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1st MBRAS Lecture 2018

The Japanese Occupation: Piecing Together What Happened

by Dr Paul H. Kratoska

Badan Warisan Malaysia,
Jalan Stonor, Ampang,
Kuala Lumpur
Saturday, 30 June 2018, 5 p.m.

Abstract

Many accounts of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya describe savage repression and hardship, but people still had to earn a living, and everyday life carried on through the war years. Japan promised a new East Asian order, but for most people the occupation settled into a dreary routine that resembled life before the war, although with shortages of food and medicine and cotton cloth, rising prices, malnutrition, illness, and a disturbing uncertainty about the future.

Many records of the war years have been lost and the administrative papers, newspapers, and intelligence reports that survive often provide only scraps of information, but combined with personal memoirs and oral history accounts, the documents produce a picture of life in occupied Malaya.

Paul Kratoska is Publishing Director for NUS Press and editor of the *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. He taught history at Universiti Sains Malaysia and the National University of Singapore for nearly 30 years before moving into publishing. He has published articles and books on the Japanese Occupation in Southeast Asia, the history of rice cultivation in Malaya, school textbooks and academic publishing. His book *The Japanese Occupation of Malaya and Singapore, 1941–45: A Social and Economic History* (C. Hurst, University of Hawaii Press, and Allen & Unwin, 1998), was recently re-issued in a new edition by NUS Press at the National University of Singapore.

The Lecture

Dr Kratoska's lecture on the Japanese occupation took off at 5.15 p.m., after a few words of introduction by MBRAS President Tengku Mohd. Fauzi Tengku Abdul Hamid. Dr Kratoska began on a note of reminiscence, describing the early circumstances that triggered his interest in the occupation period in Malaya when undertaking research for his doctoral degree in the early 1970s. He noted that in the following 25 years after 1970, various files on the occupation began trickling into the National Archives of Malaysia which made it possible to look at various aspects of this critical period in Malaysian modern history. Having published a ground-breaking book on the socio-economic aspects of the Japanese occupation in 1998 — this is now available in a fresh edition incorporating additional material — Dr Kratoska provided a revealing insight into the occupation, relying on voluminous material such as files on military activity and intelligence reports which he had accumulated in the course of his work over many years.

Through a judicious selection of topics, Dr Kratoska demonstrated the various changes and adjustments which took place during the occupation, for example the banning of Western music such as jazz and the limited imposition of Japanese language on the public, employing images from propaganda material disseminated by the Japanese. The section on the wartime economy of Malaya was remarkably informative. The state of war meant the disruption of trade leading to scarcity of goods. Under such conditions, people were compelled to stretch their ingenuity to find alternatives to essential items like soap, where the local substitute was manufactured from the ash of burnt coconut shell, lime and palm oil. Also highlighted during the lecture was the Japanese plans for population resettlement aimed at certain ethnic groups with the opening of new settlements such as New Syonan in Endau and Fuji Village in Bahau.

The consequences of war were also touched upon in the final notes of the lecture. Dr Kratoska points out that the occupation, more than anything else, taught Malaysians an important lesson in self-sufficiency amidst fear, poverty, loss of purpose and moral deterioration.

There followed after the lecture a lively question-and-answer session in which myriad questions were put to Dr Kratoska on issues as diverse as the identity of local collaborators and informers, prevalence of venereal diseases, the state of food supply, the reception of propaganda broadcast by the Allies and the \$50 million forced donation by the Chinese community to Japan. Few of the questions, however, dealt with the occupation as a critical juncture in the modern history of the nation and one which would have spurred future developments in national history. Instead questions revolved around repetitive and trivial themes, and sought specific, if not technical, information on a particular aspect of the occupation most of which have been addressed by scholars elsewhere. It may be pertinent to note that there was not a single individual in the audience who had actually lived through and experienced the horrors of the occupation first hand. Interest in the period had endured, thanks to colourful myths and anecdotes of dubious provenance, as reflected by the questions posed to the speaker on that evening. Although proceedings ended formally at 6.30 or thereabouts, Dr Kratoska gracefully agreed to take questions during the informal book-signing session that followed. With the venue at Badan Warisan filled to capacity on that evening, it appeared that the Japanese occupation remains a fascinating topic to the public and one that made the first MBRAS lecture for 2018 a justifiable success.





