

The nation's interrupted path: the Pacific War in Philippine history textbooks

For Filipinos, the Pacific War is the Japanese Occupation. Bayonet-bearing Japanese soldiers, traitorous local spies, heroic Filipino guerillas, victory 'Joes' (Americans), and the triumphant return of General McArthur are the dominant historical memories associated with this horrific war. Popularized by the mass media, these images in part originate from history textbooks, and are primary sources of people's war-time imagination.

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Here we examine three better-known texts: *History of the Filipino People* (Agoncillo 1960), *The Philippines: the Continuing Past* (Constantino and Constantino 1978) and *The Pageant of Philippine History* (Zaide 1979). These have been required readings for fourth year high school and first year college students for decades, and have simplified the complex realities of war-time Philippines by depicting Filipinos as either war heroes or victims. In either conception, Filipinos are denied an independent agency in their own history.

Despite years of scholarly criticism and ridicule, textbooks remain vital for both teachers and students in educational environments. The Philippines is no different, where texts play critical roles in constructing what Anderson famously calls an 'imagined' national community (Anderson 1991). Indeed we could link the nation's historical consciousness with the production and reception of history texts (Rüsen 1998: 3-16). This essay concentrates on the former, contextualizing the creation of historical knowledge and the messages and meanings it strives to convey.

An intrusion

Agoncillo, the Constantinos and Zaide contributed to the entrenchment of positivism in historical scholarship in the Philippines. They relied heavily on written sources to shape their arguments and interpretations, including memoirs of American soldiers, a handful of accounts of select Filipino leaders, English-language compilations of documents, monographs and newspaper reports on the Pacific War. Invariably, military personnel and politicians were the main actors in their narratives.

Zaide saw the war as a distant European drama that almost accidentally disrupted the lives of idyllic Filipinos, who were then preparing for independence as promised by their American colonizers. Within hours of the attack on Pearl Harbor, however, Japanese air squadrons began bombing the Philippines. In Zaide's eyes, surprised and overwhelmed Filipino and American forces put up a gallant fight, but were forced to surrender following a last stand on Corregidor Island. On the subsequent five-day 'Death March', more than a quarter of the 76,000 US soldiers perished due to hunger, illness and fatigue. Still, for Zaide, defeat was in name only, as surviving Filipino soldiers and other civilians formed guerilla units to wage a people's war against the *Hapon* ('Japs').

Like Zaide, Agoncillo saw the war as an intrusion upon preparations for Philippine self-rule. Yet Agoncillo shifted the theatre from a European-dominant context to one zeroed in on home. Quoting Filipino and American leaders to emphasize their agency and simulate action in

the narrative, Agoncillo interspersed his text with colorful stories about the harshness of the occupation, anecdotes to provide glimpses of how the poor sought to get by. Agoncillo subscribed to the philosophy of historians Becker and Beard, who campaigned for a 'subjectivist-pragmatist-presentism' (Strout 1958: 28-29) to counter the then dominant 'objectivist' approach in the discipline.

Agoncillo's writing moved succeeding historians, not least the husband and wife team of Letizia and Renato Constantino. Opting for a political economy perspective on the occupation, the Constantinos saw economics as the driving force behind Japan's conquest of the Pacific. Like Zaide and Agoncillo, they conceived the occupation as an experience that shattered the comfort of the Filipinos' tranquil colonial world, disrupting the path to American-engineered 'independence'. Four decades of American colonial rule had conditioned Filipinos to be loyal to their American masters; as the Constantinos pointed out, Filipinos even forgave McArthur in December 26, 1941 for declaring Manila an 'open city', which in effect handed the nation's capital to the Japanese. Filipinos continually resisted the Japanese for their American colonial masters, even as these colonizers abandoned the Philippines during the war.

The dark years

These texts use darkness as the primary metaphor to describe the situation Filipinos found themselves in from December 1941 to February 1945. Zaide lays bare the brutality of Japanese rule: thousands who refused to cooperate

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were tortured and killed. Meanwhile, the regime coerced Filipino leaders to collaborate in a puppet government that brainwashed Filipinos with Japanese wartime propaganda. Unlike scholars and politicians who depict this elite as traitorous leeches duplicitous with Japanese rule, Zaide paints them as faithful servants carrying out the wishes of the Commonwealth President in exile, Manuel Quezon, who urged officials to soften the blow of the occupation on ordinary Filipinos.

The Constantinos characterized the occupation as 'martial law: Japanese style'. With the assistance of the remaining Filipino elite, General Masaharu Homma and his army (*kempeitai*) repressed all freedoms, detained Filipino men arbitrarily, mercilessly quelled revolt, and severely punished those cooperating with Americans. Alongside a determined propaganda campaign against the US, the Japanese

also set up neighborhood associations where Filipinos had to police Filipinos. Most importantly, the military regime ruthlessly extracted war needs and supplies from the archipelago in the hopes of forming what the Japanese euphemistically called the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere.

