

Tim Harper. 2021. *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 826 pages. Hardcover. USD 39.95. ISBN: 9780674724617.

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There are many studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European empires in Asia. Few of them are laudatory, and those that do take a less-than-condemnatory stance meet with vehement denunciation. As an example of the latter, consider the furore which erupted over scholar Bruce Gilley's "Case for Colonialism," an essay in which he purported to do just as the title describes: make a case for why colonialism was a good thing (Gilley 2018). Gilley was forced to self-censor his views by retracting his peer-reviewed and already-published essay. And yet, while criticism of European empire has become the norm, those empires remain, in many cases, the conceptual ground of engagement. Orientalism critiques, subaltern studies, postcolonialism, and whiteness discourse, among other anti-imperialist fields, assume the presence of empire as the starting point for resistance. In an anti-imperialist age, in other words, empire continues to loom large.

This is partly what makes Tim Harper's *Underground Asia* so exciting to read. Harper is a professor at the University of Cambridge specializing in the history of Southeast Asia, and has written widely about British Malaya, Singapore, and, more broadly, the interpersonal networks that were formed in the shadow of the British Empire in the East. *Underground Asia* is a fresh new step. In this volume of deftly-written history, Harper looks at the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century world through the eyes of people dedicated to ending it. Empire is a given in *Underground Asia*, of course. The British Empire, as well as the French and Dutch empires, and to a smaller extent the empires of the United States (in the Philippines) and Japan, loom large. But for Harper, the focus is on the revolutionaries—and their networks—spread throughout Asia, Europe, North America, and beyond, the men, women, and groups who did not accept the existence of empire and lived (and often died) trying to achieve a world without it. We have, then, a premise orthogonal to the one which dominates writing about imperialism in the Anglosphere today. Harper's volume follows people whose overriding desire was to think past empire, to act outside of all imperial bounds.

In a word, Harper succeeds brilliantly. This is a must-read.

*Underground Asia* is divided into fourteen chapters, a prelude, and an epilogue. The prelude opens in 1924, "on the threshold of free Asia," with the bombing of a European dinner party on the "colonial enclave" of Shamian Island in the otherwise free city of Canton (3). The bomber turned out to be Pham Hong Thai (1896-1924), a Vietnamese revolutionary who had long worked to dislodge the French from Indochina. In chapter one, Harper steps back in time, to 1905, to follow an earlier (the first) generation

of Vietnamese revolutionaries as they slip into the imperial underground “in search of a lost country,” following strange dreams of a united Asia in Japan, China, and the revolutionary writings filtering into Asia from Europe (21). These anti-imperial pioneers realized that they “shar[ed] the same sickness,” the same thrall to European imperialism (33). From across the European empires, Asians gathered in Japan, where Chinese students set up *Datong*, “Sino-Japanese or pan-Asian ‘unity’ schools” open also to women (34). Other women studied under pan-Asianist Shimoda Utako (1854-1936), whose charges “pledged themselves to the great causes of educational renewal and women’s progress in China” (35) Japan was not the only nexus or vector of anti-imperialist foment. Japan was but one node, albeit an indispensable one, in the drive to oust Europeans from the East. The writings of Chinese intellectual Liang Qichao (1873-1929) (35), Indian Muslim and “supporter of the Ottoman Caliphate” (an obvious challenge to European hegemony) Maulavi Barakatullah (1854-1927) (39), exiled anti-Qing activist Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925) (41), Japanese socialist Kōtoku Denjirō (1871-1911, much better known by his “pen name [of] ‘Kotoku Shusui’”) (43), Vietnamese revolutionary Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940), and others inspired a rising generation of patriots, nationalists, pan-Asianists, communists, and modernizers to slip out of the imperial nets laid over Asia and envision, in the underground, a time when Asia would be ruled by Asians once more.

The rest of *Underground Asia* follows chronologically from chapter one. Year by year, the reader watches as anti-imperialists from across half the planet search for ways to deimperialize a place which had been under the sway of Europeans for, in some regions, more than four hundred years. The cast of characters in *Underground Asia* is long, but India is arguably the protagonist. She is a strange heroine, though, as she does not come into existence until after the timeframe of the book has ended—until after, that is, the age of empires ended in the convulsions following the Second World War. India is therefore a heroine in anticipation, a protagonist in advance. But she nursed many sons to grow strong in her cause. For example, there is Jitendra Mohan Chatterjee, a member of the Bengal underground, Taraknath Das (1884-1958), who helped grow underground Asia inside North America, Rash Behari Bose (1886-1945), a man of action who evaded top Raj policeman David Petrie (1879-1961) and built up “militant cells and support within the British Indian Army” (168)—another Bose, “the young firebrand Subhas Chandra [(1897-1945)]” (474) would take over from Rash Behari and lead the Indian National Army alongside the Imperial Japanese Army against the British—Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), an exponent of *Swaraj* (self-rule), and Gurdit Singh (1860-1954), a Sikh leader who served as de facto captain of the *Komagata Maru*, a Japanese ship which Singh filled with supporters and sailed around the world in defiance of, and as a challenge to, the racist exclusionary policies of the British Empire.

