

# *Singapore, 1915, and the Birth of the Asian Underground\**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the 1915 Singapore Mutiny within the context of border-crossing patriotic and anarchist movements in the early twentieth century world. It traces some of the continuities and discontinuities with later revolutionary movements in Asia, especially in terms of networks and the sites of their interactions. Through this, it reflects on the meaning of the ‘transnational’ at this moment in Asian history.

## **Introduction**

On Monday 15 February 1915, the Chinese New Year holiday, the Indian 5th Light Infantry mutinied at Alexandra Barracks in Singapore. The regiment, made up entirely of Muslim troops, was the mainstay of the garrison on the island. At around 3pm, shots were fired; soldiers broke open the magazine and cut the military phone lines. The regiment’s British officers were off-duty, resting at home or on the beach, and news of the uprising was slow to spread. No-one, it seems, thought to tell the police. One party of rebels headed towards Singapore’s Chinatown, killing Britons they met on the way. Others headed to a nearby battery, manned by locally recruited Sikhs of the Malay States Guides: they killed the British officer and foisted guns on the Guides, but most of them fled into the nearby jungle. The largest and most resolute band of rebels headed west to Tanglin

\* An early version of this paper was written for a workshop on ‘Asia Inside Out: Period’ at the University of Hong Kong, December 2010. I am very grateful to the organizers, Helen Siu and Eric Tagliacozzo, for inviting me. I owe a particular debt to Sunil Amrith and all our co-participants at the ‘Sites of Asian Interaction’ project at the Centre for History and Economics, Cambridge.

Camp, where 307 German internees and prisoners of war were held, and offered them guns and liberty. But colonial hierarchies held: in the reported words of a naval lieutenant, ‘a German officer does not fight without his uniform or in the ranks of mutineers’.<sup>1</sup> Some of the military men and a few businessmen, however, took the opportunity to escape. In the confused fighting across the island, 47 soldiers and civilians were attacked and killed: five Chinese and Malays died, but most were British men, targeted on the golf courses, and in cars and carriages.<sup>2</sup> Their women and children withdrew—‘like the cinema pictures of Belgium refugees’—onto steamers in the harbour, provoking an ugly racial fracas as Eurasian and other Asian women attempted to join them. The British lost control of their island fortress for two days, and the underlying fragility of colonial society was exposed.<sup>3</sup>

A week later, 614 Indian troops were in custody; 52 men had been killed and around 150 were still unaccounted for. They attempted to blend into local South Asian society by posing as cattle-keepers, or escaping across the causeway to Johore on the Malay Peninsula.<sup>4</sup> One ‘ringleader’ was captured 200 miles away. Only on 8 March did the golf clubs reopen, and by May just a small number of men were still at large.<sup>5</sup> In private, British witnesses admitted that it was a close-run thing. The besetting terror for the British was that rebellion would spill into wider society. There was, on the face of it, little leadership or coordination to the uprising. But had the mutineers marched on the town ‘nothing would have stopped a general massacre’.<sup>6</sup> The British only regained control of their island fortress by calling up a makeshift militia of sailors and settlers from other nations: 190 French seamen from the cruiser *Montcalm*; 150 more from two Japanese cruisers; a smaller detachment from a Russian ship; and the private army of the Sultan of Johore. The 200 hastily sworn-in European special constables

<sup>1</sup> Lowell Thomas, *Lauterbach of the China Sea: the Escapes and Adventures of Seagoing Falstaff* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1930), p. 114.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from unidentified correspondent, Singapore, 24 February 1915, CO 273/420, The National Archives, London (TNA).

<sup>3</sup> For the narrative, I have drawn on Nicholas Tarling’s essential essay ‘“The Merest Pustule”: The Singapore Mutiny of 1915’, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 55 (1982), pp. 26–59; and R.W.E. Harper and Harry Miller, *Singapore Mutiny* (Singapore: Oxford in Asia Paperbacks, 1985), especially pp. 120, 133–36.

<sup>4</sup> W.G. Maxwell, ‘Narrative’, [24 February 1915], CO 273/420, TNA.

<sup>5</sup> Harper and Miller, *Singapore Mutiny*, pp. 172–90.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from unidentified correspondent, Singapore, 4 March 1915, CO 273/420, TNA.

were matched by 190 Japanese civilians raised by the Imperial consul.<sup>7</sup> The decision to place Russian sailors under British command, and in British khaki, was a humiliating twist in the old ‘Great Game’ in Asia.<sup>8</sup> When a series of victory parades was held, Japanese pressmen noted gleefully that, for the first time, the ‘Rising Sun’ flew over Singapore.<sup>9</sup>

The episode was heavy with meaning for all observers. The *New York Times* portrayed the uprising as the greatest threat to British power in Asia since 1857. *The Times* of London recalled the hysteria during the earlier Indian Mutiny over rumours of violation of European women. Yet only one British woman was killed, seemingly by accident, when throwing herself in front of her husband.<sup>10</sup> The violence was curiously discriminating. ‘You Ingleesh?’ mutineers demanded of one European volunteer. ‘No, Irish’ came the reply, and the man was spared.<sup>11</sup> British retribution, however, was swift and brutal, even though the identification of the perpetrators of specific murders—often by ‘ladies not accustomed to dealing with Indians’—proved nigh-on impossible. After a Summary General Court Martial, 202 men were convicted: 43 were executed and 63 transported for life.<sup>12</sup> At one of the executions, 110 men were included in the firing party: they were local volunteers and British regulars, five men for each condemned sepoy. In a break with local practice, the executions were held in public, against the walls of Outram Road Prison and, on one occasion, a crowd of around 15,000 spectators assembled. Many in the firing parties were unaccustomed to short range musketry, with grisly results—scattered, ineffective fire—as the condemned men were despatched to the accompaniment of the wails of their comrades inside the gaol.<sup>13</sup>

A rather effective news blackout was imposed on the affair, particularly in India. When an inquiry was held, it was intended to be public, but the report was never published. It privately acknowledged

<sup>7</sup> Governor, Straits Settlements, to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 25 February 1915, CO 273/420, TNA.

<sup>8</sup> Karen A. Snow, ‘Russia and the 1915 Indian Mutiny in Singapore’, *South East Asia Research* 5 (1997), pp. 295–315.

<sup>9</sup> Tarling, “‘The Merest Pustule’”, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Christine Doran, ‘Gender Matters in the Singapore Mutiny’, *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 17(1) (2002), pp. 76–93.

<sup>11</sup> Captain T.M. Winsley, *A History of the Singapore Volunteer Corps, 1854–1937, Being Also an Historical Outline of Volunteering in Malaya* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1938), p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Court of Inquiry’, enclosed in Governor, Straits Settlements, to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 19 August 1915, CO 273/423, TNA.