For Agoncillo, darkness prevailed not only because of the regime's atrocities, but also because of the loss of social and moral balance among Filipinos. Physicians denied suffering patients treatment; graves were desecrated for corpses' gold fillings; and crimes against persons and properties multiplied. More ashamedly, a new economic elite arose and prospered amidst widespread immiseration. As Agoncillo saw it, this collaborating bourgeoisie amassed its wealth through graft and corruption. A particularly lucrative racket was mismanaging the distribution of relief goods, which continued until the disposition of equipment and materials upon the Americans' return.

A new beginning?

These authors differ on what the immediate post-war situations in the Philippines stood for. Zaide considered the occupation as a mere interlude in the country's inevitable march towards independence, where 'liberation' by US forces restored the Filipino commonwealth government. In Zaide's account, bitter in-fighting amongst Filipino leaders for the spoils of profitable political posts went unnoticed, as did the continued American air raids that levelled Manila although the Japanese had already surrendered.

In Agoncillo's eyes, Japanese rule meant heroic resistance of ordinary Filipinos, whose guerilla units incapacitated Japanese war efforts. For example, reports on the *kempeitai* that guerillas collected and submitted to McArthur's headquarters in Australia greatly assisted his returning forces in 1944. In all, Agoncillo sought to enliven the ways in which Filipinos struggled to purge the Japanese from the homeland. Lost in Agoncillo's populist zeal, however, are the burning questions of rivalry, competition, and deceit amongst guerilla fighters that burst onto the scene after the war. Agoncillo brooked no ambiguity and contradiction for his valiant guerillas.

It was left to the Constantinos to cast shadows across the guerillas' bow, although in this case perhaps overly so. The Constantinos indubitably stamped the underground fighters collaborators, those who preferred American colonial masters over the Japanese, and who -

with McArthur's help - sought political or economic gain upon their favored colonizers' return by exploiting the issue of collaboration to rid the post-war government of unwanted (read: left-leaning) leaders. All told, for the Constantinos, Filipinos let the opportunity provided by the war to attain a truly independent Philippines pass by. Instead, they basked in the glow of post-war American influence, leaving the independence granted in 1946 a hollow shell.

Projected nation

Characteristically, these texts figured the Pacific War as a stepping stone on the path towards shaping the archipelago into an ideal nation. Heeding historicist von Ranke's philosophy of telling history as it really was, Zaide brought a mechanical approach to narrating the war, featuring names, dates and places, while clumsily seeking to relate the indefatigability of the Filipino spirit. In its wake, regular folks were either swept aside or characterized with platitudes. And instead of inviting readers to recognize and understand a painful part of their past, Zaide enjoined them to concentrate on the larger project of (their leaders in) building a nation, thereby acting as a hand of the state, campaigning for its pathway to order and modernity.

Agoncillo's text took no part in this nationalist charade. Having experienced the war as a boy, he well understood the daily lives of those toughing out the occupation, and thus strove to bring forth the nuances of local culture in a war-time context. For example, he related why Filipino men detested the frequent slapping by Japanese soldiers. For Filipinos, only women could (be) slap(ped); they would rather be hit than slapped by another man. Although such stories gave colour to an otherwise terrifying account of the Pacific War, it also led to simplifications. Agoncillo characterized Filipinos as consumed by either unreasonable volatility or treachery, thereby stripping them of human depth and complexity. To be sure, Filipinos were afforded historical agency in Agoncillo's account, but one trapped in the good/evil binary.

A similar duality confounds the Constantinos' work. Polemically, they featured Japanese, Filipino, and American elites as the occupation's true adversaries. Meanwhile, poor Filipinos were depicted as either fighters or victims, anonymous 'masses' that perpetually struggle to be. For the Constantinos, these struggles constituted the driving forces of change in a nation's history, from which empowered masses would emerge to claim and build a nation in their terms. What the Constantinos hoped for was a people's revolution a la Russia or China; the Philippine scenario was interpreted not on its own terms, but forced into an ideal, linear progression towards enlightenment/ maturity, which long ago had been achieved in Europe.

In such a context, Filipinos fit awkwardly at best. Left largely under-explored, the Filipino experience is tailored to reinforce the centrality and universality of European thought and history.

For Agoncillo, the Constantinos and Zaide, the outbreak of the Pacific War interrupted an American imperial project to transform the Philippines into a self-governing polity. Deserted by their colonizers, Filipinos succumbed to a dark Japanese rule characterized by arbitrary arrests, torture and killings from 1941 to 1945, only to be 'liberated' by the bravery of McArthur's American forces with assistance by Filipino guerillas. Agoncillo, the Constantinos and Zaide regarded the war as a military exercise, a venue for social denigration, a missed opportunity towards an ideal polity - all told, another trying episode in the country's march towards nationhood.

Ample space for re-interpretation exists. The heavy use of American or English-language sources has left Filipino sources under-utilized. Comparisons of memoirs of Filipino soldiers, which started coming out in the 1990s with other military accounts, would be illuminating, as would narratives and monographs on forced prostitution to shed light on the state of women during the war. Now mostly declassified, Japanese documents might provide clues about Filipino children, Chinese, Muslims, indigenous communities and others whose historical agencies have been left wanting. Oral history, through interviewing survivors and their descendents, would go a long way in accounting for these 'missing' Filipinos. Their incorporation would provide a historian wider access to a people's personhood under desperate conditions, bringing life to a people's history of the war in their own terms. ◀

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