideratum.

Form´s talk led into the fourth panel which dealt with India´s role in the legal judgement of war atrocities in the post-war period: NARRELLE MORRIS (Curtin) and ROBERT CRIBB (Canberra) showed how specific war crimes trials aimed at punishing the Japanese actors who had committed atrocities against Indians. Morris focused on Australian cases in Rabaul. Japanese general Imamura Hitoshi was the most important defendant in the local war crime trials – a highly controversial figure of the Japanese Army who came in conflict with Japanese authorities during the war because of his allegedly indulgent occupation policy. However, the Australian military court sentenced him to ten years' imprisonment for having lost the control over his troops, who committed a number of war atrocities in the region. Cribb turned to a specific case: In Rangoon the British brought Kempeitai officer Yamawaki Hifumi to court for the torture of three Indians. Even if these three Indians were former soldiers of the Indian National Army, which meant "military collaborators of the Japanese", they were treated as British in this trial for six days. Interestingly enough, no actor of this specific war crime trial tried to exploit the trial to influence the political attitude of the western colonial powers, in this case the British. In the end, the court sentenced Yamawaki to death, but the sentence was commuted when the reviewing officer drew attention to the unreliability of some of the evidence used. Both Morris and Cribb showed how racial tropes and colonial frameworks interacted with sincere imperatives for justice in structuring these trials.

The concluding roundtable returned to some of the larger methodological questions which a study of the 'Indian' role in the Asia-Pacific during the Second World War would provoke. The participants included several observers from various Australian universities. They discussed questions about identity, including definitions of selfhood and territoriality involved in defining 'Indian'-ness in plural and fragmented ways in the Asia-Pacific; about the intersecting roles of race/ethnicity, class, and gender involved in configuring atrocities and victimhood, trials, and anti-colonial politics; about dialectical relations between colonial and anti-/post-colonial imperatives in building the associated military-political, juridical, cultural, and economic landscapes. While the participants in the roundtable, and more broadly in the conference, often differed from each other in terms of methodology and argumentative position, they largely agreed that the conference had served a very important role in using the empirical and conceptual focus on 'Indians' in the Asia-

Pacific to raise broader questions, with the potential to reshape discussions on transregional, transnational, and global history of the region in the 1940s and beyond.

The discussion focussed especially on the conflicted loyalties of and difficult pragmatic choices faced by Indians in the region, whether as soldiers or as civilian residents, as the strategic and political situation changed dramatically. It also addressed the ambivalent attitudes of Japanese authorities, indigenous residents, and Allied commands towards Indians.

The wartime and post-war experiences of Indians – whose own identity was being shaped by the tangled processes of decolonization and partition in British India – highlight the complexity and dynamic nature of the Second World War in the Asia-Pacific region and of the conflicts that succeeded it. Focussing on the contradictions between transitional justice and decolonization, the workshop identified new possibilities for innovative collaboration in research on the specific roles of Indians in this period, especially as judges and victims of war crimes and as nationalist activists.

Conference Overview:

Opening: WOLFGANG FORM (ICWC/Marburg)

Panel 1: Indians in Southeast Asia in Time of War:

SANDRA WILSON (Murdoch University): "Indian Prisoners of the Japanese Military"
TAKUMA MELBER (Heidelberg University): “The ‘Indian role’ in the Fall of Singapore and the Japanese occupation of the Malay Peninsula"
HELEN JAMES (ANU), "Indians and the trek out of Burma” (TBC)
MILINDA BANERJEE (LMU Munich): “South-East Asian Nationalisms, Japanese Colonialism, and the Ambiguities of Indian Victimhood: Three Indian Representations”

Panel 2: Tangled allegiances
Chair: KERSTIN VON LINGEN (Heidelberg University)

HEATHER GOODALL (University of Technology Sidney), “Deserters, Heroes and Martyrs: the changing representations of Indian troops who chose to fight alongside Indonesian nationalists”
LISETTE SCHOUTEN (Heidelberg University): “Shifting loyalties? Desertion among British and Indian troops on Java and Sumatra, 1945-1949”

Panel 3: The persecutors on trial I

WOLFGANG FORM (ICWC, Marburg University): “Indians as victims within the Allied war crimes trials program after WWII – Asia-Pacific-Region”

Panel 4: The persecutors on trial II
CHAIR: SANDRA WILSON (Murdoch University)

NARRELLE MORRIS (Curtin): "Indians in Australian cases in Rabaul (Papua New Guinea)"
ROBERT CRIBB (ANU): "Out of the mouth of death: the trial of Yamawaki Hifumi"

Round table discussion

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/

Citation: Takuma Melber. Review of *Indians in War and Revolution in the Asia-Pacific Region.* H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. September, 2017.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=50517