<sup>13</sup> Harper and Miller, *Singapore Mutiny*, pp. 195–204.

what was rumoured at the time: that Indian seditionists and German agents were at work among the garrison. Yet the report found little hard evidence of a concerted conspiracy. The British ascribed the revolt to the indiscipline of the unit, to divisions among the Indian and British officers, and the laxity of its British commander.<sup>14</sup> Above all, they denied the Mutiny a political meaning.<sup>15</sup> For the British, it was an unsettling reminder of the violence that ultimately guaranteed their rule. They preferred to see Singapore as an enclave of liberality, sheltered from the turbulence and misrule around it; where, if politics trespassed momentarily, it was by the machinations of marginal outsiders. This myth was perpetuated in later colonial writing, for which the era ‘before the war’ became a vanished idyll (after the horrors of the Japanese occupation in 1942—when another ‘mutiny’ occurred as Indian legions abandoned by the British went over to form an Indian National Army). In independent Singapore, there are post-colonial echoes to imperial memory. The Mutiny is seen largely through the prism of a ‘Singapore story’, in which the price of national survival is constant vigilance. A key local account of 1915 sees the ‘absent history’ as that of the police Special Branch and its defence of Singapore against external threats and internal subversion.<sup>16</sup> Beyond this, the Mutiny is not seen as an episode of any great consequence.

### 1915 in Asian history

The Great War is rarely seen as a major event in Southeast Asian history. The more recent global turn to histories of the 1914–18 conflict has yet to make an impression on entrenched national historical traditions, in which the Japanese war is usually portrayed as the defining moment, and in apocalyptic terms.<sup>17</sup> The Second World

<sup>14</sup> The best account of the post mortem is Tarling, “‘The Merest Pustule’”.

<sup>15</sup> T.R. Sareen, *Secret Documents on the Singapore Mutiny 1915* (New Delhi: Mouton Publishing House, 1985), pp. 1–20.

<sup>16</sup> Ban Kah Choon, *Absent History: The Untold Story of Special Branch Operations in Singapore 1915–1942* (Singapore: Horizon Books, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Important exceptions include Nicholas Tarling, *The Fall of Imperial Britain in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993); Xu Guoqi, *China and the Great War: China’s Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Kees van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Leiden: KITLV, 2007). For the global turn, see, for example, Hew Strachan, *The First World War, Volume One: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

War, though, is now seen as a longer process: as a Great Asian War, with a momentum of its own, beginning as early as 1937 or 1935, or even 1931, and ending perhaps only in 1949. In a similar way, the 1914–18 War needs to be recentred in Asian history. February 1915 was, arguably, a moment at which the full magnitude of its impact was felt. To focus on this moment perhaps allows us to ‘loosen’ time,<sup>18</sup> and put to use some of the fields of transnational vision: that is, a shifting of ideas of chronology, space, and of narrative focus.

The Asian aspect of the 1914–18 War was a struggle for the intertwined futures of the imperial regimes that spanned the continent: Russia, the Ottomans, the Qing, and the great arc of the British Raj from Cairo to Kowloon.<sup>19</sup> Fighting erupted at an early stage. In October and November 1914, the siege of Qingdao saw Japanese, British, and Indian troops fight alongside each other to seize the German concession in China. As in Europe, war was an opportunity to refashion the international order. The colonial borders of maritime Asia had been largely unchallenged since the Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1824, but they now seemed open to revision. Japan took advantage of the Western powers’ embroilment in Europe to project national trade and influence across Asia. Exploiting the 1902 alliance with Britain, Japanese warships were seen everywhere in British harbours and civilian ‘sightseeing’ parties gathered economic and political intelligence in Indochina and in the Dutch East Indies, which was now seen by the British as the weak link in the ‘Malay barrier’ that protected Australia and New Zealand. For colonial peoples, Japan was a model of modernity and a beacon of pan-Asian feeling. Asian reformers beat a path to Tokyo and, following wartime clampdowns in British India and elsewhere, anti-colonial dissidents sought political sanctuary there in increasing numbers. However, at the same time, on 18 January 1915, Japan’s ‘21 Demands’ on China for rights of settlement and extra-territorial concessions opened a new era of imperial competition and of Chinese patriotic resistance. Japanese intervention in the Singapore Mutiny a month later marked the limits of Japanese official support for Asian nationalisms when they collided with its own interests.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Rudolf Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. v.

<sup>19</sup> Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires 1908–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Sho Kuwajima, *Indian Mutiny in Singapore, 1915* (Calcutta: Ratna Prakashan, 1991).

The Asian war drew in combatant and non-combatant nations, old landed empires, and newer colonial empires alike. Although officially neutral until August 1917, China sought to enforce its sovereign claims to the German concessions by other means. In 1915, China sent ‘workers as soldiers’ to the western front and the fierce internal debates around the war extended the public sphere to an unprecedented extent.<sup>21</sup> The global ‘economic war’ created rupture across borders. Disruption of shipping broke down the delicate mechanisms for the supply of wheat and rice from the great river deltas of the mainland to the export-oriented economies of maritime Asia.<sup>22</sup> Although the Netherlands was a neutral power, the entangled proximity of its *Grote Oost* to British Asia meant that the war was as much an event for the East Indies as it was for neighbouring Malaya and Singapore. British prohibitions on the trade in gunny, because of its military uses, caused a near collapse of the inter-island trade in rice and other foodstuffs for the western archipelago, as there was no other means for its carriage.<sup>23</sup> Cargo arrivals in Java dropped around 25 per cent in volume between 1914 and 1916. By the end of the War, there were bad harvests, shortages, and food riots. The ‘age of strikes’ had begun. These were at their most intense in Java, where rebellion in the countryside took on a millenarian temper. For the first time, European elites across Asia confronted the possibility of a sudden disintegration of the colonial order.<sup>24</sup>

This was a crisis of imperial globalization. Total war—with its omnivorous demand for men and material—required empires to function effectively as a transnational system, rather than as loose and bewildering agglomerations of formal and informal possessions and sundry jurisdictions. Colonial governments took on functions unprecedented in peacetime, from interventions in international trade, food production, and the organization of labour to the

<sup>21</sup> Xu Guoqi, *Strangers on the Western Front: Chinese Workers in the Great War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> C. Baker, ‘Economic Reorganization and the Slump in South and Southeast Asia’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23(3) (1981), pp. 325–49.

<sup>23</sup> Young to Bonar Law, 25 August 1916, GD/C/21, Singapore National Archives (SNA).

