

Title—World War One in Southeast Asia: Colonialism and Anticolonialism in an Era of Global Conflict

Author—Heather Streets-Salter

Year—2017

Categories: World History, Politics, (Anti)Colonialism, Subaltern

Place: Southeast Asia

Time: 1914-1918

Argument Synopsis:

Streets-Salter's book attempts to be a model for doing world history without compromising archival research or individual stories. Her book tells the stories of the connections between colonies, as opposed to merely focusing on connections between colonies and their respective metropolises. The focus of the book is the experience of the region of Southeast Asia during the first world war, in an attempt to illuminate World War One as a truly global conflict. She identifies two main goals with the book, the first being to highlight the global nature of the first world war and the second being to demonstrate that it is possible to write world history without sacrificing small-scale stories. Thus she does not set out to write a definitive history of all anticolonial movements in all Southeast Asian colonies, as this would almost certainly come at the expense of small-scale, people driven stories. She relies primarily on colonial sources read 'against the grain.' In other words, she uses colonial sources that tracked perceived 'threats' in an effort to reveal the lives and stories of some of the people who sought to resist colonial rule in the region. Streets-Salter's book is about people whose strategies transcended colonial and national borders and who acted as members of organizations larger than the colony or nation-state.

The book starts with a few chapters devoted to the 1915 mutiny in Singapore, which Streets-Salter argues can be seen as a microcosm of the way the first world war affected the entire region of Southeast Asia. The mutiny is focused on from the point of view of the rebels, and she argues that encouragement by pro-German and pan-Islam print and people combined with pre-existing grievances produced the mutiny. When seen in the context of the larger region, the same currents that caused the mutiny in 1915 were active throughout the surrounding region. After the first few chapters focused on the mutiny, the book turns to a wider look at the region in order to demonstrate that the war affected the neutral powers in the region as much as the belligerents. She posits that the neutrals, willing or not, aided in furthering German, India, Ottoman, and Vietnamese conspiracies against the Allies. The role of the neutral states during the first world war helps to highlight the messy and interlocked nature of modern colonialism.

World histories are stories that cannot be understood only in the context of local or regional perspectives, and Streets-Salter uses this definition to argue that her book is a world history. Unlike the grand sweeping world histories that dominated the twentieth century, her book tells a global story without sacrificing individual stories. Importantly, she argues that these connections can not only be seen by us, but that the actors at the time understood these connections as well.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Southeast Asia did not determine the outcome of the first world war, but the experience of the first world war profoundly shaped the region of Southeast Asia
- Experience of Southeast Asia during the first world war highlights the messy and interlinked nature of modern colonialism
- World War One affected neutral countries as much as belligerents, especially in this region