

BOOK REVIEW

Revisiting the Death Railway, The Survivors' Accounts, by Sasidaran Sellappah. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2019, 148 pp.

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INTRODUCTION

Sasidaran Sellappah, although not trained as a professional historian, must be commended for his enthusiasm and commitment to research and publication of this study entitled *Revisiting the Death Railway: The Survivors' Account*. The book restores to life a virtually forgotten, grim and horrendous saga of human suffering that a huge number of lower-class Malaysians were subjected to eight decades ago. The main thrust of the book is to highlight the brutal human anguish and deaths endured under the hands of the ruthless and sadistic Imperial Japanese Army, both by the Asian workers, nearly half of whom were Malaysians, as well as the Australian, British, Dutch and American prisoners of war (PoWs), who suffered daily during the construction of Japan's strategic Burma-Siam Railway notoriously known as the "Death Railway".

In the absence of reliable primary sources, Sasidaran has through the methodology of oral history unmasked and written a captivating but highly disturbing and depressing account of the sufferings that the Death Railway inflicted on its workforce. While the defeated Japanese army had destroyed primary materials in their possession, the predominantly illiterate working-class Malayan recruits, unlike their Western PoWs counterparts, neither maintained diaries nor kept coherent records of their daily drudgery.

The book has an incisive “Foreword” by the University of Malaya historian Associate Professor Dr. Sivachandralingam Sundara Raja, emphasising the author’s invaluable contribution to Malaysian historiography as well as to “the wider corpus of World War II historical literature” (p. xiii). Dr. Sivachandralingam also foresees that the accounts teased out and reconstructed from the survivors’ stories may evoke a sense of historical empathy with readers and hopefully inspire a greater use of oral history as a methodology amongst the country’s practitioners of academic history. As Dr. Sivachandralingam points out, Sasidaran’s study revives the endless silence of the little-known chronology of dreadful events and sufferings previous generations of Malaysians had undergone. The study thus ends a long and bottomless silence in Malaysian historiography on the dark episode and more importantly, counter-balances the upsurge of Eurocentric historiography in challenging the idea of Death Railway as a tragedy predominantly endured by the Western PoWs.

Amalgamating oral history with available primary sources and a range of secondary publications, Sasidaran has unearthed and teased out the salient day to day happenings at the various railway construction camp sites. In the course of doing so, he reconstructs the sequence of events and provides a plausible historical shape to this dreadful story. The meticulously researched narrative has provided readers with a gripping description of the cruel, harsh and sub-human lives endured by the Asian workers during the three years that the Japanese took to complete the Death Railway. The study then goes on to highlight the wretched and inhuman stories of physical brutality and the dire living conditions as well as the psychological and mental torture committed by the Japanese Imperial army. The vicious physical and mental treatment was worsened by the abominable dietary and health provisions, and further aggravated by malnutrition, deadly and debilitating diseases such as malaria, dysentery, typhoid and beriberi as well as snake bites. The narrative goes on to highlight the surviving returnees’ experiences: the atrocities, the inhumane ordeals and the feeling of rootlessness they had to endure and live with for years to come.

The study is well annotated with an appendix, figures and tables and list of plates. The appendix details the memorials, museums and cemeteries that have been built after the war, as well as the bronze plaques and the names of the individuals buried in the cemetery. These serves to honour, remember and annually commemorate the Australian, British and Dutch PoWs and the Indian army personnel who had succumbed to the brutal treatment of the Japanese during the construction of the railway. The figures and tables highlight and detail the routes the invading Japanese Imperial Army took as they invaded Malaya, the track of the Death Railway and the major railway construction

worksite camps. The tables give the reader an overall picture of the estimated number of PoWs and Asians (including Malaysians) involved in the railway construction, the numbers that perished, the survivors and the returnees. Finally, the study has included an excellent reproduction of a selection of photos, list of plates and a helpful bibliography, mainly of published books and articles. Many of the photos attached to the study highlight graphically the bleak experiences of the victims, reinforcing the gruesome aspects of the narrative that Sasidaran has been able to tease out through his in-depth oral interviews.

