

**SMALL
WARS,
FARAWAY
PLACES**

The Genesis of the Modern World:
1945–65

MICHAEL BURLEIGH

PAN BOOKS



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INTRODUCTION

From the Halls of Montezuma to the Green Zone of Baghdad

At the height of President George W. Bush's 2003 intervention in Iraq, bold spirits urged the United States to do as Rudyard Kipling once urged in 1899, following the lightning US conquest of the Spanish overseas empire:

*Take up the White Man's burden –
Send forth the best ye breed –
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need . . .*

Yet in mid-1945, when the US assumed leadership of the free world, half a century after Kipling wrote and another before President Bush acted, history and tradition rendered such a choice a more equivocal affair for Americans than it is often made to seem. The pitifully needy condition of Europe after 1945, resembling the continent's million wandering orphans, sealed the fate of its distant colonies. In Asia these fell like ninepins to the marauding Japanese from early 1942 onwards. The example of Nazism more generally discredited the notion that race determined political destinies, as did Imperial Japan's occupation of Asia, with which this book begins.

It tells the story of the eclipse of those empires, of the birth of some of the nation states that replaced them, and of how the US (and the Soviet Union) reacted to these developments. These struggles for independence, in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, coincided with the

intense superpower competition called the Cold War. The Americans had to suppress a long-standing disinclination to meddle in other countries – a view caricatured as ‘isolationism’ – and an inherent dislike of colonial rule stemming from their own freedom fight against the British. That was notwithstanding an imperialist spasm of the Republic’s own just before and after the dawn of the twentieth century, or intensified interference in Mexico and the Caribbean. Colonies shocked Americans, from the Presidents downwards, and despite racial segregation in the Southern states. After a wartime visit to Gambia, President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote to his son Elliott: ‘Dirt. Disease. Very high mortality rate. I asked. Life expectancy – you’d never guess what it is. Twenty-six years. These people are treated worse than livestock. Their cattle live longer!’ In the case of French Indochina, Roosevelt agreed with Stalin that French rule there was ‘rotten to the core’. As an article in *Life* magazine had it in October 1942: ‘One thing we are sure we are not fighting for is to hold the British Empire together.’

However, by the late 1940s, when the Cold War had begun in earnest, the United States calculated that propping up colonial empires was cheaper than deploying US troops, while accepting the argument that European metropolises economically weakened by decolonization would become as susceptible to Communist subversion as their colonies. Because the Soviet Union was the sole Communist state, it was assumed that its directing hand was responsible for subversion everywhere: it had after all established the Communist International, or Comintern, for that purpose in 1919. In fact, despite being Lenin’s former Commissar responsible for nationalities, Stalin was uninterested in the Third World. A red mist clouded the vision of America’s governing class, even when Yugoslavia and then China took another route. State Department experts also sometimes failed to detect reds under every bed and President Dwight Eisenhower warned of the dangers to democracy of a military-industrial complex. Of course, American inability to discriminate between Communist regimes was as nothing compared with the incapacity of successive Communist regimes to learn from the disasters of those who went before them, so that Mao repeated many of the same ‘errors’ – meaning murderous experiments in collectivization – as Stalin, whose own radicality was eclipsed by Cambodia’s Pol Pot.

Not all Americans were enamoured of their new world role. US Congressmen routinely opposed any spending on new embassy buildings the State Department thought commensurate with post-war US power, because they and their constituents resented ‘striped pants’ elitists bent on squandering their hard-earned cash on glass ziggurats in faraway places. Actually, foreign service officers often worked in dangerous places, where the air they breathed or the water they drank could kill them, not to speak of air travel, which was far more lethal than it is now. The resentments were reciprocal. US Secretary of State Dean Acheson, an East Coast elitist and Anglophile, once gave the game away by publicly remarking: ‘If you truly had a democracy and did what people wanted, you’d go wrong every time.’ That is more relevant than ever at a time when Western intervention in Afghanistan is massively unpopular in Europe and the US.

This US accommodation with late European empire was eased by the fact that the colonial powers had themselves adopted the rhetoric of happy families progressing towards self-rule (notably the British Commonwealth but also the French Union) even as they fought vicious rearguard actions against nationalists in their colonies. What commenced as a response to Britain’s admission that it no longer had the means to support Greece and Turkey became the 1947 Truman Doctrine of potentially limitless global security undertakings. Republican Senator Robert Taft spoke up to oppose the conversion of the United States into ‘a meddlesome Mattie, interfering in every trouble throughout the world’. This linked him to a venerable tradition in US foreign policy going back to John Quincy Adams’s reluctance to support Greek nationalists in the early 1820s, no mean gesture in a land with a city called Philadelphia, and forward to the pre-9/11 foreign policy of George W. Bush, which defined itself in opposition to the fitful humanitarian interventions of William Jefferson Clinton. In the 1940s, the influential newspaper columnist Walter Lippmann was among the first to see that this newly achieved American ‘globalism’ also passed the initiative to the Soviets, who could defeat the US by ‘disorganizing states that are already disorganized, by disuniting peoples that are torn with civil strife, and by inciting their discontent which is already very great’. The US would become embroiled in ‘recruiting, subsidizing and supporting

a heterogeneous army of satellites, clients, dependents and puppets’, a highly prescient description of the decades covered in this book, 1945–65. Mindful not to alienate large numbers of West European Communists attached to their respective empires, the Soviets also reluctantly adjusted their theoretical doctrines so as to accommodate ‘bourgeois’ nationalists – for there were not many industrial proletarians in the Third World, before Khrushchev decided to compete with the US for influence in the developing world. By the end of the 1960s, Mao’s China made a bid to lead all Third World revolutionary struggles. While relations with the Soviets cooled, Mao also grew impatient with India’s pretensions to being an equal partner in the affairs of Asia. This led to war between the two most populous Asian nations over disputed territories in the Himalayas. Nations seeking to free themselves from colonialism were sucked into this vast superpower conflict, often with devastating local effects, despite attempts begun by Yugoslavia and taken over by India to non-align the new Asian and African states in a distinctive Third World camp at the April 1955 Bandung Conference. The two major empires were those of Britain and France, though there is some attention paid to the Netherlands East Indies too.

Books on empire seem to oblige the authors to give a verdict and/or statement or confession of views about the subject, although this is less contentious in the case of the Macedonian, Roman, Persian or Han empires of the ancient past where the ‘civilizing’ effects seem less controversial at such a great remove. Contemporary history is more sensitive, even though empires have been more normative than either democracies or nation states in the broad history of humankind. Just as many Americans disliked the US’s global role, so not all Europeans were eager for empire, and nor did they all live in castles and chateaux either. There were and are many critics of imperialism. Emotional investment in empire was limited, except in Scotland, to the prefect class from the private schools, inspired by the Christian warriors depicted in the stained glass of their chapels. Its ethos was anti-democratic. As one proconsul wrote from northern Nigeria, ‘the duty of colonial trusteeship lay . . . in protecting the virtues of northern [Nigerian] aristocratic life and its communal economy’ from the ‘barbarizing effects of European capitalism, democracy and individualism’. The British ruling

classes enmeshed indigenous elites in all the fluff and flummery of chivalric orders and titles, for when all was said and done the British knew how to mount a damn good show. Though they may be suckers for ‘our’ royal weddings, most Americans can separate the fluff from statecraft. They are not Romans to British Greeks, a conceit with unfortunate contemporary undertones. This is not to deprecate or ignore such objective improvements as the eradication of tropical diseases or constructing telegraphs, railways and roads, not to speak of legal systems and (through schools) the Christian virtues, which nowadays are more pervasive in Africa than in the secular former imperial metropolises. Actual literacy rates often told another story. Long after it ceased to exist, empire also left a sense of mass national entitlement and elite Romantic ambition, which endures as Britain punching above its actual capacities and resources, or the assumption lower down the social scale that a defined pool of foreigners would always do the unpleasant jobs. While your author is not a crusader trying to right past injustices, he has a realistic view of empire and its unfortunate legacies to the former colonial powers, including the subconscious ways it affects so many international moralists, for that is part of punching above one’s weight too, however much human rights advocates would not appreciate me saying so.

So, this book is about a crucial transitional era in which power tangibly passed from European capitals to the ‘World Capital on the Potomac’. Beneath that secular process, dozens of new nations struggled into independent existence, many successfully, some disastrously. Since a book which discussed every struggle for independence would be impossibly long, I have selected those which most interest me, favouring depth of field rather than a wide-angled focus. As it is, I reluctantly decided to cut lengthy sections on Angola, Mozambique and South Africa, despite months spent researching them. In all cases the presence or absence of a charismatic leader such as Chiang Kai-shek, Chairman Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, Patrice Lumumba or Jomo Kenyatta was determinative. Who remembers the Malayan Communist leader Chin Peng, one of the few among my cast of characters who, aged ninety at the time of writing, still lurks somewhere over the Thai border? Much blood was shed in what was not a

sociological process, though it is worth recalling that in Africa – often regarded as uniquely savage – the initial wave of statehood cost less life than the number of Americans killed each year on the roads. That was certainly not true of Algeria or Indochina, where millions died, nor of Korea, where the death toll was similarly colossal as the super-powers fought a proxy war and the Americans came up against Mao's armies.

This period of small wars in faraway places is highly topical, not least in contemporary military circles, which study them obsessively. This book explores a number of those fought by the British and French, or the Japanese before them, questioning some of the received wisdom whereby bludgeoning incompetents were supplanted by quasi-heroic sophisticates practising ‘population-centric’ hearts-and-minds warfare. Generals and military experts have ransacked this period for ‘how to do it’ lessons for contemporary Iraq and Afghanistan, often by ignoring what tactics actually won atypical campaigns in favour of what best resembles what they want to do in the present.

I branch out into the parallel experiences of the US in the Philippines and Vietnam, where in the first case the Americans directed a highly successful counter-insurgency campaign, and in the second inherited and compounded the disaster left by the French. In reality, hearts-and-minds campaigns only worked once kinetic force – a euphemism for killing people – had achieved population and spatial control, as such contemporary adepts as General David Petraeus do not readily acknowledge in their apparent unawareness that the Japanese also pioneered this style of warfare long before the British in Malaya. The British triumphed in Malaya, which they were leaving anyway, against an enemy limited to part of an ethnic minority, just as in Kenya their Mau Mau opponents consisted of marginalized elements of the Kikuyu tribe. In Algeria and Indochina the French had the majority populations against them and lost against guerrillas who could weave in and out of neighbouring states. China and the Soviet Union also poured men and weapons into Indochina. Able to dissociate leftist Algerian nationalists from Communists, the Americans proved unable to do the same in the case of the Vietnamese and ended up fighting a disastrous war that became uniquely their own. Obviously the ability to discriminate

between Communist states was hampered by their generic internal similarities, with secret policemen consigning broadly defined opponents to concentration camps, whether in Albania, Bulgaria, China or Vietnam.