<sup>24</sup> This is a major theme of Van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War*. For the ‘age of strikes’, see John Ingleson, *In Search of Justice: Workers and Unions in Colonial Java, 1908–1926* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Takashi Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912–1926* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). For a summary of the general unrest, see Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 46.

internment of aliens, censorship, and the interception of mail, to which 21 readers and translators were put to work in Singapore alone.<sup>25</sup> But at the same moment, the European war had taken away one-fifth of British civil servants in Malaya, and resultant overstretch exposed the underlying vulnerabilities of the system. The defining technology and presiding metaphor of the imperial globalization of the late nineteenth century was the long-distance telegraph.<sup>26</sup> When the shooting war came to the Indian Ocean in late 1914, it came in the form of the *SMS Emden*: a German raider that preyed on Allied shipping and island relay stations for the 'all red' telegraph routes that were the principal mechanism connecting Britain's Asian and Pacific empires. The *Emden's* ghost-ship-like existence stoked the febrile rumours that surrounded the Singapore Mutiny. It encouraged German diplomats, traders, and adventurers to exploit the interstices within the imperial order—international cities such as Shanghai and Tianjin as well as neutral enclaves such as Siam, the Philippines, and the Netherlands Indies—to open a Far Eastern front. They did so by channelling gold and guns across borders to the Asian opponents of empire.

At heart of the February 1915 crisis was Western paranoia about the networks and synchronisms their empires had generated for colonial subjects. Chief among these was the realization that *fin de siècle* empire was a Euro-Islamic condominium. From Morocco to Merauke, Muslim elites were the bedrock of indirect rule and Muslim soldiers formed the backbone of many colonial armies. Imperial globalization across the Indian Ocean followed older Islamic networks; Islamic globalization adapted to new systems of communication and transnational governance.<sup>27</sup> Ottoman pan-Islamism invoked old notions of suzerainty in the Eastern Indian Ocean and Malay rulers turned to Istanbul, as much as Tokyo, for legal authority and models of modernity.<sup>28</sup> The spectre of these hidden domains of power and

<sup>25</sup> R.J. Wilkinson to Andrew Bonar Law, 22 November 1915, GD/C/20, SNA.

<sup>26</sup> Deep Kanta Lahiri Choudhury, *Telegraphic Imperialism: Crisis and Panic in the Indian Empire, c. 1830–1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Francis Robinson, 'The British Empire and the Muslim World', in William Roger Louis and Judith Brown (eds), *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Vol. 4, pp. 398–420; Amira K. Bennison, 'Muslim Universalism and Western Globalization', in A.G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2002), pp. 73–94.

<sup>28</sup> Barbara Watson Andaya, 'From Rūm to Tokyo: The Search for Anticolonial Allies by the Rulers of Riau, 1899–1914', *Indonesia* 24 (1977), pp. 123–56; Michael Francis Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma Below the Winds* (London: Routledge, 2003); Iza Hussin, 'The Making of Islamic Law: Local Elites and Colonial

influence had a powerful purchase on emerging 'imperial security states' in London, Paris, Delhi, Singapore, and Batavia before the War.<sup>29</sup> After the declaration of *jihad* by the *Sheikh-ul-Islam* in Istanbul on behalf of the Ottoman Caliph on 14 November 1914, the Allies seemed to face 'a revolt of Islam'.<sup>30</sup> This possibility was both imagined and real. Turkish and German propaganda attempted to conjure it into being across Asia and Africa. Local communities such as the Hadrami Arabs, who had long been bearers of Pan-Islamic influences across the Indian Ocean, came under pressure to declare themselves. 'Loyal' Muslims, from the Ismaili Aga Khan to Sunni Malay sultans, were mobilized by the British in an unprecedented global counter-propaganda exercise.<sup>31</sup>

The direct evidence for wholesale Muslim rejection of European rule in late 1914 was scattered and inconclusive, but it looms large in accounts of the 1915 Mutiny.<sup>32</sup> The intercepted letters home from Indian troops in Singapore testified to a millenarian mood: 'And the war is increasing day by day. There is no decrease. Germany has become Mohammedan. His name has been given as Haji Mohammed William Kaiser German. And his daughter has been married to the eldest prince of the Sultan of Turkey.'<sup>33</sup> Lord Kitchener concluded that the 5th Light Infantry were 'too Mohamedan for service in Egypt', but soldiers in Singapore did not know this, and on the eve of the Mutiny they were convinced that the announcement of their redeployment to Hong Kong was a ruse to send them against

Authority in British Malaya', in Thomas Dubois (ed.), *Casting Faiths: Technology and the Creation of Religion in East and Southeast Asia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 155–74.

<sup>29</sup> James L. Hevia, *The Imperial Security State: British Colonial Knowledge and Empire-building in Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Eric Tagliacozzo, 'Kettle on a Slow Boil: Batavia's Threat Perceptions in the Indies' Outer Islands, 1870–1910', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 31(1) (2000), pp. 70–100.

<sup>30</sup> G.P. Abbott, 'A Revolt of Islam?', *Quarterly Review* 223 (1915), p. 69.

<sup>31</sup> Jacob M. Landau, *The Politics of Pan-Islam: Ideology and Organization* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). There is a large literature on the Hadrami, but for this period, see especially Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadrami Awakening: Community and Identity in the Netherlands East Indies, 1900–1942* (Ithaca, New York: SEAP Publications, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> See especially the insightful essay by Kees van Dijk, 'Religion and the Undermining of British Rule in South and Southeast Asia During the Great War', in R. Michael Feener and Terenjit Sevea Feener (eds), *Islamic Connections: Muslim Societies in South and Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), pp. 109–33.

<sup>33</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, p. 730.



the Ottomans. The garrison commander, Dudley Ridout, reported, after the event, ‘an undue amount of praying’. He believed that the interned Germans in Tanglin had stoked pro-Caliphate sentiment by prostrating themselves at sundown and ‘pretend[ing] to recite the Koran’.<sup>34</sup> A charismatic Indian preacher at Kampong Java Mosque, Nur Alam Shah, venerated as a sufi teacher by some of the soldiers and by local Punjabis, Bengalis, and Malays alike, promised the arrival of a German warship and prayed ‘for the victory of Islam and the return of Islam[ic] power’. He sheltered mutineers and chided them for not bringing him arms for a general rising, in which, an informer reported, ‘he would have arranged to kill the Governor’. He dressed mutineers in Malay clothes and exhorted the Malay police not to arrest them. A local Gujarati merchant, Kassim Ali Mansoor, with a more tenuous connection to the rebels, had written earlier to the Ottoman consul in Rangoon to ask for a Turkish ship. He was executed with them.<sup>35</sup>

After the Mutiny, the British drew comfort from the reports of a mass meeting of some 3,000 local Muslims, led by the island’s wealthy Hadrami community: ‘The King is considered the shadow of The Most High and our faith teaches us that to him we must give implicit obedience.’<sup>36</sup> But, for the Hadrami, this had always been ‘a relationship of mutual benefit, attraction, and aversion’.<sup>37</sup> Appeals to the Ottoman Sultan and his ally ‘Hadji Guillaume’, or to the British empire as the largest Islamic power, risked affront to sentiments that had a far more subtle and localized appeal. They were rooted in old geographies, over long distances, which were revived by the Great War and the reopening of the possibilities it represented. In April 1915, there was a tax revolt in Kelantan on the east coast of Malaya, in the relatively isolated district of Pasir Puteh. It was led by local men, defending their prestige against interlopers, but they showed a keen awareness of outside events. A repeated theme of their testimonies was that the British empire was coming to an end—a view shared by the local Sultan himself, although he was pledged to the war effort. European troops, it was said, had fled Singapore, and it was possible

<sup>34</sup> Major-General Dudley Ridout, ‘Reference to Report signed by General Houghton on 11 May 1915, marked “X”’, CO 273/423, TNA.