THE CENTREPIECE OF THE NARRATIVE

The centrepiece of Sasidaran's narrative is the prominence he gives to the "implosion" of human life. Through the methodology of oral history, the author has put into the public domain the horrendously cruel tragedy as well as the tremendous costs in deaths and the dreadful disappearances of a huge number of Malaysians in Japan's pursuit of its imperial ambition through territorial conquest and expansion. The human tragedy that was expended in Japan's imperial quest, Sasidaran points out, was huge: "more than 100,000 Asian labourers and an estimated 18,000 PoWs lost their lives during its construction", while another "tens of thousands of others were injured and scarred for life" (p. xvii).

The study goes on to highlight the forced recruitment, the miserable and unbearable lives as well as the huge number of deaths at the brutal hands of the Japanese. The author points out that in some cases "entire families perished, leaving no trace, while others lost loved ones" (p. 29).

THE EMERGENCE OF JAPANESE IMPERIALISM

To comprehend the reasons that led Japan to the construction of the Death Railway, the historian needs to invoke, conceptualise and interpret the broader interlinked historical constellations that were played out in the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries by the great European imperial powers including capitalist America's emerging economic imperialism. The 19th century dominance of Euro-American imperialism was followed by the economic exploitation of the weaker Asian nations. Japan under the rule of the relatively weak feudal Tokugawa Shogunate (1600–1868) also fell victim to this imperial exploitation through highly unequal treaties followed by very contestable asymmetrical concessions she had to abide by.

With the ascendancy of the Meiji Era (1868–1912) and the collapse of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Japan ended her isolationist policy. The immediate and worrying concern of the new bourgeois leadership of Meiji Japan was the country's prevailing vulnerability to invasion by the aggressive Western powers and its subjugation to them, like her Asian compatriots, viz. India, Ceylon, Burma, Malaya and Indonesia. Neighbouring China, after her defeat at the hands of Britain in the First Opium War of 1842, was forced to surrender Hong Kong as well as agree to extraterritorial rights that allowed the imposition and administration of British law by its officials on Chinese soil (Gordon 2019).

In order to forestall the forfeiture of its national sovereignty via humiliating “unequal treaties” to Western imperial powers, Japan embarked on a policy of rapid national transformation: from a feudalistic military structure to a modern industrial nation state. Simultaneously, Japan centralised, prioritised and modernised its army and navy into a naval and land imperial power. Further, Japan modernised and industrialised its economy along European lines, to be in consonance with the Meiji leadership's imperial ambition, mainly to carve out for herself a European-style empire. Japan's rapid and intensive modernisation strategy was based upon Euro-American technology and ideas, so as to be at par with Western powers (Gordon 2019).

Japan's strategy was then to territorially expand into resource rich Southeast Asian nations, drive out the white man and declare a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere. Japan considered British Malaya and Dutch Sumatra as “the nuclear zone of the Empire's plans for the Southern area” and saw the Malay Peninsula as “the economic and communication axis for the entire Southern area” (Kratoska 2018, 3).

FALL OF THE “INVINCIBLE” BRITISH IMPERIAL POWER AND THE BRUTAL JAPANESE RULE

Japan's imperial ambitions brought an end to Britain's colonial order in Malaya. The 70-day campaign (from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942) by the invading Imperial Japanese 25th Army was a momentous phase in the history of British Malaya, then a priceless colony of an empire on which “the sun never set.” The British army was convincingly decimated and routed by the land-based invading Japanese army.

I, then a seven-year-old primary school student, was an eyewitness to this shocking and unbelievable implosion of British imperial rule, whose myth of

invincibility was shattered in no time. The Japanese Imperial Army's draconian administration sent through the country an instant reign of terror and fear. Life for most ordinary Malaysians became insecure and unpredictable. Japanese brutality was exemplified in the vicious and cruel torture tactics employed with impunity by its Kempeitai (military police) and local collaborators for reasons ranging from fear to personal gain. Suspected "undesirable" elements, communists, pro-British and anti-Japanese individuals bore the brunt of Japanese aggression. The Kempeitai played a key role in the operation of death squads and was involved in the systematic abduction, torture and killing of suspected enemies. Disappearances and summary executions of suspected enemies of the regime were the order of the day; with heads of executed Malaysians displayed in prominent town squares. Many of the experiences, occurring at a time of economic downturn and incalculable suffering, are detailed in Chapter Six of Sasidaran's book entitled *Life in Malaya under Japanese Rule*.

