Contending with nationalism and communism: British policy towards Southeast Asia, 1945–65
By PETER LOWE
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Pp. 312. Maps, Notes, Bibliography, Index.
doi:10.1017/S0022463411000130

After spending a considerable amount of his scholarly career writing about the United Kingdom's involvement in modern East Asian history, Peter Lowe has belatedly taken on an ambitious and challenging assignment in monitoring British policy in Southeast Asia from 1945–65 for Palgrave's series on 'Global conflict and security'. This is no mean feat since acquiring expertise on the region as a whole is not easily accomplished. While he should be commended for devising a chronological narrative of the major twists and turns in British policy within the region, the results – such as the diplomacy itself – are not entirely convincing.

In essence, this is a primary source-based study, and Lowe's endnotes are drawn overwhelmingly from the British and American archives. Absence of other Commonwealth archival holdings, all foreign-language sources, and a number of important new works in the secondary literature are unfortunate omissions from this study. Despite these limitations, Lowe has produced an interesting, if not entirely compelling, narrative on the faltering steps made by the governments of Clement Attlee to Harold Wilson to engage with the region during the early cold war years.

Part of the problem lies in the nature of the narrative itself. Throughout this volume the short, staccato sentences read as if they had come largely unembroidered from official minutes and memoranda and seem to be a précis of documents prepared by civil servants or members of the diplomatic corps for their political masters. To be fair, one does indeed get some of the analytical ebb and flow behind the decision-making, but that is hardly enough to make it into a 'page-turner'.

Ernest Bevin, one of the finest British foreign secretaries of any age, recognised the complexity of the task confronting the United Kingdom when it came to dealing with Asian affairs in the post-war world. He knew that the dramatic and abrupt end to the Pacific war had left all the European colonial powers with a set of fascinating dilemmas to solve. What would they do about emerging nationalism and communism within the region? How could they accommodate the former and liquidate the latter? Not surprisingly, perhaps, none of them supplied fool-proof answers to these outstanding questions of the day. In the case of the United Kingdom, did SEAC (South East Asia Command) really amount to little more than 'Save England's Asiatic Colonies', as the Americans cynically put it during the war? Would the British merely return to the region and try to continue governing as before? What allowance would they make for this nascent sense of community – imagined or not – amongst the indigenous people of the region? Moreover, how could they make communism less appealing to the vast number of have-nots in Asian society?

Lowe makes a start to answering some of these questions with an introduction notable for his criticism of Anglo–Indonesian relations. His point appears to be that the British did not understand the mercurial Sukarno (who did?) and that they colluded

with the Americans in bringing about his downfall in the aftermath of the Untong coup in 1965. Did he find a 'smoking gun' linking them with General Soeharto? No. Whether one existed is unknown. One may speculate, but the evidence remains tantalisingly missing.

In his following chapter on the return of colonialism, Lowe is on far safer ground in discussing some of the individuals who helped shape British policy in the region for better or worse. He is clearly not enamoured with Governor Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith (a huge liability in Burmese politics immediately after the war) and Malcolm MacDonald who cropped up in a number of key posts within the region in the late 1940s and 1950s and yet never seemed to tire of Bao Di regardless of what the feckless Vietnamese Emperor did or did not do. Lowe's reservations about Bob Thompson's personal advocacy of the British Advisory Mission to Vietnam (BRIAM) and Esler Dening's haughty attitude to the Thais are eminently fair. Fortunately, as he reveals, Whitehall also received far shrewder analyses of the situation on the ground from other members of the diplomatic corps, such as John Addis, Leslie Holliday, Herbert Rance and Geoffrey Thompson, and was equally well served by experts such as Professor Pearn and James Cable in London.

Lowe's broad canvas stretches beyond the conventional coverage of the Malayan emergency and the abject refusal of right-wing American leaders to entertain Ho Chi Minh's nationalist aspirations, to embrace two initiatives for containing the scourge of communism: the astute Colombo plan and the lacklustre Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) defence organisation. Thereafter, chapters on the rest of Southeast Asia provide interesting glimpses of British thought processes. While revealing nothing new – there is, after all, but so much one can say in defence of British foreign policy east of Suez – Professor Lowe has evidently trawled through the archival deposits in a bid to disturb the ghosts of the past. His study has not exorcised them: Anglo–American relations in the region are deemed to be no better than before; the faulty reasoning that lay behind so many of the missteps remains painfully obvious; and money, or the lack thereof, still bedevilled British plans in this region. Few British premiers knew much about Southeast Asia and, sadly, they showed it in the post-war years.

One final and unconnected irony about this volume — it literally came apart at the seams! From the outset, pp. 99–100 were missing in action and the rest came away from the spine of the book as if modern glue just does not cut it any longer. Is there a lurking metaphor here for British policy in Southeast Asia after the war?

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Paul Mus (1902–1969): L'espace d'un regard
Edited by DAVID CHANDLER and CHRISTOPHER E. GOSCHA
Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2006. Pp 335. Annexes, Index.
doi:10.1017/S0022463411000142

Irrespective of the context, Paul Mus has left an impact wherever and with whomever he has worked. An erudite man of action, he is among the few to have left a