<sup>35</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, pp. 616–17, and as discussed by Van Dijk, ‘Religion and the Undermining of British Rule’, pp. 125–26.

<sup>36</sup> *Malaya Tribune*, 9 March 1915.

<sup>37</sup> Engseng Ho, ‘Empire Through Diasporic Eyes: A View from the Other Boat’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46(2) (2004), p. 212.

to drive out the white man.<sup>38</sup> Local communities did not always need the prompting of outsiders to frame their actions in broader terms.

The Singapore Mutiny revealed an epiphany of war-weariness and anger that rippled across disparate communities in colonial and international settlements across Asia and beyond. It was set in motion by the voyage of an ageing Japanese cargo steamer, the *Komagata Maru*, between April and September 1914. The ship's course charted Asian worlds that extended from India, Hong Kong, and Japan to Canada and the United States, and it came to symbolize the inequalities upon which claims on imperial loyalties in peace, and now in war, rested. From beginning to end, its fortunes were closely interwoven with Singapore. The voyage was the inspiration of Gurmit Singh, a Sikh businessman who had made a modest fortune as a labour and transport contractor in the western states of Malaya, from where the Malay States Guides heralded. He had been active in Sikh community affairs in Perak and Selangor, and later in Singapore. In early 1914, on a visit to Hong Kong, he was deeply moved by the struggle of Sikhs there, many of them ex-soldiers, to enter Canada to work. This was a movement spearheaded in the 1900s by the demand for labour on the Canadian Pacific Railway, and created Sikh networks that stretched across the three great oceans. But by 1910, this passage was blocked by new exclusionary laws. To defy them, Gurmit Singh privately chartered the *Komagata Maru* to land Punjabi settlers in British Columbia. Many of its 376 passengers came from Hong Kong, the ship's point of charter, but it drew men—Muslims as well as Sikhs—from Indian communities right across the China seaboard, and others from Manila and elsewhere joined the ship in Japan. Its arrival in Vancouver harbour was heralded by hysterical local press reports of a 'Hindu invasion' and no passengers were allowed to land. A long and public confrontation ensued which radicalized South Asian opinion in India, Southeast and East Asia, and North America.<sup>39</sup>

The *Komagata Maru* was forced to depart from Vancouver on the day of the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia. Its passengers became 'vagrants' on the high seas at the very moment Indian troops were

<sup>38</sup> J. de V. Allen, 'The Kelantan Rising of 1915: Some Thoughts on the Concept of Resistance in British Malayan History', *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 9(2) (1968), pp. 241–57. Cheah Boon Kheng, *To' Janggut: Legends, Histories, and Perceptions of the 1915 Rebellion in Kelantan* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2006); Ban, *Absent History*, pp. 47–53.

<sup>39</sup> The classic account is Hugh J. M. Johnston, *The Voyage of the 'Komagata Maru': The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979).

asked to bear the burden of fighting as they had done in past imperial wars. An 'Open Letter to the British Public by the Hindustanis of North America' posed a question:

But just about this time, if those 352 Hindustanis returning to Hong Kong can succeed in inducing at least some of their friends and relations who are now serving in the artillery, infantry, and police force, to desert their posts, what will be the moral effect of such an act?<sup>40</sup>

The *Komagata Maru* was forbidden Hong Kong and, on its eventual arrival in Bengal, was met with violence in which 19 passengers perished. It also passed through Singapore, where again no-one was allowed to land, and this had, the governor admitted, 'left a bad effect'.<sup>41</sup>

Prior to the 15 February uprising in Singapore, mutiny had already permeated Malaya's society. In late 1914, locally recruited men of the Malay States Guides refused to serve in East Africa and this regiment had been sent upcountry to Taiping. British officers impugned their motives: they were 'barbers, bhisitias, weavers' who wanted to 'lend money and make and save money'.<sup>42</sup> The rank and file amounted to 399 Sikhs and 205 Muslims,<sup>43</sup> with strong ties in the Malay States.<sup>44</sup> Their families numbered about 8,000 adult males, many of them in possession of arms and ammunition. These relatives held meetings in 1915 at which it was resolved to model their conduct on the Singapore rebels. If they had persisted in this, their commanding officer warned, 'there would have been a blaze throughout the Federated Malay States the effects of which might have reached the Punjab'.<sup>45</sup>

The Singapore uprising was part of a chain of rebellions in 1915—both actual and stillborn—from 'Lahore to Dacca' to Rangoon and points east. The Mutiny, or 'Ghadar' movement, was perhaps the most world-encompassing of its period. Ghadar was something

<sup>40</sup> Malwinderjit Singh Waraich and Gurdev Singh Sidhu (eds), *Komagata Maru: A Challenge to Colonialism: Key Documents* (Chandigarh: Unistar, 2005), p. 104.

<sup>41</sup> Governor, Straits Settlements, to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 19 August 1915, CO 273/423, TNA.

<sup>42</sup> Lieutenant Colonel G.H.B. Lees, 'Short History of the Malay States Guides from 16 March 1914 to date', GD/C/20, SNA.

<sup>43</sup> Telegram from Governor, Straits Settlements, to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 24 July 1915, CO 273/423, TNA.

<sup>44</sup> Gerard McCann, 'Sikhs and the City: Sikh History and Diasporic Practice in Singapore', *Modern Asian Studies* 45(6) (2011), pp. 1465–498.

<sup>45</sup> Commandant Malay States Guides to DAAG Aden Brigade, 10 December 1916, in Young to Walter Long, 17 October 1918, GD/C/24, SNA.

with which many South Asians chose to identify, rather than a disciplined revolutionary vanguard. There were, as an evocative new interpretation by Maia Ramnath has argued, many Ghadars. They were brought together by a heroic reading of India's past struggle against empire and goals for its liberation and future. They shared a revolutionary eclecticism that was formed by the global terrain in which Ghadar operated, and a willingness to embrace violence and its consequences.<sup>46</sup> Singapore was a crucial node through which its ideas and followers fanned out across the furthest horizons of the Indian Ocean. The *Ghadar* newspaper was smuggled in through the Sikh Gurdwara, hidden in the unsupervised Dutch mails, and distributed through the Netherlands Indies by Sikh and other Indian merchants in Medan, Sumatra.<sup>47</sup> As radicalized Ghadarites began to make their way back to India from North America and China, via Japan and Southeast Asia, to raise rebellion in early 1915—around 8,000 of them in one account—many of these pilgrims passed through Singapore and Penang.<sup>48</sup> The logic of the steamer routes from Hong Kong and Japan dictated this. The preacher, Nur Alam Shah, was said to have been left behind to raise funds.<sup>49</sup> Singapore and the western archipelago was also a locus of one of the most dramatic attempts by Germany to mobilize these networks when it dispatched two ships, the *Maverick* and the *Annie Larsen*, from the United States, via Mexico, to deliver arms to India via Java.<sup>50</sup>

But this was not just a Raj—an Islamic, 'Hindu', or Sikh—affair. Vietnamese radicals in Siam were encouraged to wage war on the frontier of French Indochina.<sup>51</sup> There were reports in April in Saigon of a Chinese tempting the exiled Burmese prince Mingoon Min into a

<sup>46</sup> Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>47</sup> 'Memorandum' enclosed in W.A.D. Beckett to General Secretary Buitenzorg, 29 June 1915, Kol. Openbaar Vb 20-8-1915/35, Nationaal Archief, Den Haag (ANA).