Using counter-insurgency campaigns as paradigms for contemporary practice also involves ignoring their less savoury aspects. These were deliberately concealed by the destruction of incriminating written materials relating to brutality, murder and torture. Even the ashes of burned papers were pulverized by the British, while crates crammed with papers were dropped into deep sea, where there were no currents to wash them up again. The so-called legacy files handed on to the post-colonial successor governments were systematically weeded too. When a file flagged as a watch file (stamped W) was surreptitiously removed from an archive, a dummy twin was created to fill its place, with suitably anodyne content. This ever so deliberate work was to be done only by white colonial police officers. The archive policy was decreed by Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's Colonial Secretary Iain Macleod so that materials that 'might embarrass Her Majesty's governments' or 'members of the police, military forces, public servants or others e.g. police informers' or that might be 'used unethically by ministers in the successor government' would never see the light of day. The surviving files were secreted in a Foreign Office communications centre in Buckinghamshire until lawyers acting for Kenyan victims of British maltreatment forced their selective release into the public domain in 2011.

The period I have chosen to write about is one in which many contemporary developments can be discerned, like ships appearing on the horizon, from Cuba to China and Palestine to Pakistan, though I happen to believe that contemporaries also make their own destinies in a past that was no more determined than the present. For many contemporaries, some of the major transformations described here were inconceivable at the time, whether the coming to power of Mao's Communists in China or the swift demise of what seemed to be unas-sailable global empires. People probably once felt the same way about the impossibility of democracy or racial integration. Then there are the certainties which have been overturned in subsequent decades. How

many Americans can recall that Pakistan was among the US's most solidly reliable allies, whereas India was regarded as suspiciously pink? Who would have imagined, given the US's tragic invovements in Indochina, that nowadays it would be conducting joint naval exercises with Communist Vietnam designed to contain Chinese claims to a few submerged rocks in the northern Pacific as it asserts its own Monroe Doctrine?

Historians organize decades of history, impressing their own periodization on them – the Age of Discovery; the European Civil War 1890–1945; the Cold War 1947–1989 and so forth – as they have done since the Renaissance implicitly defined a Dark Age following classical antiquity. But the lives of contemporaries rarely fit such divisions neatly, especially since until recently youth was not mandatory for high political office. Throughout I have sought to convey the generational experiences of the men who were at the centres of these events, although it is worth noting how, for example, fear of repeating 1930s appeasement still haunts leaders far too young to have lived it, as it did Presidents Truman, Kennedy and Johnson. That is why I have included biographical sketches of the main players: to emphasize the myriad experiences they brought to the decisions they made during these two decades. What did future nationalist leaders from Africa or Asia think when as young men they gawped at the ornate buildings in huge European capitals, and from within whose elegant façades the destinies of their countrymen were arranged according to abstract or inaccurate anthropological principles, or in line with considerations of international balances of power that had little or nothing to do with them? Speaking of these future leaders, it requires an act of imaginative recovery to grasp the sheer vitality of Marxist-Leninism or the ‘national socialisms’, which in ensuing decades have in turn been swept aside by Communo-capitalism or political Islamism. I hope I give the worm’s-eye view too, that is the perspective of the men and women amid whom cold and hot wars were waged as well as that of the intelligence officers who flit in and out of this story like shifting shadows. Many of the subjects dealt with here also have a remarkable pertinacity, for example Iranian belief in the almost occult role of the British in their national affairs, a form of paranoia they share with the Russians,

as they uncover cameras placed by the Secret Intelligence Service (popularly known as MI6) in fake rocks in Moscow parks. One can hear this paranoia in the words of the Iranian nationalist leader Mohammed Mossadeq, although he had every justification for feeling very afraid. The most tense borders in the world – in Korea or Kashmir – derive from this period, as do the unresolved problems of Israel and its neighbours, one of over twenty or more extant problems in the post-colonial Middle East.

The following narrative unashamedly swerves, turns in on itself and revisits key events in different contexts, in an attempt to weave them together in something approximating to their multi-layered complexity. It would be impossible for my readers to follow a simultaneous account of events in very different cultures thousands of miles apart from one another, as we would have to jump back and forth from Algeria to Kenya via Malaya and Indochina. Beneath whatever modish stances states struck were also what amounted to cultural demiurges, evident in, for example, India's far-from-smooth relations with China or the latter's with the Vietnamese, which have to be considered too. Although the military mind is often amnesiac, there were clear examples of one campaign influencing another, or of mindsets formed in one context, such as French Indochina, pre-programming a determination to win in another, in this case Algeria, even if this meant mutinous paratroopers descending on central Paris. The connections can be surprising, and the morality involved was usually obscure, most obviously in the Anglo-French-Israeli plot to overthrow Nasser or in the Kennedy brothers conniving with the Mafia to kill Fidel Castro, himself no slouch at assassinating his enemies. 'Good' decisions, such as Lyndon Johnson's not to use military force to stop China becoming a nuclear power, contributed to the 'bad' one of attempting to crush North Vietnam by conventional bombing to reassure Asia-Pacific allies made anxious by China's first nuclear-bomb test in October 1964. I have tried throughout to indicate these connections and ironies.

All maps fundamentally distort the reality they depict, including those using words rather than lines and shading. Thus, for effect, I have tilted on its head the map familiar to many Europeans and North Americans by beginning in East Asia with a series of cascading responses

to the effect of the Japanese lunge south in 1941–2, followed by the impact of global war on the greater Middle East. This is primarily designed to encourage readers to think on a commensurate scale about places that may not come readily to mind. After the only occasion, in Korea, where US and Soviet forces fought one another in the air, we turn to what in reality were simultaneous counter-insurgency wars, mainly in South and East Asia, with the coup in Iran against Mossadeq in 1953 and the Suez Crisis in 1956 marking the midway point of the book, and the moment when US power was most nakedly revealed to its own allies. This was when thoughtful British people realized they were no longer a great power, although many of their fellows have still not grasped that reality in the twenty-first century.

The extremely costly struggles between colonizers and nationalist insurgents in Algeria and Kenya follow, until we revert to the global superpower contest, and the competition for influence in Africa and South Asia, culminating in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the most ominous crisis of the entire conflict. In a way all the small wars were surrogates for the avoidance of such a moment when people might have awakened to the northern hemisphere destroyed by huge arsenals of nuclear bombs. Throughout I have intermittently referred to the parallel growth of those deadly stockpiles, to remind readers what was ultimately at stake whenever American or Russian agents clashed in some remote country according to their own ‘big boys’ rules’. The book ends with the US acting as a colonial power amid the debris of its nation-building efforts in South Vietnam, the event which fixed the widespread perception of the US as another, infinitely more successful, imperial power that persists to this day. And so it may seem, with the Pentagon’s thousand or more overseas military bases, ranging from the Green Zone in Baghdad to a drone hangar on the Seychelles, though even America’s critics relentlessly continue to admire and consume its high and low material and intellectual cultures.

As Sir Vidia Naipaul has reminded me, historians of ancient Rome from Appian of Alexandria to Edward Gibbon were still striving to understand the long-term significance of major events that had taken place centuries earlier. That is a respectable justification for the endless rehashing of the history of the Second World War in Europe, and of

more or less exiguous episodes within it. Here I want readers to focus on the two seminal decades of the Cold War, which for the older among them is the world they came from, or in my case the one in which I grew up. I wanted a depth of field that would be lost if the global story were dragged out through the 1970s and 1980s. This period really did result in the wider world as we have come to know it – obliged, as every sentient citizen is, to think much more globally than paradoxically was often the case in the first age of globalization.

Imperialism is a touchy subject, although I have tried to avoid a bland ‘on the one hand, on the other’ median tone. What follows is not a work of advocacy history, for I have little ideological and even less nostalgic investment in the events described, and your historian is not an ancillary to activist lawyers campaigning for empire’s victims. But such questions as how to wage war on irregular opponents hidden among entire populations have a contemporary relevance, as do how societies claiming to represent civilization disguise torture with euphemisms. The book will not please those who wish for a reaffirmation of their simple dogmas, but then they seldom read anything outside their own approved canon. Fortunately, most readers do not fall into that narrow category, and people of many ages and national backgrounds will read this book. They include those living in societies still marked by empire’s long recessional – such as my own – as well as those who have as yet to find ways of demythologizing the founding myths of their national liberation. The liberation-era pieties of Algeria’s ruling FLN seem pretty hollow to many unemployed Algerians under twenty-five, particularly if they see the children of the governing elite driving around in Porsches. I hope the book has the same effect on the open-minded as the surprise of looking at a painting under X-ray to find a messy multi-layered affair of false starts and second thoughts beneath the smooth surface, in this case consisting of choices and decisions by people much as ourselves.

