

BOOK REVIEW

End of Empire: 100 Days in 1945 that Changed Asia and the World

Editors: David Chandler, Robert Cribb, and Li Narangoa

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Rene R. Escalante

De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

rene.escalante@dlsu.edu.ph

When the book *End of Empire: 100 Days in 1945 that Changed Asia and the World* came out of the press, majority of those people who personally witnessed the Second World War have died already and those who are still alive are no longer lucid to retell the stories of the war. Hence, present generations derive their knowledge of the war from published sources, movies, documentaries, television shows, social media postings, and other secondary sources available to them. Accounts from these genres tend to be exaggerated, commercialized, biased, and sometimes lacking in historical basis. In fact, some of them are presented to exonerate certain personalities while others are intended to demonize their past and current political enemies. As a result, students and history enthusiasts nowadays ended up having an adulterated knowledge of World War II. Sometimes these lead to shallow analysis and negative attitude towards contemporary events which are associated with the war.

The persons who were behind the publication of *End of Empire* should be credited for reviving and bringing back to the open the events that happened before, during, and after the Second World War.

Publications of this kind tend to renew interest on a particular period and they normally result to more research outputs. It is amazing how David Chandler, Robert Cribb, and Li Narangoa were able to mobilize a good number of scholars, who are known experts coming from different continents, to share what they know and have about the topic. Some of them have written books and articles about the war and I wonder how they were able to summarize their thoughts succinctly in just a few paragraphs.

One distinctive feature of the book is the style and the manner the topics were developed. It looks like its intended readers are not specialized scholars but ordinary people who want to know what happened in Asia after the end of the Second World War. The book started by giving a brief historical background of the Pacific War. This part is necessary because it prepares the readers for the discussion of the major developments that happened after Japan surrendered to the Allied Powers. As indicated in its sub-title, the book promises to narrate what transpired in Japan and its neighboring countries 100 days after the war ended (from September 5 to November 12, 1945). Some days have long discussions while

others have just a few sentences. Geographically, the book focused not only on Japan but also on those countries that were under Japanese rule before and during the war. The accounts jumped from one country to another and there are days wherein two or more events that happened in different places were covered. What made the book interesting and educational is the insertion of maps, pictures, and other illustrations. Although many of them appeared already in earlier studies, it remains relevant because the present generation of readers might not have seen these visual aids.

The book also contributed to the enrichment of the historiography of the period when it printed several accounts coming from eyewitnesses of the war which were not considered by earlier publications. For instance, the article of Ayelet Zohar which is part of the entry for August 9 is a very touching and lucid articulation of what happened after Nagasaki was bombed. He narrated how Yamahata Yosuke, Eiji Yamada, and Jun Higashi described Nagasaki after the catastrophic event. The trio was sent by the Japanese government the day after Nagasaki was bombed to record the extent of the destruction. The two photographs that they took, which were included by Zohar in his article, give the readers a very gloomy image of the place. Pictures like this need to be circulated so that people will be discouraged from using nuclear weapons in future wars. The article of Clay Eaton (entry for August 20) is about the life of Mabel de Souza, an ordinary Eurasian living in Singapore. It could be considered a valuable contribution to the social history of the war. Mabel is an elementary graduate who worked in a Chinese-owned dance hall during the pre-war years. The war did not affect her that much and she continued working even after the dance hall was converted into a restaurant during the occupation years. The story narrated how she shrewdly avoided being molested by a Japanese customer. She was so insulated from international news that she only learned of the Japanese surrender when the restaurant she was working was converted back to a dance hall again. Stories like this are necessary because it diverts the attention of the readers away from great men and women of history to ordinary folks.

The book appears encyclopedic and the coverage of the daily chronicles was extensive in terms of scope. Majority of the daily accounts focused on Japan but there were also a lot of entries that discussed what happened in China, Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, and other countries in Southeast Asia and Oceania. Ordinary readers who have not read that much on the Pacific War will find the book very informative because it mentions the major personalities involved in the war and the places where big events happened. Since the manner of presentation is day-by-day account, one will have a clear idea of the timeline of events after reading the book. The book also sends a clear message that studying what happened one hundred days after the war is as important as studying the war years.

Like any other book dealing with history, the *End of Empire* has shortcomings and pitfalls. In its attempt to cover as many topics as it can, it ended up giving very superficial and shallow treatment of the subject matters it covered. It contains a lot of factual enumerations but gave very little analysis and explanation of the events. For instance, the entry for August 13 discusses the debate among Japanese officials whether to surrender or not to the Allied Powers. The one-paragraph account was supplemented by a two-page essay of Susanna Fessler. She provided the narrative but did not explain the arguments of those officials who were pro and against the continuation of the war. Similarly, there were also a lot of major events that were not fairly discussed. For instance, the entry for August 9, 1945 entitled "Nagasaki devastated by atomic bomb" is just one paragraph with only two sentences. It does not say much as to the type of bomb used, the persons behind the attack, the air asset used (in the case of Hiroshima, *Egola Gay* was mentioned, see August 5 entry), and other circumstance surrounding the attack. Similar criticism also applies to the entry for August 12, 1945 with the title "38th Parallel to divide Korea." This is a major historical event in the region yet only one paragraph was spent for it and the details were very scanty. If one will read the whole book, one will encounter many historic events whose entries were very short and too general. Hence, experts of the period who are looking for new information and

deeper analysis might not find the book worth reading. But for readers who do not have solid background of the war might find this book a good and entertaining introductory reading.