<sup>48</sup> Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, p. 51.

<sup>49</sup> Ban, *Absent History*, p. 29.

<sup>50</sup> There is a large literature on this: key accounts include T.G. Fraser, 'Germany and Indian Revolution, 1914–18', *Journal of Contemporary History* 12(2) (1977), pp. 255–72; Don Dignan, *The Indian Revolutionary Problem in British Diplomacy, 1914–1919* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1983); A.C. Bose, *Indian Revolutionaries Abroad, 1905–1927: Select Documents* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 2002), and, more recently, Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, and Van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War*, pp. 317–52.

<sup>51</sup> Christopher E. Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885–1954* (London: Curzon, 1998), pp. 43–44.

rebellion in Burma and Bengal, with the promise of a throne.<sup>52</sup> And it was never clear who was using whom. Indian revolutionaries from the Bengal anarchist underground approached German consuls in China and elsewhere on their own initiative. They emulated and adapted the strategies of others. Their cause was advanced by longer term arguments between people participating in wider networks, but also by a sense of commonality and proximity to others far distant, and very unlike themselves.

### Singapore, inside out

There were, then, several Singapore mutinies, all of them reaching far beyond its shores. A revisiting of 1915 allows us, perhaps, to recast Singapore's history inside out, to align Singapore to global currents and to geographies besides empire and nation. It captures a moment when Singapore was one of the most global cities on earth and also one of the most modern. Its outward-looking trading communities had built up maritime connections and wealth on a scale to be seen in few other cities of the age. The fortunes of its Chinese, Arab, Armenian, Jewish, and other minorities paralleled, and many cases eclipsed that of the Europeans, who themselves were a heterogeneous community, comprising Dutch, Swiss, and, until 1914, Germans, and many others. For Asian elites, the imperial globalization of the later nineteenth century encouraged an ecumenical and internationalist outlook. Empire became an arena for the propagation of transnational social and religious reform: theosophy, a Confucian revival, Islamic modernism, Buddhist internationalism, and global discourses on race, civilization, and liberalism.<sup>53</sup> This, not territorial nationalism, was perhaps the characteristic form of elite politics before the First World War. The outbreak of war was met with outward displays of loyalty to empire by subjects: the people of Malaya paid war taxes; they donated Straits \$5,172,174 to voluntary war funds and charities; they provided 53 aeroplanes, 250 Chinese 'coolies', and a Malay Ford Motor Van Company for the Mesopotamian campaign.<sup>54</sup> But there was a

<sup>52</sup> Consul, Saigon, to Secretary of State, 21 April 1915, COD/C/60, SNA.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Ravinder Frost, 'Asia's Maritime Networks and the Colonial Public Sphere, 1840–1920', *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 6 (2004), pp. 63–94.

<sup>54</sup> Sir Charles Lucas (ed.), *The Empire at War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), Vol. 5, pp. 398–401.

reckoning. Malay sultans were showered with high honours; Asian merchants demanded new consideration. In Singapore, the Straits Chinese reformer, Lim Boon Keng, wrote a book called, *The Great War from a Confucian Point of View and Kindred Topics* (1917). It was a profession of empire loyalty; a vision of empire as a prelude to a cosmopolitan world federation, but equally it was an powerful demand for Britain to apply the standards of 'civilization', for which it claimed it was fighting, to the treatment of its colonial peoples.<sup>55</sup> This was one of the last occasions in Singapore on which demands were framed in these terms.

The Japanese historian, Sho Kuwajima, has gone further in arguing that 1915 and the Singapore Mutiny was 'a turning point of [the] Modern History of Asia'.<sup>56</sup> This is a striking claim. But it is clear that, across the spectrum of society, the crisis forced a fresh assessment of the 'mutual benefit, attraction and aversion' of the imperial relationship. Although the majority Chinese community had stood aloof from the Singapore Mutiny, the role of the Japanese in the rag-tag imperial militia that crushed it focused Chinese attention on the international context to their struggle against Japan. It also highlighted the vulnerable position of Britain. This set the agenda for the largest political campaign of the Chinese overseas to that date: the '21 Demands' protest of a few weeks earlier. This was a transnational movement, which challenged equally Japanese economic ambitions and the colonial order. It was the first mass movement in Singapore, spearheaded by Singapore's rickshaw men, drawing in travelling anarchists and adopting the new methods of protest already used by others elsewhere. A mass boycott of Japanese goods was announced in 1919 by cyclostyled leaflets entitled: 'Announcement of the Death Sentence' and 'Reasons for Throwing the Bomb'.<sup>57</sup> Kuwajima suggests that the role of the Japanese in the suppression of the February Mutiny, and the martial law to which both the mutineers and the boycott were then subject, brought very different strands of activity together in a kind of incipient anti-colonial front.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Discussed in T.N. Harper, 'Globalism and the Pursuit of Authenticity: The Making of a Diasporic Public Sphere in Singapore', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 12(2) (1997), pp. 261–92.

<sup>56</sup> Kuwajima, *Indian Mutiny*, p. 144.

<sup>57</sup> Secret Appendix to War Diary of the General Staff, Straits Settlements Command, for September 1919: 'Suspected Persons', FO 371/3816, TNA.

<sup>58</sup> Kuwajima, *Indian Mutiny*, pp. 90–103, 117–18.