The recruitment of thousands of Asian workers including from Malaya to be enslaved in the construction of the 415-kilometre-long Burma-Siam Railway is an under-told historical narrative. As outlined in Sasidaran's study, Malaya was to become the largest supplier of labour for the railway's construction. The railway was to be the vital bridgehead in Japan's long-term imperial ambition and military campaign to capture and colonise Imperial Britain's "Jewel in the Crown" i.e., India. Apart from workers from Malaya, the Japanese also recruited large numbers of workers from China, Burma, Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia. The total estimated Asian workforce was in the range of 200,000. The Japanese, as Sasidaran points out, from as early as June 1942 began to dispatch their PoWs at regular intervals in batches from Singapore and Indonesia respectively to undertake the Death Railway construction.

The lion's share of the workers sent from Malaya from September 1942 to October 1944 to the railway construction sites were Tamils with fewer Telegus and Malayalees as well as an estimated 20,000 Malays and a few Chinese. Most of the Tamils, Telegus and Malayalees were predominantly from either the dislocated European-owned and managed rubber plantations or the abandoned colonial state's public sector services, while the Malays were from the villages and the Chinese were of working-class origin. For the aspiring Japanese imperial power, the recruitment of labour through coercion and force was nothing new. This Japanese practice far predates the construction of the Death Railway. From the 1850s, in the early phase of their modernisation process and then during their imperial expansion from the 1910s onwards into Korea and parts of China, Japan extensively recruited and used Korean and Chinese forced labour. Koreans and the Chinese were made to labour under harsh working conditions

in Japanese coal mines and shipyards for Japan's rapid and deep-seated transformation from a feudal to a successful modern economy.

The initial recruitment of Malayan workers by the Japanese was voluntary. Tamils were enticed to volunteer as they were indoctrinated and convinced by the most vocal anti-British Indian Associations, both in Malaya and Singapore, that the Siam-Burma Railway was going to be a vital bridgehead to free India, their motherland, from the yoke of British imperialism. In addition, a promise was made of high wages as well as better working and living conditions. These were the initial attraction for the rapidly increasing army of unemployed Malaysians suffering from the devastation of the country's economy. For many of them, it was a life-or-death decision in a situation of despair and uncertainty. Nonetheless, seeing that Malayan workers were not volunteering, the Japanese Imperial Administration resorted to the use of both coercion and brutal power to attain the desired numbers. As additional labour was in critical need to replenish the rapid and high attrition rate of workers at the construction sites. As Sasidaran points out, "the daily death toll and other casualties (sick and wounded) increased to high levels" (p. 19). Thus, the enormity as well as the urgency to complete the railway and constant need "to repair the extensive damage to the railway caused by the aerial assaults by Allied bombers" (p. 19) demanded more and more labour. Between the period of June 1942 and August 1945, the Japanese, through a combination of volunteering, coercion and force, mobilised thousands of Malaysians and transported them to labour camps to construct the Death Railway in record time.

On arrival, the recruits as well as PoWs were regarded as virtual slave labour to be used to the limit of their human endurance. Due to the harsh environmental conditions, arduous physical work, humiliating and traumatic working conditions, the brutal treatment and summary executions in the 70 odd camps and worksites, the poor diet and living conditions combined with the daily onslaught of rampant diseases such as malaria, typhoid, dysentery and malnutrition combined with the emotional stress in captivity, thousands of Malayan workers perished.

The story of this enormous Malayan sacrifice ended with the initial defeat of the Japanese Army at the Battle of Kohima-Imphal in July 1944, to be followed by their surrender in 1945 as a result of the barbarous atomic weapon bombs dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nearly seven decades later, few Malaysians seem to remember or to show any concern for the human tragedy. To a large extent this narrative has lacked a concise and detailed overview. Instead, this huge human tragedy and the tribulations experienced by the workers has been treated as a peripheral incident, thus glossed over and literally "forgotten" or in a few

instances given a patronising token mention in the mainstream Western-centric historiography and in some hodgepodge journalistic narratives.

On the contrary, in the West, the arduous physical and mental humiliation, dietary and health sufferings and the 18,000 deaths of PoWs have been well-researched, documented and unfolded in the partisan structures of Eurocentric historiography. So have the stories of Japanese cruelty, unjust brutality and killings. The poignant narratives are popularised worldwide through the abundant use of archival documents, diaries and records kept by the PoWs as well as eyewitness testimony and oral history and through copious academic and journalistic publications (Trouillot 1995).

