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Post War Rehabilitation:

The British Military Administration in the Far East 1943–46

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POST WAR REHABILITATION

THE BRITISH MILITARY ADMINISTRATION IN THE FAR EAST 1943-46. By F. S. V. Donnison C. B. E. London. Her Majesty's Stationery Office. 1955. Pp. xviii, 483. Index. Maps.

MILITARY administration is that phase of war that has to do with the control of a country after the enemy has been driven away. It is military because the administration is done by military personnel preparing the territory for the restoration of civil government. This book is a history of the British military administration in those territories of the Far East which the Japanese had seized at the beginning of the war and which the allies had seized back.

By 1942 Malaya and Hongkong had been captured by the Japanese. The British surrendered, their army was imprisoned and the British civilian population interned. The British were driven from Burma with the Japanese in hot pursuit. A tiny no-man's-land stood between Burma and India which later proved a help to the British when they began their counter offensive to recapture Burma. Borneo including the British territory was in the hands of the Japanese as were French Indochina and Dutch Indonesia. Millions of miles of territory and millions of people thus fell to the Japanese.

Mr. Donnison's book is a detailed narration of how these lands were finally restored to their former owners. The British sent civilian officials into Burma to help people in territory not yet completely in the hands of the Japanese. These men finally had to flee for their lives. Planning was undertaken in India and London for the counter offensive by which these lands would be regained by the British. In these vast territories thousands of people had been driven from their homes; law and order and all the means of civilian life had been disrupted or destroyed. Thousands of these native peoples had become subject to the Japanese and a few had collaborated with them. Obviously care must be taken of these people. They must be encouraged to rebuild their homes, to help the British army in labor battalions and also to help themselves under British supervision by restoring commerce, transportation, light, water supply, drainage, police, law courts, schools and hospitals. Concentration camps must be established; food, clothing, medicine must be obtained. In time

these people could be rehabilitated and the sinews of civilized peaceful life rebuilt.

This task was one for civilians, not soldiers. Thus a civilian corps was organized, composed wherever possible of former civilian officials in the countries to be reclaimed. It was called the civil affairs service. To avoid any confusion and to insure unity of command, this corps was incorporated in the army, wore military uniform and received military titles up to that of major general. A civilian affairs officer was attached to every military command to convey to the civilian affairs service in the field necessary communications and orders. This however did not always work. The army did not always deem it necessary to do what obviously should have been done in this regard.

The planning was good but circumstances sometimes made plans impracticable so that they had to be modified or new ones devised. With the help of the Americans and the Chinese, Burma was all but reconquered and partially reclaimed when the Japanese surrendered. The Burmese welcomed the British with open arms as the Japanese had treated them harshly. Fortunately for them the British were willing to accede to their patriotic demands. The communist movement was stopped and the new government was really a national one. Of course this latter task goes beyond the scope of Mr. Donnison's book. Unfortunately, in dealing with the collaborators, mistakes were made on the part of the military administration which only increased the desire of the Burmese for independence.

In Malaya some men were parachuted behind Japanese lines to organize forces and create sympathy for the British in preparation for the British invasion of the country. The Japanese surrendered before the invasion became a fact. The British then rushed troops into the country and their work of rehabilitation began. In Malaya there were really two peoples to deal with, the Chinese and the Malaysians. Also mingled with the supporters of nationalization were real communists ready to stir up any trouble to advance their nefarious cause.

In Hongkong the British had to rush a battleship to bring in a British force to cope with the Japanese surrender. It had been feared for a time that Chiang Kai-shek with the aid of Americans would seize Hongkong. This was an unrealistic fear. Here the internees had organized under the former civilian of-

ficials and were already controlling Hongkong when the British forces arrived. The civilians were all suffering from malnutrition and internee fatigue. They were glad to turn over their jobs to the British military administration. However they are to be congratulated for their resourcefulness as well as their efficiency, especially since they were so heavily handicapped by poor health after their long internment. This reviewer speaks from experience when he says that the prisoners of the Japanese were in no danger of getting fat.

Indochina and Indonesia were a different kettle of fish from the British territories. Here the British were to take over, accept the Japanese surrender, free the prisoners and internees. The work of rehabilitation was to be left to the French and the Dutch. In Indonesia the population had been helped by the Japanese and were prepared to fight for independence. In fact they proclaimed the Indonesian republic right after the Japanese surrender. The Dutch were no longer to be tolerated and the British were far from popular in the task they had to assume. The British here and in Indochina were in a far from enviable position. First they were not in any way to interfere with the sovereignty of the French in Indochina or the Dutch in Indonesia. Whatever their sympathies they did not want to take part in a revolution against French or Dutch sovereignty on either side.

Mr. Donnison's almost twenty years of service as a civilian official, his work as a deputy chief civilian affairs officer with the rank of lieutenant colonel and his service as chief secretary of the Burmese civil government after the war eminently qualified him to write this book. He was supplied with a great number of official documents, commands and communications and he has organized this vast material very skillfully, achieving as a result a readable book.

As one goes through the story, one is first amazed at the great task the British military administration had to do, involving thousands of square miles of territory and millions of diverse peoples with different languages, customs and religions. Destruction was great in many places: roads had been destroyed, drainage ruined, water cut off or polluted, hospitals destroyed or damaged. In some places people were fighting against each other; there was brigandage, robbery, looting and rebellion. Clothing, food and medicine were scarce. The task of supplying money to take

the place of the "Mickey Mouse" variety the Japanese had supplied, of having a firm sound currency, of fighting any tendency towards inflation is but one instance of the many complicated problems that had to be met and yet in a comparatively short time affairs were handed over to civil government. In British Borneo this was accomplished perhaps quicker than anywhere else. One reason was that there was less demand for independence there than anywhere else.

Throughout the book one sees also on the part of the British an attitude of sympathy for the people who had to live through the Japanese occupation, an understanding of their precarious position in which oftentimes they were forced to join labor battalions or even a native constabulary or national army. One criterion was used to track down collaborators: namely, whether real aid and comfort had been given to the Japanese. It was unfortunate that this criterion was not always used. Yet the mistakes made were due to circumstances and not to stupidity or malice. The plan of reforming the Malayan States after the war seems to the reviewer to have been unrealistic in the face of the drive for nationalization in the Far East even before the war. The British themselves finally realized this and proceeded to amend the plan to the satisfaction of the people in these territories of Malaya.

This book is a volume of the United Kingdom Military Series on the Second World War edited by J. A. M. Butler, professor emeritus of modern history at Cambridge. The printing is excellent and the book is supplied with very good maps, a glossary, appendices of official communications and a workable index. It sells for forty shillings net. This book is a "must" for all interested in history, especially of the Second World War.

AUSTIN V. DOWD

SOCIALISM IN INDIA

INDIAN APPROACHES TO A SOCIALIST SOCIETY. By Margaret W. Fisher and Joan V. Bondurant. Berkeley. University of California. 1956. Pp. 105, xliii.