In both the old and new empires of the *fin de siècle*, greater mobility and official repression had cast networks of ‘nation-makers’ and would-be revolutionaries overseas, across Asia, and to Europe and the Americas.<sup>59</sup> Writing in 1913, Lenin saw the 1905 Russian Revolution as ‘awakening’ Asia. But by then the centre of gravity of protest had already moved East, where any number of events had wider resonance. The Philippines Revolution of 1898 was an augury to young nationalists across Asia. The Boxer Rebellion was portrayed at the time as a ‘world-crisis’.<sup>60</sup> The defeat of Russia at Port Arthur was a bigger event in Asian history than it was in European history. The politics of extremism in Bengal was played out in London, Berlin, New York, San Francisco, and, in 1915, in Singapore and Batavia. These events had synchronicity. The Russian Revolution of 1905 was ‘the first revolution covered “live” by international telegraph services’. Anarchist violence in Europe and democratic revolutions in Russia in 1905, Iran in 1906 and 1908, the Ottoman empire in 1908, Portugal, Mexico, and China in 1910, 1911, and 1912 respectively were all linked by the rise of a new kind of intellectual. They were all lodged within global networks and in multiple translations and transpositions of ideas.<sup>61</sup>

These conflicts marked the real beginning of the global First World War. What Ghadar showed, and Chinese radicalism in opposition to Japan confirmed, was that this politics extended into the worlds of migrant labour. The general mobilization after July had extended these movements, and deepened their plebeian character, even at the heart of the imperial metropolis. There were 48,995 new arrivals of Indochinese and 36,941 Chinese in France in 1914 and they encouraged the radicalism of students and exiles.<sup>62</sup> In July 1914,

<sup>59</sup> For example, Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (London: Verso, 2005); Caroline S. Hau and Kasian Tejapira (eds), *Traveling Nation-makers: Transnational Flows and Movements in the Making of Modern Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> By Allen S. Will, *World-crisis in China* (Baltimore: J. Murphy Co., 1900), and see Robert Bickers and R. G. Tiedemann (eds), *The Boxers, China, and the World* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

<sup>61</sup> Charles Kurzman, *Democracy Denied, 1905–1915: Intellectuals and the Fate of Democracy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), especially p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> Tyler Stovall, ‘The Color Line Behind the Lines: Racial Violence in France During the Great War’, *The American Historical Review* 103(3) (1998), pp. 737–69; Xu, *Strangers on the Western Front*; Marilyn A. Levine, *The Found Generation: Chinese Communists in Europe During the Twenties* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993).

when the lights went out over Europe, a growing number of young Asian intellectuals in Europe saw in the industrialized carnage a challenge to the monopoly of the civilized standards that Europe had claimed since the Enlightenment, and they voiced counter-claims for a pan-Asian future.<sup>63</sup> They drew increasingly on a global repertoire of revolution. Tan Malaka, a young Indonesian student in Haarlem, turned to Thomas Carlyle: 'In that time of Sturm und Drang, when ideas were leaping about, hiding, turning, left and right, and breaking through like damned-up water, the book, *The French Revolution*, suddenly appeared as a resting place for my weary, questing thoughts.'<sup>64</sup> For anti-colonialists, the global webs of empire had created new possibilities for challenging it. Imperial policemen and the rebels of 1915 shared an obsession with making connections. Much of the recent historical writing on this period shares this imperative.<sup>65</sup> Yet it was unclear at the time, and since, how far these connections bridged different communities and contexts.

What is clear is that, at this juncture, the combined resources of empires were now pitted against this contingency. The crisis of 1915 was met with the accelerated consolidation of external boundaries and the imposition of closer internal structures of authority. It was the moment at which colonial Singapore was confronted by the logic of its own cosmopolitanism. The events of February showed that Singapore was, in 1915, still a very open city, part of a chain of such port settlements across Asia. But now, the British city fathers emphasized a more exclusive form of colonial identity. Even within what was a diverse European community, internment and the 'complete destruction' of German economic interests, privileged ties of blood.<sup>66</sup> Across colonial Asia, the certainties of 'race' were long insinuated in bureaucratic processes, ethnographical categories, and social segregation. Now war meant that boundaries were policed more directly than ever before, and this imposed fresh limits on the

<sup>63</sup> Prasenjit Duara, 'The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism', *Journal of World History* 12 (2001), pp. 99–130; Michael Adas, 'Contested Hegemony: The Great War and the Afro-Asian Assault on the Civilizing Mission Ideology', *Journal of World History* 15 (2004), pp. 31–63.

<sup>64</sup> Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*. Translated, edited and introduced by Helen Jarvis. 3 volumes (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1991), Vol. I, p. 26.

<sup>65</sup> As discussed in Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, p. 4.

<sup>66</sup> Mark Emmanuel, 'Trading with the Enemy: Economic Warfare against Germany in the Straits Settlements, 1914–1921', BA (Hons) Academic Exercise, National University of Singapore, 1996, p. 15.



ambitions of Eurasians and the emerging Asian middling class.<sup>67</sup> The racialization of state practice gathered pace. In Malaya, in 1913, the British established 'Malay Reservations' in land and, in the wake of war, as they contemplated political reform, they placed fresh emphasis on the essential Malay-centeredness of government. These conceits were to have a lasting legacy for independent Singapore and Malaysia.<sup>68</sup> Similar formulas were advanced in other colonial territories.

Above all, this moment was crystallized by the impact of new models of territorialized sovereignty and systems of individual identification.<sup>69</sup> Borders were suddenly less porous, and traffic across them, by land and sea, was now more closely policed.<sup>70</sup> The category of the 'coolie' had always carried with it the idea that a labourer's presence in any given territory was temporary.<sup>71</sup> The politics of exclusion, the deployment of labourers and soldiers, the displacements of refugees, the flight of exiles exposed the contingent and vulnerable status of those who travelled across the imperial world. Now the colonial powers took up new tools to uproot people across borders. In Malaya, after 1914, the British resorted increasingly to 'banishment'. This meant that people of long residence could be suddenly expelled to a 'home' to which they had few ties. This was an elaborate, visceral exercise in power: the life histories of banishees were recorded, their faces were photographed, and their scarred bodies mapped to guard against their return. British ministers denied that they used banishment to expel trade unionists from Malaya.<sup>72</sup> But in 1915, 31 members of a 'Hokkien secret society' were arrested, tried, and deported for political

<sup>67</sup> Tim Harper, 'The British "Malayans"', in Robert Bickers (ed.), *Settlers and Expatriates: Britons over the Seas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 233–68.

<sup>68</sup> Lim Teck Ghee, *Peasants and Their Agricultural Economy in Colonial Malaya, 1874–1941* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press 1977); Yeo Kim Wah, *The Politics of Decentralization: Colonial Controversy in Malaya, 1920–1929* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>69</sup> John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

<sup>70</sup> Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865–1915* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2005).

<sup>71</sup> Jan Breman and E. Valentine Daniel, 'Conclusion: The Making of a Coolie', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19(3–4) (1992), pp. 268–95.