1. JAPAN OPENS PANDORA'S BOX

A War for the Future of the World

The end of the Second World War was like a starting pistol for what the uninvolved often dismiss as ‘little’ colonial wars. From December 1941 Japanese forces had swept all before them, defying the huge latent industrial capacities of their enemies. These were experienced warriors who had been at war in northern China since 1937. A series of powerful thrusts took the invaders into South-east Asia, the Netherlands East Indies and the Philippines, as well as across a vast oceanic Pacific theatre. Their intelligence officers prepared the ground well for a rampage that took imperial forces to the northern shores of Australia. Japanese fishermen mapped the coastlines, while barbers and brothel madams recorded their clients’ careless gossip. Even the official photographer inside Singapore Naval Base was a covert Japanese intelligence officer.¹

The Japanese advances caused panic among European colonists, among whom it was a case of *sauve qui peut*. Pet dogs and horses were put down, captive birds set free as their owners fled pell-mell from the Japanese. There were also personal betrayals. Leslie Froggatt in Singapore confessed:

I betrayed my Malay gardener. He cut my hedges, watered my flowers, cut and rolled my tennis lawn, and brushed up the leaves that blew down from the trees. I betrayed my round fat amah, who liked me, and amused me with her funny ways. I betrayed my Hokkien cook, who had a wife and four lovely children, whom he kept beautifully dressed at all times on the money he earned from me. I betrayed ‘Old Faithful’, our Nr. 2 Boy, who knew no word of English or Malay

and padded round the house silently in bare feet . . . I betrayed the caddie who carried my bag, searched for my ball, and always backed my game with a sporting bet.²

When Japanese troops entered Singapore in early 1942, the clocks moved forward two hours to Tokyo time, and the year became 2602, in conformity with the Japanese calendar. Other changes deranged the cosmos of many Asians in more fundamental ways. Unless interned, the European masters and mistresses had to carry cash and stand in line in stores, rather than signing a chit or sending a ‘boy’ (the general term for servants, even when they were greyheads) to shop in their stead. For the first time in their lives, Asian subjects of European colonial rule witnessed the white man abase himself in the dirt, hands raised in the air, or sullenly sweeping the streets. If disobedient, these white men were slapped, or had their heads chopped off with a samurai sword, wielded by conquerors who regarded themselves as liberating lords of Asia.³

The Japanese were given to massed cries of ‘Banzai!’ when they paraded or assembled. Lopping prisoners’ heads off was a competitive sport for their officers, whose brisk manners owed something to classical operas familiar to other Asians. European and Dominion soldiers (half of the defenders of Singapore were Indians, while many of the whites were Australians) seemed slovenly and wilted, even before their morale collapsed amid defeat and heat.⁴

The surrender of 85,000 British and Dominion troops to 36,000 Japanese under General Yamashita Tomoyuki at Singapore in February 1942 was a comprehensive humiliation. As the opera-singer wife of the British Admiral superintending the docks wrote in her diary while Japanese shells whizzed overhead: ‘One can have so little confidence in the powers that be here. It’s a tragedy.’⁵ Gross negligence before the war had been crowned by dithering incompetence during the campaign. ‘Never have so many been fucked about by so few / And neither the few nor the many / Have fuck all idea what to do,’ observed a British wit.⁶

The war with Japan pitted Washington’s vision of a democratic United Nations against Tokyo’s paternalist Greater East Asian Co-

Prosperity Scheme. The Indian Communist and nationalist Manabendra Nath Roy accurately described the conflict – in which he supported the democracies – as ‘a war for the future of the world’.⁷ When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the Christian Methodist Chinese Nationalist Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek responded by playing ‘Ave Maria’ on his gramophone. He hoped, and the US hoped too, that a reunited and revivified China would emerge as the world’s fourth major power, occupying the vacuum that would one day be left by the defeated Japanese. It was not to be under his leadership, and by the time the People’s Republic of China finally replaced the rump Republic of China in Taiwan as a permanent member of the UN Security Council in 1971 the old ‘progressive’ concept of the great powers presiding over a world of self-determined and democratic peoples seemed like a distant hallucination.

Broader geostrategic calculations forced actions blatantly at variance with the rhetoric of the August 1941 Anglo-American Atlantic Charter, which affirmed ‘the rights of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they shall live’. The Japanese responded by claiming that each people within its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere would ‘have its proper place and demonstrate its real character, thereby securing an order of coexistence and co-prosperity based on ethical principles with Japan serving as its nucleus’. The Japanese granted Burma qualified independence in 1943, offered it to the Philippines a year later and pursued a fairly successful hearts-and-minds campaign in Malaya, an approach they had essayed fighting Kim Il Sung in Manchuria in the 1930s.⁸ They also had some success in recruiting captured Indian Army troops to a new Indian National Army under their puppet Chandra Subhas Bose. Bose overstated the size of the INA for propaganda purposes, but at one point British intelligence estimated that it contained about 35,000 trained troops.

Some Asians regarded the Japanese as liberators, on the principle that ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’, or believed the Japanese embodied an Asian form of modernity. They did, but it was racially supremacist and bound up with mystical nationalism, rather in the way of Nazi Germany. The benign view had gathered momentum ever since the crushing defeat Japan inflicted on Russia in 1904–5, proof indeed of

the Meiji modernization of the previously backward island empire. That was why so many Asian nationalists sought to instrumentalize the Japanese against colonialism. This may seem remarkable in the light of the atrocities committed by the Japanese against civilians and prisoners of war, but from the point of view of Asian nationalists these were not greatly different to the methods employed on occasions by the Western powers, both before and after the war.⁹

The Japanese distinguished between what they called ‘the rule of branches and leaves’, meaning the day-to-day emergencies of fighting insurgents, and ‘the rule of the roots’, a metaphor for the fundamental social and political issues which needed to be tackled. Japanese policy in China included *minshin haaku* – winning the people’s hearts – which went beyond mere propaganda to include reducing feudal dues, providing farmers with tools and seeds and above all ensuring competent government, in a land where officials were chosen and promoted on the basis of their calligraphy. The more intelligent Japanese officials were well aware that effective administration was the ‘secret weapon’ of the British Empire, and sought to emulate it. They also built on the foundations laid by Europeans to encourage opium addiction as a means of corrupting and pacifying the general population.

For all their belief in ancient paternalistic values, the Japanese employed modern techniques of mobilizing populations they claimed had been metaphorically emasculated by Western colonialism. Japanese propaganda films showed each martial triumph, from the blazing hulks of Pearl Harbor to victorious troops entering Rangoon or Singapore. When Chiang found himself ruling most of China after the Japanese capitulation, he popularized the rule of the Chinese Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) with the aid of printing presses the Japanese had established in major Chinese cities.¹⁰

To the regret of some Japanese commanders, who appreciated the importance of winning popular support in a counter-insurgency campaign, the predominance of a purely military ethos ensured that these civilian-run programmes were never terribly effective and the bayonet was more conspicuous than the hand of friendship. Starting in 1934 the Japanese sought to isolate the guerrillas from the local population by corralling peasants in collective hamlets or *shudan buraku*,

after burning their villages. The loss, disruption and increased costs caused by such programmes won the Japanese few friends, to the detriment of their simultaneous programme of intelligence gathering and the deployment of local collaborators to track down and kill insurgents.¹¹

Perhaps the principal reason why Bose, Aung San of Burma and Sukarno of the Dutch East Indies took a broad view of Japanese atrocities was that they were mainly perpetrated in China, or against overseas Chinese in other conquered lands, where they were universally resented. *Minshin haaku* stood little chance against the particular racist loathing felt by the Japanese for the Chinese, and by the end of the war they had killed fifteen million of a people they regarded as uncultured vermin. Ominously, General Yamashita Tomoyuki's men fought boredom on troopships steaming to Malaya by reading a booklet in which the 'extortionist' overseas Chinese were excluded from any notions of 'Asia for the Asians' or 'Asian brotherhood'. This was heady stuff amid the diesel fumes and stale air.¹²

China

The Japanese military's aggression in South-east Asia and the Pacific was an extension of their earlier invasion of China, itself torn apart by ongoing civil war. In 1937, when the Japanese resumed their attempts to conquer China from the northern Manchurian bastion they had seized in 1931–2, the KMT and Communists only briefly stopped fighting each other. Even as the Japanese occupied most of the coastal areas, the two rival Chinese camps fought the invaders as competitors rather than allies. Nor were all Chinese opposed to the Japanese invasion. Wang Jingwei, a left-wing Nationalist politician who had fallen out with KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek, set up a collaborationist regime in Nanjing based on what he deemed the true principles of Sun Yat-sen, the godfather of the Chinese Revolution that deposed the Manchu Qing dynasty in 1910. Sun had modernized the surface of Chinese life, with men cutting off their long pigtail queues and adopting collarless Sun Yat-sen suits, the prototype for the garb of Mao. He also met with

the Comintern in 1923, which resulted in the United Front pact with the Communists.¹³

In the mid-1920s the future Communist leader Mao Zedong had been one of Wang's political clients, a relationship subsequently obscured.¹⁴ Born in landlocked Hunan in 1893, Mao was given a name (Zedong) that meant 'shine on the East'. His peasant-cum-soldier father made enough money dealing in grain to subsidize Mao's peripatetic student idleness, which consisted less of formal study than of whiling away entire days in university libraries, much like Lenin in Zurich before 1917. Mao was a shabbily dressed, long-haired layabout with a big fleshy face, but he had already decided that peace and prosperity only suited little folk: 'People like me long for its destruction, because when the old universe is destroyed, a new universe will be formed. Isn't that better?'¹⁵

Mao was also a poet, composing more than competently, often about nature, in the Chinese classical style. Yet he believed that much of traditional Chinese culture should be destroyed, while Confucianism did not appeal to one who defined morality as whatever suited his interests. After a spell in Beijing he returned to Hunan, where he eked out a modest living as a teacher, with a sideline in journalism, having rejected the opportunity to study in France because he did not want to learn the language. In June 1920 the twenty-seven-year-old radical was asked to open a bookshop by one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party. Soviet Comintern agents provided him with subsidies to become a full-time professional revolutionary, which meant sleeping most of the day and reading and plotting through the night. His total loyalty to the Soviets meant that he was given a key role in infiltrating the KMT. Encouraged by the Soviets to take an interest in peasant themes that he had hitherto ignored, Mao realized that only the peasantry had sufficient numbers for a revolution in a vast country where the industrial proletariat made up only 5 per cent of the population. The history of Chinese peasant uprisings – notably the genocidal Taiping Rebellion in the nineteenth century – led him to the view that the Party and People's Liberation Army needed to win over the peasantry, while the prospect of another bloodbath appealed to him.

The Nationalists were appalled by the systematic violence unleashed

by the Communists, and in 1927 Chiang Kai-shek, the head of the military section at the Soviet-inspired Whampoa Academy, moved against them, with an arrest list that included Mao's name. The Communists reverted to the defence of 'Soviet areas' in which their appetites for bloodthirsty purges of real and imagined opponents were indulged to the hilt and with indescribable cruelty. In 1934 Mao embarked on the 6,000-mile Long March, a year-long extraction of 82,000 Communist fighters from encirclement and destruction in the south, with 8,000 resurfacing as survivors in the remote north. There the Communists could pose as liberators and reformers without fear of attack by either the KMT or the Japanese. Mao gradually emerged as *primus inter pares* of a statelet that harked back to Plato, with the Party cadres being the philosopher kings while the guardians were the Red Army commanders and soldiers, below whom were the drones whose labour supported them. Since the majority of those who flocked to the remote Yenan redoubt did so merely from a patriotic desire to fight the Japanese, 'rectification' campaigns based on confessions and indoctrination were used to re-engineer their personalities, submerging the individual self in the collective as embodied by Mao himself.¹⁶

The KMT could not mobilize sufficient military power to defeat the Communists as well as resisting Japanese invasion. As elsewhere in East Asia, wealthy figures in cities such as Shanghai rallied to the Japanese cause.¹⁷ But so did many collaborators who were also covert Communist agents, with instructions to direct the Japanese against their Nationalist rivals. While Chiang's armies fought the Japanese, Mao's Communists avoided main-force encounters, even when urged to fight them by Stalin, who feared that the Soviet Union could be crushed between the Japanese and German onslaughts. Mao's caution and evasiveness rankled with the Soviet leader and the only 'battle' against the Japanese, at Pingxingguan in September 1937, hardly features in the annals of warfare.¹⁸

Communist guerrillas did have an impact in Manchuria, historically a lawless place which contained the world's densest concentration of villages run by outlaws. But it was also the most industrialized region in China, which was why the Japanese had conquered it. The guerrillas who fought the Japanese in this wild, grey-brown place were

ethnic Koreans, who also made up 90 per cent of the local ‘Chinese’ Communist Party. The ethnic Chinese Communists claimed to be fighting the Japanese as they husbanded their resources in their northern regional redoubt of Yenan for the anticipated showdown with Chiang.¹⁹

Mao’s forces were sustained by subsidies from Stalin as well as by a revived opium industry, which they wisely kept secret from the ‘Dixie Mission’ sent to Yenan by the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in July 1944 out of frustration with KMT military incompetence and venality and in order to glean actionable intelligence on Japanese strength in northern China from POWs taken by the Communists.²⁰ While a large pool of 2,000 American advisers stationed in Chongqing by turns publicly lauded and privately denounced Chiang Kai-shek, some of the Yenan Americans became admirers of the iron discipline of the Communists.²¹

Korea

Japan’s ‘backyard’ was Korea, which it had ruled since 1910. There, geography arguably played a greater role than politics in the long sequence of events that was to result in one of the most intractably divided nations of the world. The north of the peninsula was bleak and mountainous, and it was among the million or so Koreans who migrated to Manchuria in search of industrial jobs that the Korean Communist Party was born. Among them was Kim Il Sung, the future Great Leader of the People’s Republic of North Korea and grandfather of Kim Eun, the third generation of Kims who assumed power in 2012. Born in a village near Pyongyang in 1912, Kim migrated with his family to Manchuria in 1919. From 1932 onwards, he led a small but lethal guerrilla force against the Japanese, striking at Japanese police bases across the Korean border. The Japanese murdered his first wife; his middle brother died at their hands; and an uncle spent thirteen years in Japanese prisons. Like Mao Zedong, Kim Il Sung was steeled by conflict and struggle, another way of saying that his capacity for human sympathy was severely diminished, though for a rare photograph he managed a wide smile as he bounced his unsmiling son and

successor Kim Il Jong on his knee.²² In October 1939 the Japanese launched a huge punitive operation against the North-east Anti-Japanese Army, of which Kim's group was a part, forcing the latter to flee into Soviet Siberia.²³

In the more agrarian south, many members of the Korean elite, including businessmen, landowners and soldiers, collaborated with the Japanese colonial regime, which in the late 1930s banned the Korean language entirely.²⁴ A different path was taken by Syngman Rhee, who had been an advocate of Korean independence since the late nineteenth century, while becoming a Christian in a Japanese prison. After release he travelled to the USA and he took a BA at George Washington University, an MA at Harvard and a PhD at Princeton, where he became a protégé of Woodrow Wilson. Although the 'Fourteen Points' expounded by President Wilson at Versailles after the First World War were not extended to the Far East, the principle of self-determination was the theme of a 1919 conference of Korean independence movements in Shanghai. Syngman Rhee was elected president of the provisional government of the Republic of Korea, a post he held until 1925, when he was impeached for behaving in a dictatorial manner. In a prefiguring of their attempt to foist the supposedly safe (because US-educated) Ahmed Chalabi on Iraq in 2003, Syngman Rhee was the obvious candidate when the Americans needed a sympathetic strongman to govern South Korea in the late 1940s.

As we shall see, the US preference for charismatic individuals (who spoke fluent English) over mass political movements was to colour policy far beyond Korea, and in the process betrayed a profound lack of faith that their grand declarations of principle were a useful guide to the exigencies of war and the post-war settlement in the Far East that mobilized immense numbers of ordinary people.

India

With considerable high-handedness the liberal imperialist Viceroy John Hope, Marquess of Linlithgow, announced in 1939 that India was at war. When he refused the majority Indian National Congress party

any role in the central direction of the Indian war effort, its members resigned en masse from provincial governments, and British governors assumed direct rule. The interruption of what the British had hoped would be orderly (for which read as slow as possible) progress towards representative government made little difference while the war was far away, but the Japanese came close enough to induce widespread panic. In April 1942 they raided the Ceylonese capital of Colombo, killing 800 British sailors in two successive attacks on the naval base at Trincomalee. They struck next at southern Indian ports as well as coastal Madras, causing many British administrators to flee to the interior hills. Japanese agents were especially active in Calcutta, capital of Bengal, where Subhas Chandra Bose envisaged a nationalist army on the lines of the Irish Republican Army of the 1920s.

The fact that the US would undertake the main burden of reversing Japanese expansion in South Asia meant that Washington balked at Prime Minister Winston Churchill's insistence that the affairs of India were none of their business. Large numbers of American servicemen were stationed in India, where, oblivious of their own racially segregated society, they criticized British racism.²⁵ However, both American meddling and Churchillian obduracy were irrelevant – India was well on its way to independence before the war, and its massive contribution to the war effort made the case for prompt post-war independence overwhelming. Two million sub-continentals, the largest volunteer army in history, served with the British armed forces, many of them in North Africa or Italy. London agreed to underwrite the costs of Indians serving abroad, the result being that Britain owed India £1,321 million by the end of the war, an often overlooked 40 per cent of its colossal £3,355 million post-war debt. Sixty-five per cent of the Indian Army troops were Punjabi Muslims from the north of the sub-continent, which in turn was to make a compelling case for a Muslim-dominated area in the north of a loose, secular Indian federation. Events moved so swiftly and violently that the result was an independent Pakistan.

Indian nationalist politicians had long ago discovered the advantages of alternating constitutional politics with passive-aggressive non-violent protest. They knew the British close up, and saw their

weaknesses. Such a strategy had enabled them to occupy the moral high ground, with the British cast in the role of clumsy and violent oppressors.²⁶ Once war with Japan began, Hindu leader Mahatma Gandhi – who knew Linlithgow well and judged him to be weak and out of his depth – launched a renewed wave of resistance, demanding immediate independence and neutrality, encapsulated in the slogan that the British should ‘Quit India’. It was a tactical error that split the Congress and damaged Gandhi’s prestige, not only because it was foolish to expect the Japanese to respect Indian neutrality but also because it gave Linlithgow no choice but to invoke emergency powers. British rule became an occupation, deploying more troops – fifty battalions – to quell Indian unrest than were being used to fight the Japanese.²⁷

Beginning on 9 August 1942 the British rounded up 60,000 Congress supporters, including the leaders. Jawaharlal Nehru, the radical lawyer and nationalist politician, was comfortably installed in the old Mughal fort at Ahmednagar, but Gandhi was locked up in the Aga Khan’s insalubrious prison at Pune. While Nehru read, gardened and wrote, Gandhi embarked on one of his carefully calibrated fasts. The ‘Quit India’ campaign degenerated rapidly from non-violent strikes into mass riots and acts of sabotage. A hundred police stations were burned down, and there were attacks on 250 railway stations. Track was dismantled and telegraph wires cut. The British response was robust, with 900 people killed and 600 flogged by their own estimate. In and around Patna, the capital of Bihar, RAF fighters were used to strafe Congress supporters who under the cover of lying down on the tracks were tearing them up.

The disparity between how India’s two major religious groups responded to metropolitan Britain’s existential crisis enhanced the claims of Muhammad Ali Jinnah and his Muslim League to an independent Pakistan following the war, drowning out the voices of Muslim members of the Congress party who disputed Jinnah’s claims to speak for all of India’s Muslims. Of course the Western-educated lawyers who dominated Congress did not speak for all Hindus either. British emissaries and viceroys vainly endeavoured to retain an all-Indian framework as Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs slid towards an inter-communal blood-bath. In addition the 562 independent feudal princes, some ruling

enormous territories such as Hyderabad, represented a further layer of complexity because Britain acknowledged their autocracies through the doctrine of paramountcy.

In the course of 1943 these political problems were joined by a humanitarian one, as some two million Bengalis starved to death when a combination of hoarding-induced inflation and bureaucratic bungling by mainly Indian civil servants resulted in famine. Six million tons of wheat, reserved for military use, bobbed on ships in the Indian Ocean, while other shipping capacity was reserved for the planned D-Day landings in Normandy.²⁸ Churchill insisted that Indians should ‘feel the pinch in the same way as the Mother Country has done’. If humiliating military defeat stripped away the illusion of British power, and emergency laws revealed the mere force that underpinned it, the Bengal famine revealed the supposed efficiency of British administration to be a sham.²⁹

India was, of course, the jewel not only in the crown of the British Empire but also by an order of magnitude (with nearly 400 million people) the most intrinsically powerful possession of any of the colonial powers. As such it was able to defend its own frontiers and so buy time for the British to make a swift exit in 1947, once they realized that more was to be gained from a free India within the Commonwealth than from trying to hang on in a situation where the balance of effective power had already tipped to the native population, whether in provincial politics or in the composition of the Indian Civil Service. Unfortunately, in the phrase employed by Field Marshal Lord Wavell, who replaced the hapless Linlithgow as viceroy in 1943, the momentum of past prestige prevented the imperial boat from slowing before it hit the rocks.

Other minds turned from the Raj to an independent future, although much of that future would retain the DNA of the Raj. The key problem, as Nehru acknowledged, was how to create a secular state in a religious country. The future Prime Minister was a Harrow- and Cambridge-educated leftist lawyer. He was well travelled, including Russia in his peregrinations, and well imprisoned, since he spent nine years of his adult life in the Raj’s jails. How on earth, he asked, was he to deal with a society in which the questions whether cow dung should be left

piled up in the streets or rabid sacred monkeys should not be shot were regarded as issues of fundamental import, and for which human life could be lost in instantly combusting riots.³⁰ Although many of his Congress party colleagues resented it, the British valued Nehru's dispassionate approach, sharing his concern that Partition would lead to the wholesale Balkanization of the sub-continent as micro-communities descended into religiously inspired anarchy and violence.