The title of the book is also problematic because it only says "End of Empire." It creates an impression that it was only the Japanese empire that ended in 1945. But history books tell us, including some of the essays in this book, that aside from the Japanese empire, other western empires also lost control of their colonies in the region. For instance, Britain failed to retake Malaysia and Burma and the same thing happened also to the Dutch in Indonesia. The French were defeated by the Vietnamese and the Americans voluntarily gave up the Philippines. After the war, countries in the region, which were under colonial rule for several centuries, launched their respective independence movement. Some did it using force while other opted to take the diplomatic route. These would ultimately result to the "end of empires" in Southeast and East Asia and paved the way for the beginning of a new era known as post-colonial period. Hence, the title of the book should have been "End of Empires" (plural).

Despite the fact that the essays in this book were written by scholars coming from different continents, the European perspective ended up dominating the narratives and the selection of what event to privilege. This can be seen both in the historical background and in the day-to-day accounts. As regards the former, it has a long discussion of what happened in the Korean Peninsula, China, and Mongolia before the outbreak of the Pacific War. It even covers events that transpired as early as the last decade of the 19th century like the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). Similarly, it also provided a lengthy discussion of the major developments in mainland Southeast Asia particularly on those countries under colonial rule by the British, French, and the Dutch. Conspicuously short and lacking in details is the important role that the American empire played in the region during the period covered. One should not forget that at the height of the Pacific war, the only major power left in Asia-Pacific region was the American military contingents. The British, French, Dutch, and the Russians had to bring home their

troops to augment their forces who were fighting the Nazis. History books tell us that when the war broke out, fighting did not commence in European controlled countries but in Hawaii and the Philippines where the American troops were prepositioned. It only shows that as far as the Japanese war strategists were concerned, the biggest threat to them was not the Europeans but the Americans. In the discussion of the anti-Japanese forces during the war, focus was more on the *Thakins* of Burma, the Kuomintang and Communists of China, the Vietminhs in Indochina, and other anti-facist forces in Malaysia and Indonesia. The Hukbalahap and the USAFFE in the Philippines were not given due credit despite the fact that they also fought the Japanese. In the same way, in 1945 it was not the Europeans who delivered the fatal blow on the Japanese army but the Americans. Were it not for the atomic bombs detonated in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, history might have taken a different route. Hence, the Americans' role in the region should have been given fair treatment in the historical background and in the body of the book.

The Eurocentric focus of the book is also obvious in the discussion of the first one hundred days after the Japanese Imperial Army capitulated. There were lengthy articles that narrated the multi-pronged attacks launched by European powers from different fronts. It covered the Russian offensive in the northern part of Asia, the British offensive in the western part of mainland Southeast Asia, the return of the French in Indochina and the attempt of the Dutch to reestablish themselves in Indonesia. The American offensive from the Pacific Ocean and their return to the Philippines were also mentioned but the number of pages devoted to them were too short and could not equal the amount of attention given to what happened in the western side of the continent. One should not forget that the American offensive preceded the return of the European powers and it significantly reduced the military capabilities of Japan. The book would have appeared more comprehensive if it tackled the major military campaigns that the U.S. forces launched against the Japanese. These include War Plan Orange, the battle of Midway and Coral Sea, and the famous battle in Leyte Gulf, which some historians regard as the biggest naval battle in recent

history. These battles weakened Japan's military might that is why when the Europeans arrived months later; the Japanese military contingents were already tired, demoralized, and exhausted. The book should have given the Americans due recognition by giving them more space and longer write ups.

The activities and programs of the American-dominated Supreme Commander of the Allied Power (SCAP) were not also given that much attention in the narrative and in the sub-stories. The August 30 entry with the title "MacArthur assumes Power" is just one paragraph composed of four sentences. If one will consider the accompanying picture beside the paragraph, they did not even cover half of page 161. One should not forget that it was the SCAP who supervised the demilitarization and reorganization of the Japanese government and society. It is ironic that these important events were not given that much importance despite the fact that two prominent historians of the period, Ricardo Jose (a Filipino) and Theodore Friend (an American), were contributors in this project. If the American-Filipino-Australian side of the story was given fair treatment, readers would have been given a balanced picture of the Pacific War.

The Cold War is another major development that happened in the region after the end of the empires but sad to say the book did not spend that much pages on it. It started in Asia when the Allied Powers were discussing how to manage Japan after it surrendered. Like what happened to Germany, the representative of the United States and the former Soviet Union competed against each other as to who would call the shots in occupied Japan. Later, the animosity between these two superpowers spread throughout Asia and subsequently polarized the whole region. Since the Cold War started during the 100-day period after the end of the war, it should have been taken as a major topic.

If there were topics which were not given fair treatment in the book, there were also some events and countries which were given too much attention even if they did not play pivotal role in the fall of the empires in Asia. For instance, Mongolia was discussed extensively even if it is very far from the theatre of the war. Moreover, its role and contributions in defeating the Japanese empire and the other empires in the region were negligible. Yet the book devoted one full section in the prelude and a total of 16 articles in the body. There are even dates wherein Mongolia had two entries (August 10, 14, and October 20). There are also some articles in the book that sound trivial and should not have been included so that there will be enough space left for other important events. These include the famine and flooding in Vietnam, the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, and the renaming of Siam to Thailand.

The negative comments mentioned above are matters concerning perspective and choice of topic which fall under the absolute prerogative of the editors. Since majority of the contributors are Europeans, it is just and expected that they would look at the Pacific War from their perspective. The book need not be revised to address the comments but it has to be highlighted so that readers will not get the impression that it covered fairly the important events that happened 100 days after the defeat of Japan. The disclosure will encourage readers to consider other works dealing with the same period but with a non-European perspective. Books written by American, Australian, Japanese, and Filipino historians will surely complement this study. Doing so, it will give students of history a deeper and a more comprehensive view of this very important turning point in the history of Asia in general and of Japan in particular.