India also figures prominently in an indirect way, a way hinted at by the exploits of Gurdit Singh. Harper's book has many filaments tying its parts together, but one of the strongest of those filaments is the irony of a world at the same time united under imperial banners, and closed off to travel and opportunity for the people living in those ostensibly united realms. Revolutionaries in the Netherlands East Indies, Harper tells us:

defined themselves as *orang pergerakan*, men and women of 'movement'. They were a generation who knew of nothing else but to move. They actively sought to free themselves from ties to the Dutch regime. In British India too, to throw aside a government scholarship, as Aurobindo Ghose and [revolutionary and expatriate] Har Dayal [(1834-1939)] had once done to shock contemporaries, was now [in the years at the end of and just after World War I] an established rite of passage. Many more young men and women now refused colonial education altogether. Free Schools and night schools multiplied in the moving cities of Asia (342).

But while Asia was moving, it was also stuck. As Singh proved in his *Komagata Maru* voyages, and as so many others experienced in their own ways, Europe opened Asia for Europeans, but locked it down for Asians. Once a colonial scholarship was "thrown over," there was nothing else for Asians but to sit at home, to serve Europeans in war, or, for some, to plan for a time when Europe would be in Asia no longer. And service to Europeans rankled indeed. Europeans traveled freely to colonial outposts in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Canton, Delhi, and Jakarta. The people born in those places, however, were increasingly pinned down by racist rules and restrictions which kept the privilege of free movement within and between empires reserved for Europeans. The case of India shows this best in Harper's book. There is incident after incident in *Underground Asia* in which Indians are insulted and even imprisoned, or worse, for daring to defy white supremacy in the British Raj.

But the story of course does not end here. As Harper shows with great skill, it was partly in response to the quickly hardening racist colonial policies in the European empires that revolutionaries sought to link their undergrounds with those outside the imperial spheres. Empire, in a sense, begot its own assassin. Another of Harper's main figures, for instance, is Manabendra Nath Roy (1887-1954), who moved in radical and communist circles in Mexico, America, Berlin, and Moscow and who worked with the Comintern in its attempt to overthrow Asian empires with subversion and violence. But Roy was hardly alone. Dutch revolutionary Henk Sneevliet (1883-1942) also worked closely with the Comintern, as did the most shadowy figure of all in *Underground Asia*, a man who went variously by Nguyen Tat Thanh, Ba, Nguyen Ai Quoc ("Nguyen the Patriot"), Ly Thuy, and, finally, Ho Chi Minh

(1890-1969). These and other radicals tried to bend the Comintern to the cause of Asian revolution. Empire was global first; anti-empire was global second, and caught up quickly.

But the imperialism of the West, even in a place like Russia which the West had long excluded from civilizational parity, proved too strong to overcome. Asians who had attempted to focus the Comintern's attention on European empires in Asia grew disillusioned with the heavy-handedness, racist arrogance, and Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist dogmatics of the Moscow-led Comintern. Yet another generation of Asian revolutionaries, such as Mao Zedong (1893-1976) and Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975), took the fight against empire into their own hands. What has been hidden under the communism and republicanism of such men, however, has been the networks of Asians which supported them and which made their very rises to power possible in the first place. Harper is therefore to be thanked for *Underground Asia*. Harper's foregrounding of Asians and Asian-led initiatives is, to my mind, the right way to think about European empire in Asia. Harper eschews the theoretical approaches of many others in the academy and digs deep in the archives to find what Asians themselves said and did in the days when European empires seemed to be at their strongest.

*Underground Asia* is an invaluable book, a magnum opus even, but it is not without flaws. The biggest flaw appears to be methodological. Oddly, for a volume such as this, Harper appears to have relied almost exclusively on Western-language sources. There are some 150 pages of endnotes: the majority of sources are in English, with some archival work done in French and Dutch as well. This is only fitting, of course. Harper is investigating the British Raj, imperialism in America and Canada, and the Asian empires of the Netherlands and France. The colonial archives will of course be in the languages of those respective European powers, and Harper is right to make full use of them. Furthermore, many of the revolutionaries themselves, such as early Indonesian patriot Tan Malaka (1897-1949), wrote in European languages, as well (in Malaka's case, in Dutch and occasionally English). But for a volume which is set so often in places in Japan, China, Vietnam, and other places with thriving literatures in local languages, it is unfortunate that Harper did not, it seems, avail himself of those riches. There is a wealth of material on anti-European imperialism written in Chinese and Japanese, for instance. Had this been accessed for *Underground Asia*, it would have strengthened even more an already towering work. In the future, perhaps other scholars can pick up Harper's monumental volume and write companion pieces detailing the underground networks as revealed in sources written in non-Western languages.

The above intervention, however, should not dissuade anyone from reading *Underground Asia*. It is a triumph, the near-absence of Asian languages from the endnotes notwithstanding. The book is long and will take many sittings to complete, but that is as it should be, I think. The networks of

revolutionaries, pan-Asianists, and patriots which stretched across the old European empires were almost infinitely ramified and complex. Harper's book is filled with details, with clues that help the reader link the denizens of these undergrounds to the overarching themes of the world they were shaping in a given month and year. There is far too much here to take in all at once, but, by the same measure, far too much to pass by. *Underground Asia* is changing the conversation about the late age of empire. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in how one geopolitical paradigm gives way to another.

### References

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[https://www.nas.org/academic-questions/31/2/the\\_case\\_for\\_colonialism/pdf](https://www.nas.org/academic-questions/31/2/the_case_for_colonialism/pdf)

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