<sup>72</sup> 'List of persons deported under orders of banishment during the month of December 1914', CO 273/420, TNA; HC Deb 25 February 1914 vol. 58 cc1749–50.

reasons. Between 1911 and 1931, over 20,000 people were banished from Malaya, with no right of appeal.<sup>73</sup> This was not just a case of colonial regimes repressing subjects in private. The 1915 crisis spread the legal concept of ‘criminal conspiracy’ across the globe. In the United States, after so-called ‘Hindu Conspiracy’ of 1915—the Ghadar that ‘permeated and encircled the whole globe’—a wave of wartime legislation, including the Espionage Act of 1917 and a Sedition Act, facilitated the banishment of political undesirables.<sup>74</sup> ‘Conspiracy’, in the words of the Harvard jurist Francis B. Sayre, ‘saved the judges from the often embarrassing necessity of having to spell out the crime’.<sup>75</sup>

Colonial officials had always seen Asian society as cabalistic. Servants of the Raj were mesmerised by an ‘underside India’ of ‘every sort of half understood thing and people’.<sup>76</sup> Now, in tracking *bomb-parasts*, jihadists, and Ghadarites, the British extended control and surveillance across borders and across systems. The Raj ran agents in Singapore, China, and Canada; a regional security apparatus conducted censuses of the Indian workforces on the China coast, beyond areas where they had any real jurisdiction, tracking individuals, providing life histories, and checking travel manifests.<sup>77</sup> Colonial powers acted in concert to regulate affairs beyond the framework of their own territories.<sup>78</sup> They all emphasized the external origins of anti-colonialism to try to strip it of internal legitimacy. The shared panic of the Singapore Mutiny led the British and the Dutch, rather painfully at first, to trade information on Ghadar networks and pan-Islamists, and this stimulated the founding of a Political Intelligence Service in the Indies in 1916. By 1919 it had 800 officials in around 100 locations.<sup>79</sup> The French equivalent, the *Sûreté Generale*, was founded in 1915 to address explicitly the threat of the overseas Vietnam

<sup>73</sup> C.F. Yong and R.B. McKenna, *Kuomintang Movement in British Malaya, 1912–1949* (Singapore: NUS Press, 1990), p. 67; Alun Jones, ‘Internal Security in British Malaya, 1895–1942’, PhD thesis, Yale University, 1970, p. 129.

<sup>74</sup> Joan M. Jensen, ‘The “Hindu Conspiracy”: A Reassessment’, *Pacific Historical Review* 48(1) (1979), pp. 65–83.

<sup>75</sup> Francis B. Sayre, ‘Criminal Conspiracy’, *Harvard Law Review* 35(4) (1922), p. 406.

<sup>76</sup> G.F. MacMunn, *The Underworld of India* (London: Jarrolds, 1933), p. 13.

<sup>77</sup> Richard Popplewell, *Intelligence and Imperial Defence: British Intelligence and the Defence of the Indian Empire, 1904–1924* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>78</sup> Anne L. Foster, *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919–1941* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 15–22.

<sup>79</sup> Harry Poeze, ‘Political intelligence in the Netherlands Indies’, in Robert Cribb (ed.), *The Late Colonial State in Indonesia: Political and Economic Foundations of the*

communities along the sea routes to and from Vietnam. Parallel bodies appeared at home to track what were euphemistically called ‘disorientated Asians’.<sup>80</sup> The British brought ever more pressure to bear on the Japanese to yield up Indian renegades. On the eve of the War, the governor of French Indochina, Albert Sarraut, had spoken of a ‘republicanising’ momentum: ‘a vast fire that seems to cover the whole of Asia’.<sup>81</sup> After 1915, it seemed to be quelled somewhat. In the summer, the British announced their defeat of rebellion in India.<sup>82</sup> With restrictions on flows of labour from India, it marked the first hiatus in the great human flows across Asia since the 1880s. In 1915, labour shortages caused steamship companies across the Bay of Bengal to complain that they were running at a heavy loss.<sup>83</sup> However, it would be naive to assume that this world of movement was stilled at the caprice of the colonial powers.<sup>84</sup> The new spatiality to power did not sever the transnational linkages of the first age of imperial globalization, but it made worldly living a harder task, against the grain of empire. It opened up a new great game in Asia.

### Empires, inside out

We might end here, at a lost moment of transnational possibilities and their foreclosure. This is a theme that shapes much of the recent wave of writing on Asian transnationalism. We have focused on Singapore and its global connections, but a similar story might be told of other cities on the itineraries of the period. Much of this writing—on the eastern Mediterranean as much as the Indian Ocean and beyond—also shares a chronological arc from, say, the 1880s to some time during or after the First World War and traces a late imperial *belle*

*Netherlands Indies 1880–1942* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1994), pp. 229–45; Van Dijk, *The Netherlands East Indies and the Great War*, pp. 322–29.

<sup>80</sup> Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks*, pp. 40–43; Douglas Porch, *The French Secret Services: From the Dreyfus Affair to the Gulf War* (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 293–94.

<sup>81</sup> J. Kim Munholland, ‘The French Response to the Vietnamese Nationalist Movement, 1905–14’, *The Journal of Modern History* 47(4) (1975), p. 674.

<sup>82</sup> Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, p. 2.

<sup>83</sup> Letter from Agents, BISN Singapore, to Controller of Labour, FMS, 4 October 1915, Singapore, BIS/7/20, National Maritime Museum. I am grateful to Sunil Amrith for this reference.

<sup>84</sup> Adam McKeown, ‘Global Migration, 1846–1940’, *Journal of World History* 15(2) (2004), pp. 176–77.

*époque*. In histories of radicalism, too, there is a sense that in 1914, or 1915, an open era of experimental possibilities had come to a climax, if not an end.<sup>85</sup> It is striking how many of the narratives of this period are narratives of loss: a grieving of diasporas for lost influence; a nostalgia, even, for an imagined cosmopolitan past or for the recession of alternative futures.<sup>86</sup> The idea of cosmopolitanism, here, rarely appears without qualification: it is elite, literary, or it is actually lived, visceral. There were Asian cosmopolitans: travellers who embraced the ‘different universalisms’ espoused by Rabindranath Tagore and others, in a first, inclusive wave of Pan-Asian thinking.<sup>87</sup> At points, these sentiments travelled deeper within societies, beyond the elite, to be embraced as an ideology and even, by some, as an identity.<sup>88</sup> These cosmopolitanisms were rarely informed by the traditions of thinking about rights and hospitality that the term invokes in the Western canon. But, nevertheless, they suggest a world-consciousness at work on multiple levels, not least in the banal worldliness of everyday life: the worldliness of people who often did not travel very far at all. A recurring question is: what happened to this in the era of colonial borders, of ethnic and ideological exclusivity, and the rise of the nation-state? To focus, as we are doing here, on a period as a completed thought, as it were, perhaps leads too easily to talk of watersheds and boundaries.

One answer may be that, in the wake of immigration controls and surveillance, the initiative passed into non-elite hands and so dropped somewhat, although never fully, out of view. One of the most iconic travelling intellectuals of the first quarter of the twentieth century was the Vietnamese scholar and reformer turned revolutionary, Phan Boi Chau. In 1917, he described this world of movement across imperial frontiers as ‘creating the village abroad’. From the early

<sup>85</sup> See the splendid study by Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

<sup>86</sup> Will Hanley, ‘Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle East Studies’, *History Compass* 6(5) (2008), pp. 1346–367.

