

Book Reviews

Asia

Detention camps in Asia: The conditions of confinement in modern Asian history

Edited by ROBERT CRIBB, CHRISTINA TWOMEY and SANDRA WILSON

Leiden: Brill, 2022. Pp. 314. Maps, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

doi:10.1017/S0022463423000565

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, regimes in Asia have sought to detain their ‘enemies’ in places specifically set up as ‘detention camps’ rather than just use existing prisons and correctional institutions. This edited volume sets out to trace the history of these detention camps in various Asian countries as they have taken a number of forms, which Robert Cribb argues were different from detention camps in European history. The book sees the purpose of the detention camps in Asia as not reflecting broader oppressive trends in society, as scholars working on European detention camps claim. Instead, detention camps in Asia are seen as oppressive institutions that through social segregation enable the wider society to enjoy greater freedoms at the expense of those individuals in the camps.

The organisation of the 15 essays of the edited volume has by and large worked well for potential readers. The arrangement of chapters into different sections is done thematically rather than chronologically or geographically. This mostly works, but there are a number of chapters that cross several of the themes of counterinsurgency, isolating public enemies, torture and re-education, and lastly the section on managing camps. Giving each chapter a map so that readers can geographically follow the places mentioned in the relevant chapter is very good, as many readers would struggle to visualise the locations named in the chapters.

The volume starts with Christina Twomey’s account of American ‘reconcentration’ camps in the Philippines during and after the Philippine-American War (1899–1902). She sees these camps as similar to the British concentration camps for the Boers, which are accepted as the beginning of the idea of concentration camps in the twentieth century. Twomey argues that the concentration camps for the Boers and their families were more well-known because they held Europeans whereas the American camps held Filipinos and did not arouse the same level of sympathy. Karl Hack continues this theme of detention camps and insurgency in his account of how the New Villages set up by the British during the Malayan Emergency in the 1950s could be oppressive institutions designed for a similar purpose of stopping the communist guerrillas from being supported by their families and supporters in the Chinese community.

After briefly dealing with detention camps under the colonial governments, the edited volume moves onto essays that are studies of how postcolonial governments in Asia have used detention camps from the mid-twentieth century into the twenty-first century. These essays follow the themes of isolating public enemies as

well as torture and re-education. They comprise the majority of the chapters. Nick Cheesman starts these essays with the compelling story of the short-lived military government of Burma setting up in 1959 a specially constructed detention camp on the Cocos Islands in the Bay of Bengal for its political opponents. The move foreshadowed what it would do when it took over Burma permanently after 1962. Indonesian detention camps during Suharto's New Order are well-covered. Ken M.P. Setiawan ably chronicles the New Order penal settlement on the island of Buru. Hannah Loney deals expertly with the East Timorese who were detained on Ataúro Island. Jess Melvin has an insightful chapter on detention camps that were used to process detainees who were to be killed during the 1965–66 massacres of the members of the Indonesian Communist Party. Annie Pohlman adds to this with her intriguing study of the Indonesian government detention camps of 1965–70 that were set up for torture and interrogation. Other Asian regimes and their detention camps are also included. Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen skilfully traces Vietnam's 'Bamboo Gulag' of re-education camps after 1975. This makes an interesting comparison with James Leibold's essay on China's re-education camps in Xinjiang province in the twenty-first century.

The last part of the book on managing camps is where the essays on the Japanese wartime detention camps are all located. Sandra Wilson gives a good overview of both the prisoner of war and civilian internment camps of the wartime Japanese Empire, highlighting systemic and logistical factors that more often led to the poor treatment rather than individual brutality. Paul Taucher's comprehensive account of the Tan Toey prisoner of war camp on Ambon Island stresses that multiple factors from breakdowns in logistics to physical mistreatment led to the high death rates. Sarah Kovner provides a complete account of the prisoner of war camps in Japan itself, seeing them as mostly having better conditions than those in the rest of the empire. In this same section on managing camps is the stimulating story told by Grace J. Chae of detention camps of enemy Korean women held by the US army during the Korean War. Also included is Jemma Purdey's self-reflective chapter on the Galang Island camp for Vietnamese refugees in the Riau Archipelago of Indonesia. This chapter adds to the other chapters on Indonesia as it highlights the diverse forms of detention camps of the New Order.

Overall, the collection of essays in the edited volume present insightful comparisons when they are read together. The collection constitutes a thought-provoking contribution to the comparative study of detention and imprisonment in different cultural contexts.

KEVIN BLACKBURN

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore