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Excavating the History of Collaboration

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Collaboration in War and Memory in East Asia: A Symposium

This article is a contribution to a symposium on collaboration in East Asia during the Asia-Pacific War and its aftermath, which addresses some of the most fraught issues in historiography, historical remembrance, and contemporary politics. It also reflects on occupation states in Europe and postwar East Asia, while casting important light on contemporary issues of collaboration globally. How are we to assess occupation regimes that emerged in each East and Southeast Asian nation during the Pacific War, as well as in postwar nations including those occuped by the United States or other occupiers. Issues of collaboration in a post-colonial world may be equally salient in reflecting on the experiences of newly independent nations? The issues are closely intertwined with dominant nationalist ideologies that have characteristically obfuscated and dismissed collaborationist politics while establishing their own legitimacy, or what Timothy Brook calls their "untouchability". In the post Cold War milieu, and at a time when politicians on both sides of the Taiwan straits, and across the 38th parallel that divides North and South Korea, are redefining their relationships, it becomes possible to revisit the history of war, revolution, occupation and collaboration.

This symposium on war and collaboration in East Asia and globally features contributions by Timothy Brook, Prasenjit Duara, Suk-Jung Han, Heonik Kwon, a response by Brook and a further contribution by Margherita Zanasi. The authors examine war and collaboration in China, Korea, Vietnam, and Manchukuo, in history and memory and in comparative perspective. The symposium includes the following articles:

1. Timothy Brook, Collaboration in the History of Wartime East Asia
2. Prasenjit Duara, Collaboration and the Politics of the Twentieth Century
3. Suk-Jung Han, On the Question of Collaboration in South Korea
4. Heonik Kwon, Excavating the History of Collaboration
5. Timothy Brook, Collaboration in the Postwar
6. Margherita Zanasi, New Perspectives on Chinese Collaboration

Japan Focus anticipates and welcomes responses to the symposium. These will be published in future issues. MS

In southern France, there was a group of people who lived through the time of the Vichy regime somewhat differently from most of their neighbors. A few of them still survive, in France or in Vietnam, but most have passed away. In 1937-1938, the French colonial authority in Indochina conscripted numerous laborers from the central region of Vietnam and shipped them to the great Mediterranean city of Marseilles. There, the two thousand Vietnamese were brought to the notorious poudrerie—the powdery of Marseilles. The conscripts manufactured gunpowder for the French army

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and, under the Vichy regime, for the German army under French management. A number of these Vietnamese laborer-soldiers objected to their situation and joined the French résistance, whereas others continued to endure the appalling working conditions in the powdery. After sharing the humiliating experience of German occupation with the French citizens, these foreign conscripts found themselves in a highly precarious situation after their return home in 1948: the cadres in the Vietnamese revolutionary movement distrusted them, indeed looked upon them as collaborators with the colonial regime; the French took no interest in their past service to their national economy or their contribution to the resistance movement against the German occupiers. Many of these returnees perished in the ensuing chaos of war, and many of their children joined the revolutionary resistance movement in the following era, which the Vietnamese call the war against America. One returnee who survived the carnage has an extraordinary story of survival to tell: how he rescued his family in 1953 from the imminent threat of summary execution by pleading to French soldiers in their language, and again in 1967 thanks to the presence of an American officer in the pacification team who understood a few words of French as a result of having fought in Europe during World War II. The man's youngest brother died unmarried and without a descendent, and so the man's eldest son now performs periodic death-anniversary rites on behalf of the deceased. His brother was killed in action during the Vietnam War as a soldier of the South Vietnamese army, and his eldest son is a decorated former partisan fighter belonging to the national liberation front.



French forces parachute into Dienbienphu, 1954

Anyone who studies the reality of a modern war, especially life under prolonged military occupation, will surely encounter stories of collaboration between the subjugated locals and the occupying power. No matter how brutal and unjust the process, military occupation is distinct from conquest in which some form of ties are constructed between the conquered and the conqueror, not least for rebuilding a functioning social order and security after the devastation. The cooperation is often a coerced one; people may have no choice but to cooperate. Since the authority that demands cooperation may have brutally harmed the locals in the process of conquest, collaborating with this authority can be a morally explosive issue. Nevertheless, when a war of conquest develops to become a politics of occupation, or when the conquering power is defeated, the history of war inevitably involves stories of collaboration, and understanding that history remains critically incomplete without knowledge of these stories. The last is the message of Timothy Brook's gripping account of collaboration in wartime China.

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Brook's approach to the Chinese encounter with Japanese invasion and occupation is not merely about the reactions this devastating encounter triggered on the Chinese side, but equally about how to approach this important yet sensitive subject free from the dominant national historical narrative in China, which fails to acknowledge the existence of collaboration with the occupying power. The mere mention of collaboration can still set off charged emotional reactions. Brook explains that his intention is to recover the deeper "political landscape" of occupation, which he contrasts to the "moral landscape" of historical denial and misrepresentation. This dual scheme of historical knowledge is expressed in various other terms, such as surface knowledge/deep reality, simplicity/complexity, and clarity/ambiguity, and it constitutes an organizing principle in Brook's alternative narrative that features fascinating case studies. The moral landscape of occupation enforces a clear, uncontested boundary between the victims and the perpetrators of injustice; the political landscape was a much more complex one consisting of myriad transgressions and ambiguities as well as repression and resistance. Brook's political/moral divide is therefore a way of making an authoritative claim of empirical knowledge of the past over an ideological and selective misrepresentation of it.

The analytical divide is understandable, considering the sensitivity of the subject, and may be necessary for engaging with a history marred by national truth claims and national denials. The damage caused by colonial occupation is far from a settled topic, but remains a haunting subject not only between China and Japan but throughout the wider Pacific Asian region. However, Brook's moral/political divide raises a few conceptual issues, both in terms of political theory and in view of a wider horizon of collaboration in the region's modern political history.

As illustrated in the story from Marseilles' Powdery, the history of collaboration is not limited to the time of colonialism, which Brook focuses on, but continues to the subsequent era of the global cold war and beyond. I say cold war era with some reservation, being aware that this particular reference to the epochal political form that permeated the second half of the twentieth century is at odds with how nations in the postcolonial world experienced the epoch of radical political bipolarity, in terms of vicious and often protracted civil wars, international wars, and other organized violence rather than a "cold" imaginary war of containment and deterrence, as was the case in Western Europe and North America. We know that the unresolved questions of political collaboration with the colonial power were closely intertwined with the complications of postcolonial nation building and the political bipolarization that frequently characterized it. In the context of an ideologically charged civil war waged as part of a global bipolar confrontation, people were driven to take sides with one or the other political force and, when the frontline moved, those who had cooperated with the other side—whether a foreign power or a domestic force—were severely and brutally punished. In the experience of many communities, the frontline moved as often and as regularly as night changed to day. This was patently the case in the theatre of the Vietnam War as well as in the Korean War, and the punishment of collaborators often targeted not only individuals accused of culpability but often entire families or communities to which these individuals belonged. The politics of collaboration in this historical context was about the coerced mobilization of labor and resources by the bifurcated political forces. It was also about the devastation of communal norms and relations when the coerced collaboration with one side called in brutal actions from the other side, and when this reciprocal violence extended to retaliatory actions within the community and between groups of people who suffered violence from

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different sides. Seen against this tortuous, chaotic historical background, the moral and political landscapes of collaboration suggested by Brook take on new significance.

The conceptual separation between the moral and political landscape assumes a certain clarity in the friend/enemy antithesis—the contrast which Carl Schmidt defines in The Concept of the Political as foundational to the sovereignty of the modern state. The moral discourse described by Brook radicalizes this clarity by denying that a zone of ambiguity existed between friends and enemy, thereby generating a sense of absolute internal moral solidarity and purity in opposition to an absolute notion of external enemy. The political landscape Brook paints challenges this discursive representation and, in doing so, aims to shed critical light on the propensity to base political sovereignty on a radical clarity of friend/enemy contrast. The problem is, however, that what appears to Brook to be a moral and moralizing discursive practice is in fact a highly political practice relating to the construction of state sovereignty.

If the moral discourse of collaboration is actually a political practice, the political reality of collaboration, in turn, can be considered in moral or ethical terms. The Vietnamese family introduced above has a multiple history of cooperating with the wrong side of the political divide, according to how this is defined by the postwar political community. One grandfather worked for the French colonial army, and his brother fought in opposition to the Vietnamese revolutionary movement, or in postwar Vietnamese classification the ben kia (the "American" side, as against bent ta, "our side"). This history of collaboration coexists in a family with a history of patriotic contribution, such as that embodied by his eldest son, and these two histories interact with each other within the family in ways that differ from how they play out in the wider society: the man's experience of working in France helped to save his family from annihilation; his son's record of revolutionary merit helped to rescue his family from the stigmatic status of a collaborator or "reactionary" family, which many other families had to endure in postwar years. Seen within the family history and context, therefore, there is another history of collaboration emerging, related to but distinct from the political history of collaboration detailed by Brook. This moral history of collaboration is about how historical actors cared for each other, and how they together strived to survive the prevailing political divide and maintain a normative life amidst the polarizing divide through collaborating with each other. If we look closely enough, we will probably find similar histories of collaboration across political divides existing in the wider social field, between families and communities, and perhaps in an even broader horizon.


Combined Action Company, Khe Sanh 1967, CPT Haines Commander

The above agenda entails recognition of the fact that beneath the political landscape of collaboration there is another spectrum of collaborative human actions that exists within and against the extreme polarization that is the product of war and occupation. In excavating the muddy political history of collaboration, it will be important to dig further and to try to touch the bedrock history of human collaboration. In conducting this archaeology of history, it will be equally instructive to compare

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the bodies of unearthed objects from different sites and from different layers of a site. The comparison of materials from European and Asian sites is important, as Brook shows, yet so will be comparisons among different Asian sites as well as comparing materials discovered from the layer of colonial history to those emerging from the layer of bipolar national history. Brook's work makes an important, decisive step towards this hopeful prospect of discovery.

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