The British withdrew in 1947 amid scenes of horror in which a million people were slaughtered and another fifteen million physically displaced, with many women subjected to rape. One Sunday in September 1947 the last Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, took Nehru in his Dakota to get a close look at the mass exodus of refugees fleeing communal violence. They swooped down to 200 feet above one such column, of Muslims heading north to Lahore. It took a quarter of an hour at 180mph to fly along the forty-five-mile length of the column.³¹

Unsurprisingly, the British retreat from India bulks large in many British accounts, but other Asian empires were more directly victims of Imperial Japan's rampage. European authority in the lesser Far Eastern colonies was irretrievably destroyed by the ease with which the Japanese had conquered them. However, as with the Nazis in Eastern Europe, Japanese assumptions of racial supremacy caused them to behave in most respects worse than the Europeans they had defeated.

The Philippines

The US conquest of the Philippines in 1898 had been followed by a decade-long counter-insurgency against Filipino nationalists. Having previously and piously denounced the use of 'reconcentration camps' by the Spanish in Cuba and the British in South Africa, the Americans adopted them in the Philippines, along with the routine employment of torture including the 'water cure' of drowning and reviving guerrilla suspects, a practice they had learned from the Apaches. US imperialists regarded the Philippines as the key to the door of China and an unsatisfactory post-conquest settlement resulted, with local Hispanic

elites utterly dependent on US patronage using the rhetoric of nationalism. As always the Americans talked the talk about democracy, but deferred independence while ensuring that the tame and corrupt native elites remained in power. In the mid-1930s the Tydings–McDuffie Act promised the so-called Commonwealth of the Philippines independence, but with its external relations controlled by the US. The archipelago's defences were entrusted to the ambitious General Douglas MacArthur, son of a former US military governor, who was loaned to Manila to organize a Swiss-style citizens' army.³²

In the event, by May 1942 the Japanese had overrun the Philippines, forcing the US to surrender its forces after dogged rearguard actions at Bataan and Corregidor. MacArthur was evacuated, accompanied on his retreat to Australia by the Commonwealth's President Manuel Quezon. The Japanese stationed an enormous occupation force, some 625,800 soldiers, in the Philippines, which were rightly regarded as crucial to defence of the home islands and to the entire Japanese position in South-east Asia. Few members of the Hispanic elites who had collaborated with the Americans had qualms about switching their allegiance. The Japanese met them halfway, explaining, 'Like it or not you are Filipinos and belong to the Oriental race. No matter how hard you try, you cannot become white people.'³³ Tokyo offered its collaborators independence more rapidly than the defeated Americans had done. In July 1943 they were instructed to draft a constitution, the *quid pro quo* being that they declare war on the US, which after much foot dragging they did in September 1944.

Meanwhile, large numbers of brave Filipinos retreated to the hills to wage guerrilla war against the occupiers. The largest group was the Hukbong Bayan Laban sa Hapon (People's Anti-Japanese Army), known as Hukbalahap (Huks) for short. The Huks had their roots in several pre-war militant peasant groups that had coalesced to defend the traditional rights of peasant tenant farmers on the central plain of Luzon, in an area bounded by the Candaba Swamps, the lone peak of Mount Arayat, and the longer ranges of the Sierra Madre and Zimbales. Their desire was to 'get what was just if landlords were honourable and good men'; for, like most peasant movements in history, they were nostalgic for supposedly venerable customs and times when the *patron*

wore a human face. The trend was otherwise: landlords took up to 50 per cent of each rice harvest, charging extortionate interest rates in return for emergency loans, and introduced machines to replace men. They also abused land registration to appropriate land with insecure titles, getting away with it because of their corrupt influence in the courts and the Constabulary. On haciendas they had their own strongarm squads to rough up troublesome peasants.³⁴

The complex relationship between the Huks and the Philippines Communist Party will be discussed separately. Many of the Huks were in their twenties and had witnessed Japanese brutality at first hand when their relatives were raped, tortured or shot. One in ten of them were young women, although they usually acted as couriers, instructors and nurses rather than as guerrilla fighters. Their weapons were those they took from the Japanese, which they taught themselves to use. It was a desperately savage conflict, in which the Japanese relied on hooded informants to identify Huk sympathizers, while the Huks kidnapped, tried and shot local mayors and policemen who collaborated with the occupiers. The US also inserted its own force into this conflict, recruiting guerrillas whose task was to keep a watching brief on Japanese troop movements, but increasingly they also came into conflict with the Huks. All of this would be replayed after MacArthur's grandiose return and the liberation of the Philippines, when the pre-war elite was restored to power.³⁵

Indochina

Indochina was a French colony, consisting of the petty kingdoms of Cambodia and Laos, as well as the southern colony of Cochin China, and the protectorates of Annam and Tonkin in the north. These last three comprised 'Vietnam' in the eyes of nationalists, a very long country about a thousand miles north to south, and wider in the north and south than in a middle, where it narrows to thirty miles. It is roughly the length of California but half the width, and much of it consists of mountainous jungle. Forty thousand French ruled twenty-three million indigenous peoples, the bureaucrats mostly ensconced in the

administrative capital of Hanoi in the north, and the settlers concentrated in Saigon in the south, to be near their coffee, rubber and tea plantations. The overseas Chinese constituted the majority of the urban entrepreneurial class.³⁶

In 1943 Franklin Roosevelt famously commented to Stalin that ‘after a hundred years of French rule in Indochina, the inhabitants are worse off than they had been before’.³⁷ This was because the ramified interests of the Banque d’Indochine syphoned off the nation’s wealth, so that Indochina was actually an economic and political liability. Roosevelt’s preferred solution was to place such dysfunctional colonies under international trusteeships, to be supervised by the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain and China, for in his view France did not merit a place in such exalted company. China’s manifold incapacities were the first blow to this solution, while on the altar of inter-Allied solidarity he eventually bowed to Churchill, who supported the exiled Free French leader Charles de Gaulle from 1940 onwards as much to pre-empt US threats to Britain’s own colonial interests as to restore France. As Churchill said, he had not become prime minister to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire. Roosevelt also reluctantly awoke to the probability that the colonial issue might compromise the larger security architecture he envisaged for the post-war world, chiefly by weakening the already debilitated imperial metropolises by stripping away their overseas resources.³⁸

Wartime Indochina had special complexities, largely because the colonial power fractured into two inimical groupings: adherents of Marshal Pétain’s Vichy regime and the Free French followers of Charles de Gaulle. From 1940 to 1944, Vichy French forces coexisted with 65,000 Japanese troops, a minor concession being that they were not obliged to salute each other. For the Japanese, Indochina was the pivotal hinge of the fan they used to spread across South-east Asia, as well as a means of preventing Allied supplies reaching Nationalist China overland. As the war turned against them, the Japanese feared a US invasion from the liberated Philippines, which might be co-ordinated with a local French uprising, after Vichy influence had been subverted by de Gaulle’s Free French.

In March 1945 Japanese commander General Tsuchihashi Yuichi

swept the colonial regime aside. He gave Admiral Jean Decoux two hours to ponder whether to subordinate French troops to the Japanese. When Decoux asked for more time, the Japanese took over all French bases and installations, crushing such French resistance as arose. Wherever French troops baulked at this coup, as they did at Lang Son in the far north, they were captured and beheaded, poignantly singing the 'Marseillaise'. Those French troops who escaped to a remote north-western airfield at Dien Bien Phu found that their requests for US arms fell on deaf ears. They eventually straggled into southern China, barefoot and hungry.

In Indochina the French had ruthlessly suppressed every manifestation of anti-colonial sentiment, from mutinous troops via rebellious peasants to striking schoolboys, but there was one implacable opponent who eluded them for three decades: Ho Chi Minh. This was the final iteration of multiple aliases Ho would use. Nguyen Tat Thanh (He Who Will Succeed) was born in about 1890 to a farmer's son who had joined the mandarin elite, achieving the equivalent of a doctorate. Whether because of pride or temperament, Ho's father refused to work directly for the puppet emperor who ruled supposedly autonomous Annam, working instead as a rural teacher and then as a magistrate. In 1910 in a drunken rage he caned the wrong person to death and was dismissed from office. He died poor in Saigon.

The future Ho was a bright boy who shed the long hair that marked him out as a country bumpkin at school. He realized early on that a mastery of Western culture – including its revolutionary tradition – was the way to defeat Western imperialism. By his late teens Thanh was involved in anti-French demonstrations, which resulted in expulsion from his French school. Already marked out by the colonial police, he eventually embarked for France, as 'Ba', an assistant cook and stoker on a small liner bound for Marseilles. A truly remarkable odyssey had begun.³⁹

When Ho arrived in Marseilles in July 1911, he noted that 'the French in France are better and more polite than in Indochina'. In cafés waiters called him 'Monsieur'. He applied without success for a scholarship to attend the Colonial School. After he had opted for the merchant marine his movements were necessarily opaque; but, wherever

he ventured ashore, he moved in political circles as Nguyen Ai Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot).

In July 1923 he slipped his French police shadows through the rear exit of a Parisian cinema and boarded a train to Hamburg and on to Russia by ship as the Chinese merchant ‘Chen Vang’. In Moscow he enrolled in the University of the Toilers of the East, which was informally known as the Stalin School since it was under his Commissariat of Nationalities. By July 1923 Ho was deemed important enough to move into the Lux Hotel, albeit into a small room with a bed infested with bugs. In January 1924 his face and fingers were damaged after queuing for hours in deep winter to view Lenin’s body. After impressing his Comintern comrades at the Fifth Congress in 1924, speaking of the need to strike imperialism in the colonies from which it drew its resources, he persuaded his superiors to send him to Canton to organize exiled Vietnamese revolutionaries.⁴⁰

Ho moved into the Canton villa of Mikhail Borodin, the leader of twenty Bolshevik agents attached to the United Front of the KMT and CCP (that is, the Chinese Communist Party). He became ‘Ly Thuy’ to confuse the French Sûreté officers operating from the French enclave. Officially a journalist, his covert Comintern activities involved recruiting members of an exiled Vietnamese Anarchist group called Tam Tam Xa (Society of Beating Hearts) who, shortly before his arrival, had attempted to assassinate Martial Merlin, the new Governor-General of Indochina, at a banquet, with a bomb that sent knives and forks into the bodies of five other guests. These radicals became the initial recruits of an Indochinese Nationalist Party attached to the CCP and the KMT, but also the covert kernel of a separate Vietnamese Communist group. In early 1925 Ho founded the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League, the feeder pool for a future Vietnamese Communist Party. The mandarin’s son gave a distinctly Confucian ethical stamp to a movement that blended nationalism and Marxist-Leninism, at a time when the relationship between the two was unresolved by the Soviets.

