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Singapore's Military History: Look Beyond World War II

By Ong Weichong

SYNOPSIS

A longer, deeper lens on Singapore's military history should go beyond the overused stories of World War II heroism.

COMMENTARY

IN MUCH of post-war Southeast Asia, the central role played by militaries in the struggle for independence such as in Indonesia and Vietnam earned the armed forces a place in the national narrative. In the absence of a war of national liberation against colonial authority, it is perhaps understandable that Singapore's military history draws upon its involvement in British colonial rule as a convenient starting point, albeit within limits.

Singapore's pre-independence military past - particularly events, sites, monuments and personages from the Second World War - are appropriated as part of Singapore's nation-building narrative. Military history however is more than just the heat of battles and the great military commanders who fought them. How a society remembers and commemorates its wartime past as citizens and communities beyond the exploits of generals and admirals is part of military history as well.

The sheer scale and number of parties involved in the Battle and Fall of Singapore in February 1942 (Australian, British, Chinese, Indian, Malay and Japanese) allows for remembrance and commemoration in different ways. Sites such as the Kranji War Cemetery are used and remembered by different groups in different ways.

Whilst the Australians meet at Kranji on Anzac day to commemorate the 'Anzac Spirit', the Kranji war graves stand as testament to British stoicism on Remembrance Day.

In contrast, Singaporean school children and Full-time National Servicemen (NSFs) visit the site to learn the lesson of what may come if Singapore were to rely on external powers for its national security.

Appropriation of Singapore's Colonial Past

Selective appropriations of colonial history into Singapore's 'nation-building' story, however, can be problematic. In the January 2019 issue of NUS's *Alumnus*, retired diplomat Bilahari Kausikan makes an important point that "Singapore identity was formed only after 1965: Before Singapore became independent, it was a colony. Its people were subjects, not citizens. Those who came here were in principle sojourners, not settlers."

Indeed, the logic of colonial Singapore's defence within Britain's imperial grand design meant that it had to be defended by subjects and sojourners of the British empire - not citizens.

In wartime Singapore, Dalforce, or the Singapore Overseas Chinese Volunteer Army, a volunteer militia, was formed from the Overseas Chinese (hua qiao). These underequipped volunteers fought valiantly against the Japanese, but they were sojourners who fought for ideals 'other' than Singapore's independence. Should these hua qiao resistance figures be appropriated as Singapore's war heroes when many of them including Lim Bo Seng of Force 136 saw a Kuomintang (KMT) led China as their motherland (zu guo)?

The identity politics of wartime Singapore are very different from those in 21st Century Singapore. As a symbol of Overseas Chinese unity, Dalforce had both KMT and communist supporters and communists in its ranks. There were cracks however behind this 'united front' of Overseas Chinese. Despite their common cause against the Japanese, Overseas Chinese with communist leanings who joined or supported Chin Peng's Malaya Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) were treated with suspicion by British commanders in Southeast Asia Command (SEAC) and later fought against the British during the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) years as the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA).

To a younger generation of Singaporeans born after independence or 'Post-65ers' who may not necessarily identify with the values and identity politics of Malaya's and Singapore's sojourner hua qiao, the appropriation of Lim Bo Seng's heroism as Singaporean presents a problem.

The narratives of wartime resistance are an important part of Singapore's past, but these narratives should be accurately represented rather than too simplistically appropriated as Singaporean.

If Singapore's colonial and Second World War past is a period of sojourn and search for an identity, can we speak of a Singapore military history that speaks to the present and future generations of young Singaporeans?

One way to do this is to go beyond a fixation on the Second World as the convenient

starting point for Singapore's military history, and cast our net wider to include other 'long' and 'short' strands of Singapore's military past.

'Long Strand'

The 'long' strand is to set Singapore's military past within the *longue duree* of Singapore's history - *longue duree* being an approach to history that looks at long-term structures, rather than epochal events. Through this lens, we can shape the 'how' and 'why' behind Singapore's fall and rise in regional and international strategic importance in the last 1,000 years.

Historian John Miksic makes the case that in pre-British Singapore, the strategic importance of Singapore in the Malayu-Jambi (1025-1275), Classical Singapore (1275-1400), Melaka (1400-1511), Johore-Riau (1511-1780) and Dutch-Bugis (1700-1819) phases largely rose and fell with external trends and perceptions.

This approach grapples with the geostrategic importance of Singapore over centuries from pre-British to modern Singapore. In the colonial era, the Singapore naval base was constructed as a symbol of Pax Britannica's wide-reaching presence and control in the Far East. The end of Britain's East of Suez role, independence in 1965 and the precipitated withdrawal of British forces in 1971 meant that the 'accidental nation' of Singapore had to find its role in the wider world – and protect it.

Since the formation of the Singapore Armed Forces in 1965, its role and capabilities have evolved from 'Rising to the Defence of Singapore' in the 1960s to a more 'Global, More Capable and Ready' one in the 1990s.

The more sizable overseas deployments of the SAF since the 1990s and growing partnerships with international partners in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond remains an undertold story. This 'long' strand of Singapore's military history that puts Singapore's role in the regional and global context from pre-colonial to the 21st Century is one that deserves greater attention.

'Short Strand'

If the 'long' strand of Singapore's military history is one set in Singapore's place in the wider world through the centuries, the 'short' strand is one largely shaped by the recent experiences of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) since 1965.

The 'short' strand tells the military history of independent Singapore as stories that belong to citizens - as 'yours' and 'mine'. Such authentic 'short' strand resonates with our values as Singaporeans and mirrors Singaporean society at large.

One example of a 'short' strand that is emerging and having a pluralising effect on Singapore's military history is the shared experience of citizen soldiers in National Service (NS). From the local 'blockbuster' Ah Boys to Men series to independent short films discussing gender identity in NS, the NS storyboard is finding a place in the array of stories that we tell. More importantly, the interface between the SAF and Singapore society reveals a military history of Singapore that is distinct from Singapore's colonial

military history - it tells the story of a transition from sojourners to citizen soldiers of Singapore.

As a nation, we need to look beyond the over-ploughed battlefields of World War Two and tap into the underexplored 'long' and 'short' strands of Singapore's military past.

What Singapore lacks in an anti-colonial revolutionary military past like Indonesia or Vietnam does not make for an absence of a Singaporean military history. Despite the absence of combat experience, a distinct brand of military history focused on the peacetime development of the SAF buttressed by the memories, experiences and voices of its citizen soldiers deserves a larger place in the scripting of Singapore's military history.

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