

# [Global Histories]

## A student journal

**Review: “World War One in Southeast Asia: Colonialism and Anticolonialism in an Era of Global Conflict” By Heather Streets-Salter**

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2018.187>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 4, No. 1 (May 2018), pp. 189–192

ISSN: 2366-780X

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Publisher information:

‘Global Histories: A Student Journal’ is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. ‘Global Histories’ is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

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## **World War One in Southeast Asia: Colonialism and Anticolonialism in an Era of Global Conflict**

By Heather Streets-Salter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, Pp. 246, Paperback £ 23.99, ISBN: 978-1316501092

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### **REVIEWED BY KELVIN YUDIANTO**

Most people identify World War I with trench warfare in Western Europe. Yet, in *World War One in Southeast Asia*, Heather Streets-Salter demonstrates that the war also unfolded in a region located thousands of mile away from Europe. As Streets-Salter describes, the book has three related empirical contributions. First, it adds to a growing body of works on the Great War whose research scope goes beyond the European fronts. Second, it examines an understudied front of the Great War. Finally, the book contributes to a recent historiography which argues that the war was truly a global phenomenon.

Streets-Salter's journey with the book project began unexpectedly in the French colonial archives of Aix-en-Provence. While researching late nineteenth-century linkages between British Malaya, French Indochina, and Dutch East Indies, Streets-Salter stumbled upon archival documents about the 1915 mutiny in Singapore, a British colony. She had never heard of this incident before. Further research on the mutiny supported Streets-Salter's initial hypothesis, namely, that the event could not be fully understood without considering its relation to global events and movements. Following the threads, Streets-Salter also discovered that the Singaporean event represents how World War I affected a broader segment of Southeast Asia.

While acknowledging that the Southeast Asian war front was not crucial in deciding the final outcome of World War I, Streets-Salter contends that by examining the Southeast Asian front, one could better understand the broader mechanism of World War I. This is possible because the Southeast Asian front was globally connected to other fronts. Many factors that played out on those other fronts unfolded in Southeast Asia—for instance, the Central Powers' global efforts to instigate rebellions in British India had operations in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the Great War would significantly shape the region even long after it ended, as in the case of war-posed security risks inducing colonial officers to strengthen their intelligence agencies. Such an effort was important for the British attempt to check communism and the Japanese expansion during the interwar years. The war also disrupted communication and economy across the region.

Streets-Salter also makes two methodological contributions through the book. First, she underscores the weakness of the metropole/colony framework commonly found in the history of empire and colonialism. This framework presup-

poses that colonies (e.g. British Malaya and French Indochina) and their respective metropolises (e.g. Britain and France) are “more or less discreet units” (p.6) and are crucial to understanding the workings of empires. Streets-Salter, however, posits that many colonial structures operated outside the metropole/colony nexus. She shows that colonial actors often interacted with actors or processes that existed outside colonial limits. In this way, Streets-Salter contributes to an emerging body of scholarship that views modern empires as “porous, interconnected, and frequently disrupted by transnational or global forces” (p.7).

Second, the book adds to a small body of scholarship demonstrating that it is possible to inculcate local details while writing about world history. Most works on world history typically examine structures and processes over huge areas or long periods of time, for instance, the Columbian Exchange and the Great Divergence. Yet, the broad geographic and temporal scopes of such works often render local subtleties as aggregates. Consequently, those subtleties are seldom discussed in the works. Streets-Salter demonstrates that this does not have to be the case. In the book, she shows how trans-regional forces such as the Ottoman-inspired pan-Islamism and the German-backed revolutionary nationalism interacted with local forces during the war in Southeast Asia.

The first two chapters examine the 1915 Singapore Mutiny. Streets-Salter dedicates a considerable amount of space on the incident because it “encapsulates so clearly the ways the World War I came to Southeast Asia” (p.17). Chapter 1 focuses on the causes of the mutiny from the standpoint of the mutineers—the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian infantry regiment. Streets-Salter mainly attributes the mutiny to two factors: German-Indian-Ottoman anti-Allied propaganda and the subversive actions of pro-German activists in Singapore. In turn, Chapter 2 explores how global processes that traversed the metropole/colony axis shaped official and civilian responses to the mutiny. Among others, Britain, France, Russia, and Japan coordinated a forceful response that effectively suppressed the mutiny only a few days after it started. This cooperation happened despite a history of strained relations between Britain and each of the other three powers.

Chapters 3–6 examine the substantial importance that both the Allies and the Central Powers bestowed upon the neutral territories of Southeast Asia. These chapters show that those territories “were not simply curious sideshows” in how the war unfolded in the region because they provided strategic locations from which the Central Powers could attack nearby Allied colonies (p.89). Although several important works have examined the Central Powers’ attempts to instigate rebellion in Allied colonies, these works have mainly focused on North America, Central Asia, or on the German-Ottoman relationship, but have largely ignored or glossed over Southeast Asia. Taken together, then, these chapters “explore [a] mostly uncharted historiographical terrain” within the literature on World War I (p.89).

Both Chapter 3 and 4 discuss how war dynamics impacted the neutral Dutch East Indies, and vice versa. Chapter 3 discusses how the war disrupted the economy and communication networks of the Dutch colony of East Indies. It also explores how the Dutch, resolved to abide by its neutrality stance and not be dragged to war by the belligerents, tried its best to accommodate the interests of both the Allies and Germany. Chapter 4 examines German attempts to send arms from the United States to revolutionaries in India through ships that passed by the East Indies. It also recounts how British officials successfully built connections with two German double agents, who in turn provided crucial information that led to the arrests of four men who had links with the German-Indian anti-Allied conspiracy.

Chapter 5 explores how the war unfolded in Siam. Streets-Salter illustrates that as a neutral territory surrounded by British India, British Malaya, and French Indochina on its three sides, Siam was another suitable hub for the Central Powers to plot and conduct subversions against the Allies. Finally, Chapter 6 mainly explores how Germany supported China-based Vietnamese revolutionaries to cause disturbances in neighboring French Indochina.

Streets-Salter's book contributes to the Southeast Asian historiography in a few ways. First, it demonstrates the relevance of the Great War to the history of Southeast Asia. The Great War itself is a subfield of modern Southeast Asian history that has been explored little. Second, the book adds to a growing body of works showing that different parts of Southeast Asia were connected with one another and with parts of the globe other than their respective colonial metropolises. These works challenge the prevailing nation-centric framework found in the historiography of Southeast Asia. Those works which do address Southeast Asia's transnational history tend to only explore the early modern period. Streets-Salter's work, however, contributes to the historiography of twentieth-century Southeast Asia—a subfield where state-centric analysis still dominates.

One limitation of the book was the general omission of the Philippines from the discussion, despite descriptions throughout the book describing the territory as a way station for several U.S. ships transporting weapons and anti-Allied propaganda materials for the conspirators. A closer examination of the Philippines would actually provide a relevant backdrop to other parts of Southeast Asia—especially Siam and the Dutch East Indies—since as a U.S. colony it remained neutral until early 1917.

Overall, the book is an important addition to preexisting scholarship. Besides contributing to a growing body of works examining the global dimension of the Great War, it also contributes to an emerging body of scholarship that explores the interconnectivity of Southeast Asia. By analyzing how the war unfolded in the region, the book also analyzes an area of modern Southeast Asian history that has been less explored. In addition, the book represents a way of writing that challenges the dominant frameworks of colonial and world history respectively. Writ-

ing a monograph that navigates different historical genres is certainly demanding. However, Streets-Salter makes it look easy. The book is easily read and is, therefore, suitable for both undergraduate and graduate students. It is also a must-read for historians of both World War I and Southeast Asia.