His relatively stable life in Canton with wife and child ended when in 1927 Chiang Kai-shek’s KMT broke with the Chinese Communists, many of whom were tracked down and shot. Ho fled to Hong Kong, where he was refused entry, then to Vladivostok and back to Europe.

One night in Paris a friend met him on a bridge, looking down sadly into the Seine. 'I always thought I would become a scholar or a writer, but I've become a professional revolutionary,' he said. 'I travel through many countries, but I see nothing. I'm on strict orders, and my itinerary is carefully prescribed, and you cannot deviate from the route, can you?'⁴¹

He eventually took ship to Siam, home to 20,000 Vietnamese exiles. In 1929 the French colonial authorities sentenced him to death *in absentia*. When three rival Vietnamese Communist parties emerged, Ho was smuggled into Hong Kong in February 1930 to resolve their differences. This resulted in the formal foundation of the Dang Cong san Viet Nam, the Vietnamese Communist Party. Arrested and put on trial by the British, Ho eventually fled to the Soviet Union, where he remained until 1938.

Lengthy British custody meant that he laboured under suspicion of being a spy in the years when Stalin murdered 650,000 of his comrades, in purges which reached into the foreign denizens of the Lux Hotel, who got used to sleeping with one eye open. Ho survived because Stalin did not regard Indochina as a serious place, and by shrinking into near invisibility. In 1938 he was allowed to leave for China, where the CCP and KMT had re-formed their alliance to resist the Japanese. He used the name Hu Guang first in Yan'an, where the CCP were massed, and then in Guangxi, whence he repaired to establish closer links with his homeland.

By 1940 he was in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan, where he met two fellow sons of Vietnamese mandarins: Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap. The former had spent years in the notorious 'tiger cages' of the French prison of Poulo Condore, the latter was a law graduate who had developed a fascination with military history, in particular guerrilla warfare. Giap's father and sister had died in, or just after release from, French jails by the time he reached ten years of age. His sister-in-law was executed by the French and in 1943 his young wife would perish in Hanoi's Central Prison – later known to captured Americans as the Hanoi Hilton. These experiences left him a cold, unforgiving man wholly dedicated to the cause of armed struggle, in which he was to reveal military genius.⁴²

The fall of France in June 1940 triggered a new stage in a hitherto spasmodic revolution. By then Ho had thoroughly studied the strategy and tactics of the Chinese Communist Party and he had read Mao's works on guerrilla warfare. He decided that the first priority should be to build a political infrastructure throughout the country, while creating a small military force that, when the moment came, could launch insurrections which would trigger a general uprising. While Ho had close contacts with the Chinese Communists, and in particular with Zhou Enlai, he also needed to maintain good relations with the Kuomintang, who would be providing Ho's forces with a safe rear area in southern China. He cleverly negotiated his way through the complex eddies of Chinese politics, by stressing a simple anti-imperialist line, in which the enemy was the Japanese and the French. Moving nearer to the border with Tonkin, Ho helped form a united patriotic front or League for the Independence of Vietnam, which in Vietnamese was the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh – better known as Viet Minh. In 1941 he was the lead instructor at a camp at Jingxi on the Vietnamese border at which Giap provided the military training. The course ended with a kiss of the red flag with its gold star, after which graduates were sent back to Vietnam, gathering in a mountainous area called the Viet Bac. In early 1941 Ho returned to Vietnam for the first time in thirty years, setting up an HQ in a limestone cave near the remote village of Pac Bo. By this time he had adopted the identity of a Chinese journalist and the name Ho Chi Minh (He Who Enlightens).⁴³

Although Ho was not Party general secretary, the French police had eliminated most of his internal Vietnamese rivals and he enjoyed enormous prestige not just as the Comintern's senior man, but because of the sacrifices his life had manifestly entailed. In Vietnamese terms he was also quite old, and hence deserving of the affectionate name Uncle. The final incarnation had occurred: Uncle Ho. Ever in character, he dodged French checkpoints and patrols by pretending to be a shaman, dressed in a black robe and equipped with magic texts, joss sticks and a live chicken for sacrifice.

Japanese destruction of French rule forced crucial decisions on the Viet Minh. It also provided the Americans with an opportunity to use the Vietnamese to fight the Japanese. The US began dropping arms

from aircraft based in southern China, while the Viet Minh provided valuable weather reports and helped locate shot-down US aircrew. In March 1945 the OSS sent 'Deer Team' into Vietnam to liaise with the 'old man' who led the Viet Minh. One of these agents, Archimedes 'Al' Patti, penned an account of their stay in a jungle encampment. The emaciated Viet Minh leader, already tubercular, lay ill with dysentery and malaria, but rallied enough to chain-smoke Patti's Chesterfields after the team doctor had treated him.⁴⁴ The OSS agents taught guerrillas, commanded by Giap – 'a wiry little man with large calculating eyes and a perpetually angry look' – how to use modern weapons. The Americans spent many agreeable hours with Ho Chi Minh, who at one point inquired in English: 'Your statesmen make eloquent speeches about helping those with self-determination. We are self-determined. Why not help us? Am I different from Nehru, Quezon, even your George Washington? Was not Washington considered a revolutionary? I, too, want to set my people free.'⁴⁵ Privately he thought that the Americans were all about business. As Ho heard news of the dropping of the atomic bombs and the Japanese surrender that August, he and Giap decided to launch their insurrection, their task aided by widespread peasant anger over a famine in the winter of 1944–5 that killed a million people, after the Japanese had refused to stop exporting rice to Japan from their state granaries.⁴⁶

Then the Japanese managed to cause a political crisis. Following their disarming of the French in March 1945, they encouraged Emperor Bao Dai to declare Vietnamese independence, a step they urged neighbouring Cambodia's Prince Sihanouk to follow. Bao Dai's authority was entirely notional in northern Tonkin, where real, lethal power was increasingly exercised by the Viet Minh from their Viet Bac bases, from which they sortied to cut communications and terrorize government officials and policemen.

The Potsdam conference arranged in the summer of 1945 to reorder the world is often viewed through an exclusively European optic, as reflected in the fact that the Big Three were actually the Big Four, for Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek was present along with Harry S. Truman (Roosevelt's successor), Stalin and Churchill. The conference was concerned with winning the ongoing war with Japan and unmaking

its empire in South-east Asia. It was decreed that China and Britain should occupy Indochina above and below the 16th parallel, but Al Patti's OSS units returned to Vietnam, nominally to secure Allied POWs and civilian internees still in Japanese captivity. This gave them a ring-side seat to observe how Ho created a *fait accompli* to pre-empt the restoration of colonial authority. He sent his men into Hanoi across the Doumer Bridge over the Red River to force the abdication of Bao Dai. The capital of Tonkin was bedecked with lanterns, flowers and red banners with the five golden stars, all under the eyes of 30,000 Japanese troops. On 2 September 1945 at a massed meeting on Place Puginier in front of the former Governor-General's Hanoi Palace, Ho proclaimed Vietnamese independence. There were some deliberate nods to his OSS friends in the wording of his speech:

'All men are created equal. They are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' This immortal statement appeared in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. In a broader sense, it means: All the peoples on earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live and to be happy and free. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, made at the time of the French Revolution, in 1791, also states: 'All men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights.'⁴⁷

He asked the crowd, 'My fellow countrymen, have you understood?' 'Yes!' the crowd roared back. Standing alongside Patti, General Giap gave a clenched-fist salute when the band struck up the 'Star Spangled Banner'. The French were appalled by this. A more senior US team tried to pin down Ho's political views, but was fobbed off with evasive vagaries: 'I have difficulty remembering some parts of my long life. That is the problem of being an old revolutionary.' Meanwhile his regime in Hanoi made short work of any ideological opponents. In addition to a new state security apparatus, the Communists encouraged the creation of 'traitor elimination committees' and an 'Assault Assassination Committee' whose victims were liberal nationalists, Trotskyites and women who had married French men.⁴⁸

As the new government established itself, 150,000 Chinese KMT Nationalist troops crossed into Vietnam under a drug-addict warlord Chiang was keen to divert from China. The Viet Minh tried to secure their good conduct by supplying him with opium, but the Chinese looted everything up to the roof tiles. Meanwhile, in the southern capital of Saigon, where the Viet Minh played a much weaker hand as part of a broader nationalist coalition, attempts to celebrate Independence Day led to violent clashes between French and Vietnamese residents. Watching the celebrations from high vantage points, the French ostentatiously refused to join in the applause when independence was proclaimed. French snipers started shooting, and in retaliation Europeans were assaulted and their business premises looted.

Four days later 600 men from the 20th Indian Division arrived in Saigon under General Douglas Gracey to disarm 50,000 surrendered Japanese troops. He was not a political general and inflexibly followed his orders, with disastrous consequences. One of his first acts was to use his Gurkha guard to evict the Southern Provisional Executive Committee from the former Governor-General's Palace, after they had tried to welcome him. He next rearmed liberated French internees, who promptly attacked any 'native' they encountered. Angry Vietnamese retaliated, slaughtering 150 Europeans. With fresh French troops slow to arrive, Gracey relied on his Gurkhas and surrendered Japanese to expel the Viet Minh. He declared martial law to break a general strike and used liberated French Foreign Legionnaires to impose their simulacrum of civil order.

In a remarkable example of intra-Allied incivility Gracey ordered Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Dewey, the senior OSS officer in Saigon, to leave Indochina because of the OSS's 'blatantly subversive' involvement with the Viet Minh. Dewey was shot dead en route to the airport after Gracey forbade him to fly the Stars and Stripes on his Jeep and the Viet Minh mistook him for a Frenchman. The following day Gracey threatened Japanese General Numata with prosecution for war crimes if he did not order his men to help the British and French fight the Viet Minh; and so it was that the British coerced the soldiers who had humiliated them in 1942 to reimpose French rule over Vietnam, which the Japanese had overthrown seven months previously.⁴⁹

By early October 1945 there were sufficient French forces in Cochin China for Gracey to relinquish authority south of the 16th parallel to the Free French war hero General Philippe Leclerc, who re-established French rule in Cambodia and Laos, before turning his attention to the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam. By 20 January 1946 the British forces were gone. A French high commissioner designate, Jean Sainteny, was flown to Hanoi accompanied by Patti's OSS team. They noted that Hanoi was swathed in red banners and bedecked with other banners which, in English, read 'Independence or Death' and 'Vietnam for the Vietnamese'. Only a cordon of Japanese troops prevented the French from being lynched, but Patti and his team settled into a comfortable and unthreatened existence at the Hotel Metropole.