Malaysia's Neglected Historiography

In Chapter 8, "The Forgotten Men of History," Sasidaran laments the fact that though the Death Railway was built on the back of the enslaved Asian workers, the huge human sacrifice rendered by them has been overlooked. During the construction of the Death Railway, Malayan workers had lost their lives in the thousands. Their "remains were dumped into mass graves or thrown into the river" (p. 114) while many were laid to rest "in shallow pits along the railway line from Kanchanaburi to Thanbyuzayat and from Chumphon to Kra Buri, in dense undergrowth. There are no longer any records of their part in the building of the railway, not any tangible memorial to remember" (p. 109). Thus, the author points out that: "Sadly, there is no reference to the thousands of Asian workers (other than Thai) who gave their lives for the railway." (p. 114). While their Western counterparts, though much smaller in numbers, have been duly recognised and commemorated with memorials, museums and cemeteries. Sasidaran does raise a very pertinent question. Perhaps "they were regarded as expendable commodities" (p. 114). There have been persistent calls from concerned Malaysians including by the NGO "Death Railway Interest Group" formed in 2016 for a single dedicated memorial to be built in their memory. The main objective according to the author is "to generate public interest and ensure their legacy survives time and future generations" (p. 10).

THE MIRAGE OF REPARATION

The irreparable grief and loss of lives suffered by an innumerable number of Malayan workers through this inherently immoral or illegitimate brutality has rightly spurred the survivors and their descendants to call out for justice as well as demand reparations from the Japanese government. Their calls have until today

gone overlooked. Japan has paid reparation to Korea to atone for the wrongs done. As early as 1958, the Death Railway Association was mooted by a group of Malay survivors with an objective to seek compensation for the suffering and loss of lives. The attempts by the Association ended in an impasse. In 1992 the movement was reconstituted as the Former Forced Labour and Heritage to Burma 1942–1946 (Persatuan Bekas dan Warisan Buruh Paksa ke Burma 1942–1946). The call to the Japanese government to make amends for the irrevocable pain caused to the thousands of innocent Malaysians and to pay a fair amount of reparation has been contentious and unsolved issue for the past 70 years. Interestingly, the author points out that in 2013 a Japanese official in the Japanese Embassy in Kuala Lumpur stressed “that apart from two ships donated to the Malaysian Government in 1967 (which was to compensate for Japan’s intrusion into Malaya) he was not aware of any compensation paid to Malaysia for the victims. He also could not confirm if there were records of labourers conscripted by the Japanese for railway construction in Thailand and Burma” (p. 9).

CONCLUSION

This study has brought to the forefront and cast light on the calamity inflicted through violence, looting, massacres, bloodshed and deaths and the massive psychological damage as well as the huge disruptions in the lives of thousands of ordinary Malaysians by the Japanese Imperial Army’s invasion and brutal rule. Sasidaran’s oral history though constrained by his lack of academic rigour has, in a limited sense, placed within Malaysian historiography the long-forgotten human costs extracted from ordinary Malaysians by Japanese wartime imperialism. This critical historical epic of human involvement in untold drudgery, despair and death, has remained relatively dormant in Malaysian history.

Japan’s Death Railway and the brutality that was meted out to thousands upon thousands of enslaved Malayan workers during its construction had then triggered issues of human rights and restitution from the Japanese. However, over the years it seems to have petered out. Therefore, this timely, insightful and meticulous study of one of the darkest eras of Malayan history largely based on oral sources, is very much welcome. This was achieved through Sasidaran’s passion, his unyielding and meticulous efforts in tracking down the surviving returnees of the Death Railway and in cases where survivor had died, through their descendant or descendants. With the administration of a series of in-depth interviews combined with a few available corroborative unpublished primary sources and a long list of published secondary sources, Sasidaran has recreated a very informative and readable historical narrative of the brutality of the Japanese Imperial Army and

Malaya's human cost. The study, apart from portraying and articulating the gruesome and emotional events of the Japanese Imperial Army's occupation, stresses and illustrates the virtue of constructing the country's historiography during the period through the dreadful experiences of the disparaged, the marginalised, the exploited, the incarcerated and those who suffered execution.

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