Sainteny was bitter about the role of the Americans: 'We seemed to the Americans incorrigibly obstinate in reviving a colonial past to which they were opposed, in the name of an infantile anti-colonialism which blinded them to almost everything.'⁵⁰ Nothing is so simple, for there were also OSS agents of French-American extraction, or passionately Francophile veterans of the Gaullist resistance. But the Americans were certainly more popular than anyone else. One night Ho invited a relatively junior OSS agent to dinner. Major Frank White noticed to his horror that he was seated next to Ho himself in a room awash with Chinese and French dignitaries. The Chinese quickly became drunk and the French were uncommunicative and as stiff as broomsticks. When White remarked on the resentment caused by the seating plan, Ho replied, 'Yes, I can see that – but who else could I talk to?'

Leclerc despatched motorized and waterborne columns, one commanded by Colonel Jacques Massu, whom we will encounter later, to surprise Viet Minh troops in the countryside, which was then ravaged by follow-up infantry sweeps. Otherwise he was careful to minimize civilian casualties in ways which prefigured British hearts-and-minds efforts in Malaya. As far as northern Annam and Tonkin were concerned, Leclerc prevailed on the Chinese to withdraw – they were needed by Chiang Kai-shek to fight the Communists – in return for a renunciation of French concessionary enclaves in China. Ironically, Chiang had earlier declined Roosevelt's offer to take over the whole of Vietnam.

Ho was careful to do nothing to upset the Franco-Chinese negoti-

ations. As he explained to his sceptical Party comrades: 'Can't you understand what would happen if the Chinese stayed? You are forgetting our past history. Whenever the Chinese came, they stayed a thousand years. The French, on the other hand, can stay for only a short time. Eventually they will leave.' His summing up was less delicate: 'Better to sniff French shit for a while than to eat China's for the rest of our lives.'⁵¹ To that end Giap led talks with Sainteny at the mountain resort of Dalat, although there was little trust on either side. The French agreed to a Democratic Republic of Vietnam, within the French Union, with the possible future inclusion of Cochin China subject to a referendum – although in reality the French had no intention of relinquishing control. Almost as soon as the Vietnamese thought they had a deal, the French tried to write their continued control of justice, economic planning and communications into it. Ho even agreed to allow the French to station 15,000 troops in the north for a five-year period. At a rally where Ho explained his strategy to activists, someone threw a grenade, forgetting to take the pin out.

While Leclerc was commander-in-chief Indochina, de Gaulle's new High Commissioner was Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu, a militant right-wing Catholic and former Carmelite friar. A member of his staff said he 'had one of the greatest minds of the twelfth century'. He intended to restore French rule in Cochin China and, unlike Leclerc, refused to negotiate with Ho over the fate of the North. While Ho flew to Paris to finalize the settlement drafted with Leclerc, on 1 June 1946 d'Argenlieu returned from home leave and unilaterally proclaimed a new Autonomous Republic of Cochin China to scupper the talks in France. While he had the backing of businessmen and colonists, the Admiral had no authorization from Paris to do this. In November 1946, when Ho was still engaged in talks at Fontainebleau, the Admiral ordered the French cruiser *Suffren* to shell Haiphong, killing around 6,000 people, under the pretext of interdicting arms shipments.

In retaliation, Giap ordered the killing of about 350 village headmen who refused to co-operate with the Viet Minh, and the slaughter of the entire leadership of the nationalist movement who were members of the coalition government of the Democratic Republic. At Fontainebleau the talks collapsed and after Sainteny had stated that

the French must triumph militarily, Ho replied: ‘You will kill ten of my men while we kill one of yours, but you will be the ones to end up exhausted.’ The larger irony involved in this story was that the Radical, Socialist and Christian Democrat French politicians who were at the forefront in advocating a federal Europe were the most intransigent supporters of an authoritarian and centralized colonial empire. Empire was essential to France’s ongoing pretensions to be a global power after years of defeat and humiliation and dependence on the Anglo-Saxons for liberation.⁵²

Emboldened by increasing numbers, in Hanoi the French troops acted in a cavalier fashion towards what was a democratically elected northern government. Giap readied the population for rebellion, with holes drilled in trees into which dynamite could be inserted to create instant roadblocks. After Ho returned in December, he reluctantly called for a war of resistance. Sainteny was an early casualty when a mine destroyed his armoured vehicle, and another forty French nationals were also killed. Although the French gained control of the capital, the night of 19–20 December 1946 was when the first Indochina war between the French and Viet Minh formally began.

The Communists fell back on their former liberated areas in Viet Bac near the Chinese border, around eighty miles from Hanoi, in a country where moving a couple of miles could take a month. *Ad hoc* arms factories churned out weapons to supplement old British or Japanese stocks, or those purchased from the Chinese, who also supplied modern radio communications equipment. Japanese instructors taught the Viet Minh how to use modern weaponry, and in some cases joined operations against the French. Giap rigorously applied the basic principles of modern insurgency warfare which he had acquired through a reading of Mao’s works on guerrilla warfare. He added some tactical tips of his own:

*If the enemy advances, we retreat.
If he halts, we harass.
If he avoids battle, we attack.
If he retreats, we follow.*

He was a keen student of domestic French politics and knew that the here-today, gone-tomorrow caravanserai of squabbling Fourth Republic politicians would always go for a quick fix, that the French public had little appetite for the drip of death thousands of miles away, and that much of the equipment that arrived in Vietnam would be sabotaged by a fifth column of French Communist workers. In this war of wills, it would be a rash man who would put money on the French. Leclerc was among those who realized that there was no military solution. Shortly before his death in Africa in 1947 he wrote: 'France will no longer put down by force a grouping of 24 million inhabitants which is assuming unity and in which there exists a xenophobic and perhaps a national ideal . . . The main problem is political.'⁵³

The French drifted into war against a masterly tactician leading a people whose warlike propensities had been evident – to their neighbours – since the Middle Ages.⁵⁴ But there were signs that the French would not be fighting alone. As Al Patti's OSS team was withdrawn from Indochina on 30 September 1945, he had already realized how far US policy was changing from Roosevelt's coolness towards colonial regimes. He felt that a new policy had evolved almost by stealth after Truman took over. By January 1946, this favoured the French, as evidenced when the State Department approved a British request to give the French 800 US military vehicles from their Lend-Lease pool. The 'Made in America' markings disappeared, in a minor concession to the disregarded anti-colonial line. This was the first step on a winding road, which would lead, over the protracted agony of France's involvements in Indochina, to the US taking on Giap and his steely troops themselves.⁵⁵

Indonesia

Starting in late December 1941 and concluding in March 1942, successive attacks by the Japanese resulted in their conquest of the resource-rich archipelago of the Netherlands East Indies (modern Indonesia). In March 93,000 men of the Dutch colonial army surrendered, not bothering to consult their Australian and British allies, who

joined many European and Australian civilians in brutal and degrading captivity. The Dutch had made no attempt to arm native Indonesians, typical of a colonial regime that had managed to educate 207 native children a year to high-school level from a total population of sixty-seven million.

The 300,000 Japanese troops based on these islands managed to make Dutch neglect seem benign. Native women were abducted to work in military brothels, while men were deployed as slave labour on railways, roads and the like. Of a quarter of a million Javanese abducted to work for the Japanese, only 70,000 came home alive. Drought, typhoons and Japanese rice requisitioning caused the death by starvation of two and a half million Javanese. Sumatra was administratively detached and merged into a Southern Region with Malaya, all ultimately governed by Tokyo from Singapore, renamed Syonan or ‘Light of the South’. Suspected of aiding Chiang or Mao, the large ethnic Chinese community was treated with appalling brutality, with 40,000 of them murdered. Richer Chinese saved their skins by paying a \$50 million levy in ‘atonement’ for past support of Chiang Kai-shek. This was not the only respect in which domestic Chinese politics had contaminated the diaspora. In Malay forests, the Japanese corralled villagers in stockades to isolate them from Communist guerrillas who were supported by Force 136 sent by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE).⁵⁶

By a unique accident, the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies laid the foundations for an independent nation. Although the Japanese navy swept the Dutch and their British and American allies aside with ease, one Allied submarine managed to sink a transport carrying half the trained administrators sent by Tokyo to take over the government of the vast Indonesian archipelago – it is as wide as the United States, and Sumatra alone is the size of California. Among some Indonesians the Japanese, and their erasure of Dutch-language street signs and place names, were welcomed, although their earliest actions included the dissolution of political parties and the prohibition of the red and white Indonesian nationalist flag. However, the mass internment of Dutch administrators and the deaths of their Japanese replacements meant that educated Indonesians filled thousands of middle- and upper-

echelon administrative and technical jobs. These officials soon gained confidence and realized that they did not need Dutch – or Japanese – tutelage to run their country.⁵⁷

The middle-aged civil engineer and nationalist activist Sukarno (Javanese has no first names) was one of the first to beat a path to the Japanese high command; he left the meeting in a Buick loaned to him to facilitate his collaborative activities. Yet he was not quite the Quisling the Dutch claimed him to be to discredit him with the Americans. With one eye towards a post-imperial future, Sukarno calculated that it was better to collaborate with the Japanese, whose over-stretched empire seemed potentially ephemeral, than to support what even in defeat he regarded as more durable European empires. Although he was as aware as many other nationalists of the nature of Japanese imperialism, unlike the others he had not been educated in metropolitan Holland and had no residual loyalty to the Dutch, who had repeatedly imprisoned and exiled him in the preceding years.

Everywhere they conquered, the Japanese authorities created submissive local cliques to replace nascent political parties. They invariably involved the word 'New' in their titles. In China there was Wang Jinwei's New Citizens' Movement; in the Philippines the Association for Service to the New Philippines. In Indonesia the Japanese crudely tried to co-opt both modernized and traditional Islam by requiring their adherents to bow towards Tokyo's Imperial Palace rather than Mecca. They also established a Triple A movement: Japan the Leader of Asia; Japan the Light of Asia; and Japan the Protector of Asia. The limited appeal of this movement afforded Sukarno his chance; he offered to associate Indonesian nationalism with the conqueror-liberators through a movement called Centre of the People's Power or Putera, the Indonesian word for Son of his Mother. 'Long Live Japan! Long Live Indonesia!' was its slogan.

As the tide of war turned, the Japanese conceded limited representative institutions, perhaps with a view to lumbering the Allies with the most awkward customers among the latter's former colonial subjects while reducing the number of problems they had to deal with themselves. In September 1943 Sukarno was appointed president of a Central Advisory Council, at whose sessions Indonesians could raise grievances

as they simultaneously rubber-stamped Japanese demands for labour or rice levies. As similar bodies were elaborated down to local level, so an embryonic national administration emerged. Collaborating also licensed Sukarno to traverse Indonesia, which in itself enabled him to become a national figure. He may have been strident in his denunciations of the Americans and British, and extravagant in his praise of the Japanese, but he did so in an elliptical Indonesian tongue via a national network of ‘singing trees’ or village radios suspended from branches. It was easy in these speeches to bamboozle the largely monoglot Japanese, but they had also learned – too late – that a policy of ruthless exploitation was counter-productive. One senior Japanese commander wrote:

If we judge the trend of native sentiments correctly and, while advancing their education, promise in the near future to meet their desires, the extremely sensitive natives will be impressed and although there may be material shortages they will tolerate this and steadily strengthen their cooperation . . . On the other hand, if we regard the natives as ignorant people and err in the ways of winning their hearts, we shall receive an unexpected counterblow – as the saying goes, ‘Even a small work has a large spirit’ – and we must then be prepared to partake of the same bitter cup suffered by the former Dutch regime at the time of its collapse.⁵⁸

In accordance with this new line, the Japanese formed quasi-military youth movements and an Indonesian volunteer army which would become the core of a future republican Indonesian army. In November 1943 Sukarno made his first foreign trip to Tokyo, where he was decorated by Emperor Hirohito and entertained by Prime Minister Tojo. In May 1944 he attended a conference in Singapore, where he publicly enunciated the five principles which would guide a future Indonesian state. These were belief in God, social justice, representative government, internationalism and unity of the archipelago from Sumatra to Papua New Guinea. In a complex society of sixty-seven million people, this was probably the maximum aspiration.⁵⁹

Sukarno’s strategy appeared to pay dividends as in September 1944

the Japanese promised independence to what they had hitherto called the Southern Regions, meaning all the territory they had conquered in South-east Asia. In March 1945 they established an Investigative Committee for the Preparation of Independence. That August they appointed Sukarno chairman, and Mohammed Hatta his deputy, with 24 August set to be the date when power would be formally transferred – a date rendered irrelevant by the abrupt end of the war following the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

After 8 August Sukarno took matters into his own hands and on the 17th in the courtyard of a house in Jakarta simply declared, 'We, the people of Indonesia, hereby declare Indonesia's independence.' This was followed by demonstrations, under the nervous eyes of Japanese troops, in the lengthy interval before the Allies arrived to take their surrender. As originally planned, that should have been the Americans, with the Dutch East Indies destined to become a part of MacArthur's vast Pacific command. He fully intended to restore Dutch rule, but while an invasion of Japan was still on the cards US Chief of Staff General George Marshall had decided that MacArthur should not dissipate forces he needed for Operation Olympic, the invasion and occupation of Japan. Marshall's growing dislike of MacArthur gave him a further reason to cut him down to size.

Following agreement at Potsdam, the British had already subsumed the Dutch East Indies into Mountbatten's hopelessly overstretched South East Asia Command (SEAC), an enterprise known to American cynics as 'Save England's Asian Colonies'. This sleight of hand resulted in some confused loyalties in Indonesia two months later, when Australian and Indian Army troops landed, the delay caused by the US reluctance to provide ships. Red and white flags flew openly and 'Merdeka!' (Freedom!) was daubed on walls; but there were also such pro-US slogans as: 'We are fighting for government for the people, by the people, of the people.' A British officer sourly noted to an American observer: 'Your damned American revolution is still giving us trouble.' After Indonesian nationalist gangs tried to kill anyone with a white face, a larger force of Seaforth Highlanders was despatched under General Sir Philip Christison. With demobilization beckoning, none of these British or Indian soldiers wished to tarry in Indonesia and, since

his Muslim Indian troops would be highly unlikely to coerce Muslim Indonesians, Christison wisely announced that ‘British and Indian troops will not become involved in internal politics,’ leaving the maintenance of civil order in the hands of the Japanese. His aim was to fulfil only the limited role of freeing 100,000 Europeans from atrocious conditions of confinement, but circumstances dictated otherwise.

The new Labour government in London endorsed Mountbatten’s proposal that the Dutch negotiate with the Indonesian nationalists. Unwilling though they were, the Dutch had little choice, since their homeland was devastated and the country had no armed forces to speak of. Negotiations were complicated by the fact that the government in The Hague was provisional, and unwilling to wave farewell to a colony that was at least as important to the Netherlands economy as India was to Britain. Overseas colonies also bolstered Dutch pretensions to being a significant player in newly liberated Europe. Not unreasonably, Sukarno pleaded with the British: ‘Indonesians will never understand why it is, for instance, wrong for the Germans to rule Holland if it is right for the Dutch to rule Indonesia. In either case the right to rule rests on pure force and not on the sanction of the populations.’ Mohammed Hatta put it more bluntly: ‘the Dutch [are] about as popular as the pox’.⁶⁰

The British tried to stand aside from the murderous tensions between Indonesian nationalists and incoming Dutch officials, who behaved as though they would simply take up where they had left off three years earlier. However, in Surabaya in eastern Java a British force was surrounded and shot up by a much larger number of Indonesian militiamen after they tried to extract civilian internees. A British general based in Batavia made the mistake of leafleting these militias from the air, telling them to disarm. When the British commander on the spot, Brigadier Aubertin Mallaby, tried to negotiate an exit for his forces, he was killed. The 5th Indian Division, supported by aircraft and tanks, went in to avenge the Mallaby’s death and killed around 9,000 Indonesian fighters.

Since the Dutch lacked the forces to reoccupy Indonesia, the fate of their colony devolved on the Americans and the British. US policy initially reflected the anti-colonial sentiments of the late President

Roosevelt, but his idea of international trusteeships for former European colonies was quietly abandoned, partly because the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington did not want this logic extended to the new overseas bases the US had acquired, and also because US corporations had a keen interest in Indonesia's oil, rubber and tin.

But Indonesia was affected by a more fundamental clash over policy between different departments of the US foreign service, which was to bedevil the making of policy towards other parts of the world in the post-war years. The State Department was bitterly divided between Europeanists, who wanted to support Britain, France and the Netherlands, and Asianists, who thought that the (outrageously circumscribed) independence the United States granted to the Philippines on 4 July 1946 should be paradigmatic for all former European colonies. A compromise formula that sought to reconcile the 'natural aspirations' of indigenous peoples and the 'legitimate rights and interests' of the colonizers revealed some of the tensions in US policy-making. The advent of Harry Truman with his less cynical and more broadbrush view of the world enabled the Europeanists to quietly bury Roosevelt's more ambivalent policy, which, in truth, would have unravelled anyway under the weight of its own contradictions.

The main British concern was that the spirit of independence evident in Indonesia should not spread to Malaya, but at the same time the British wished to withdraw their forces as rapidly as possible. The solution was to rely on 65,000 Japanese troops to maintain order, as they were legally obliged to do under the terms of the surrender agreement. They were good soldiers, as a British officer noted when he used them to rescue European hostages taken in Bandung. 'I watched the Japs closely as they went in. Couldn't fault 'em – absolutely first class!' When Mountbatten visited in April 1946, the guard of honour consisted of a thousand Japanese with their officers presenting arms with Samurai swords.⁶¹

The threat of peremptory British withdrawal forced the Dutch into negotiations, not with Sukarno, who was unacceptable to them, but with Premier Sutan Sjahrir, who met with them at Linggadjati under the chairmanship of Lord Killearn. The agreement, concluded in November 1946 but not ratified until six months later, accepted the

existence of an independent Indonesian Republic as part of a Netherlands Union headed by the Dutch Crown, with joint control of defence and foreign affairs. Pausing only long enough to slip 55,000 Dutch troops into Java, the British withdrew.⁶²

The Dutch hoped to establish a series of puppet states organized as an Indonesian federation under Dutch control. This resulted in fighting between the Dutch troops, who took major cities on Java and Sumatra as well as the Outer Islands including Bali, and the army of the Indonesian Republic and *ad hoc* militias. The Dutch launched two major ‘police’ campaigns in July 1947 and December 1948, the first called Operation Product, the second Operation Crow, after an intervening armistice known as the Renville Agreement broke down. These operations were extremely brutal. On 9 December 1947 Dutch forces massacred all 431 men in the village of Rawagede after they refused to betray the whereabouts of a leading independence fighter – tragically, they did not know who he was. After the Indonesian nationalists also breached the Renville Agreement, in December 1948 the Dutch launched a surprise attack on the nationalist capital of Jogjakarta, their actions aided by their having broken the enemy’s military codes. They took the city and captured Hatta and Sukarno, who were about to depart for a meeting with Nehru in India, and exiled them to Bangka island.

The Dutch had failed to spot the significance of an earlier event. Between September and November 1948, Soviet-backed Indonesian Communists had launched the Madiun revolt in Central Java, which the Indonesian army had suppressed with considerable violence. This brought the Americans into play. A senior agent of the CIA (which had succeeded the OSS in 1947 as America’s main external intelligence agency) arrived in Jogjakarta, one of his tasks being to select members of the Police Mobile Brigade, who were flown to US bases for advanced training. The US was not going to allow a minor power like the Netherlands to mess up the incipient United Nations and used the threat of ending the Netherlands’ participation in the European reconstruction assistance plan known as Marshall Aid to induce the Dutch to comply with UN ceasefire demands. Under the terms of the final settlement which gave the Indonesian Republic its independence, the

Dutch clung on to Netherlands New Guinea, while Indonesia was obliged to take over £4 billion of Dutch East Indies debt, half of which was the cost of the campaign Holland had waged to frustrate Indonesian independence.⁶³