<sup>87</sup> See Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), Bose and Kris Manjapra, *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>88</sup> See especially Su Lin Lewis, ‘Cosmopolitanism and the Modern Girl: A Cross-Cultural Discourse in 1930s Penang’, *Modern Asian Studies* 43(6) (2008), pp. 1–35.

twentieth century, harassed by the French, Phan Boi Chau and his followers located their freedom movement overseas, in China, Japan, and across Southeast Asia, in networks of Vietnamese sailors, cooks, servants, and, not least, women—some of them prostitutes, or single women often taken as such—who often acted as its couriers. Their settlements were forward bases for revolutionaries. They were linked by kin networks, secured by intermarriage to locals, and over time were given emotional force by the shrines of revolutionary martyrs.<sup>89</sup> Much of the writing on these movements—the first wave of world history—has been written through ‘diasporic eyes’, or as national history ‘inside out’.<sup>90</sup> Yet many of these lives were also lived beyond the nation and diaspora. This leads us to consider not only how diasporas functioned from within, but the functions they performed for others; how they conversed with others; and the ideas that emerged from this.<sup>91</sup> The networks formed in these worlds could, of course, adhere doggedly to ethnicity and nationality—and this is how they have been chiefly studied, in Southeast Asia in particular, in terms of a ‘plural’ of ‘segmented’ society. But what lay besides or beyond ethnicity?<sup>92</sup> How did one ‘village abroad’ connect with another and what did these crossings mean? To begin to answer this, we need to loosen time and space a little further.

Pathways through the village abroad could connect places other than ‘home’, often bypassing ‘home’ altogether. Singapore, seen ‘inside out’ in 1915, shows how far action across borders demanded contact and trust with others. In one sense, Ghadar was a movement in the diaspora aimed at home. But it was not solely thus. Only when the passengers of the *Komagata Maru* were refused entry to Canada did it become an issue of return. Ghadar, and other villages abroad, were lodged in diverse communities for which the prospect of return was often increasingly remote. In 1915, exiles in Japan depended on the patronage of individual Japanese. In the wake of the *Komagata Maru* affair, Japanese ships, with their more opaque manifests and Asian crews, became the transport of choice for long-distance exiles. In the

<sup>89</sup> Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks*, pp. 34–40. This is a pioneering study, to which I am greatly indebted.

<sup>90</sup> Ho, ‘Empire through Diasporic Eyes’; Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks*, p. 5.

<sup>91</sup> T.N. Harper, ‘Empire, Diaspora and the Languages of Globalism, 1850–1914’, in A.G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History* (London: Pimlico, 2001), pp. 141–66.

<sup>92</sup> Sunil S. Amrith, ‘Tamil Diasporas across the Bay of Bengal’, *American Historical Review*, 114 (2009), pp. 547–72.

German conspiracies, Indians worked through Chinese gunrunners in Shanghai and Chinese batik merchants in the Dutch East Indies. What is striking is how radical networks *needed* others to connect with each other. Sun Yat-sen's regime in exile gave succour to Indian conspirators in Japan. It was through an audience with Sun Yat-sen, for example, that Abani Mukherji, an emissary from the Bengal underground to the Ghadar, made contact with his countryman in exile, Rash Behari Bose.<sup>93</sup> Such intermediaries were often key catalysts. One of the most hunted men in the global conspiracies of 1915 was Ernest Douwes Dekker, a man who began his career fighting imperialism by declaring that common Dutch descent (through his father) obliged him to fight with the Boers in South Africa. He was converted to the Indian revolutionary cause in Geneva by Ghadar's visionary leader, Har Dayal, and, as his agent, was pursued by the British across South Asia and the China seaboard, until he was arrested in Hong Kong and taken to Singapore, from where he was dispatched to be a witness at the trials of the 'Hindu conspiracy' in San Francisco. He ended his life under a Sundanese name, Danoedirdja Setiaboedi, a hero of the Indonesian national revolution, with which he first identified through his half-Javanese mother.<sup>94</sup>

In this period, there were many coeval itineraries, which took many different twists and turns. But talk of following networks and connections can lead us in one direction as much as another: why is any particular seam worth retracing? There is a danger that historians tend to gravitate to connections and conversations between people whose lives connect to a larger story. Abani Mukherji's covert wanderings in this period can be triangulated in multiple imperial archives; in the lives of those he met and who hunted him; in the two confessions he made to colonial policeman after his arrest on his return to India via Shanghai; in the notebook they captured; and the tale he later told of himself to others. His biographers speak of a 'closed chapter' around his subsequent escape from prison at Fort Canning in Singapore, his flight to the East Indies, and his two-year sojourn in Java.<sup>95</sup> The Germans who met him in Java did not trust him at the time, and his future political opponents believed the entire story was

<sup>93</sup> Gautam Chattopadhyaya, *Abani Mukherji, a Dauntless Revolutionary and Pioneering Communist* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1976), p. 150.

<sup>94</sup> Paul W. van der Veur, *The Lion and the Gadfly: Dutch Colonialism and the Spirit of E.F.E. Douwes Dekker* (Leiden: KITLV, 2007).

<sup>95</sup> Chattopadhyaya, *Abani Mukherji*, p. 150.

a fabrication.<sup>96</sup> This, not untypical, controversy becomes important because of the man he became. It was through Java, and Indonesian communists that, via the Netherlands and Moscow, Abani Mukherji entered the history of world communism.

Equally important is the sheer diversity of lives that crossed and intersected, embedded in the worlds they passed through, touching many other stories in smaller ways. In 1915, the British in Singapore were watching a dizzying cast of characters. There was the conjurer from Columbo, Abdul Mansur Leyard, who had worked in India and England; 'anti-English', they warned, 'dresses like a European'. Another suspect worked as an engineer with Borowski's circus. The figure who most impressed those who encountered him at the time was Abdul Selam, alias Rafiqi. He was, it appears, a Kashmiri, son of a noted maulvi of Noorpur. He was himself a *pesh-imam* (prayer leader), educated in Urdu and Arabic, and a *hafiz*, who had memorized the holy Qu'ran. He was also a correspondent of Lahore newspapers and a member of the noted Anjuman Hamayat Islam society, which promoted Islamic education for women. In 1903, he went to Burma as an agent to a contractor; there he established a *waqaf* fund for the Muslims of Rangoon, and lobbied the government to reconstruct the tomb of the last Mughal, Baradur Shah. He published a paper called *al-Rafiq*, but lived on the breadline, working for a while as a mail contractor for the Rangoon General Post Office, and was imprisoned for six months for debt by his landlord. It was said that around this time he taught himself English and developed a taste for 'stylish' English dress. He was accused of misappropriating money collected for Aligarh University by the Muslims of Rangoon, and in July 1912 he disappeared, abandoning his wife and son, leaving a note saying he intended to take his own life and that his body would not be found.<sup>97</sup> The Germans in Java believed he had been in the service of the British police in Singapore. He had arrived, it was said, via Japan, and had taken to printing anti-British pamphlets and sending them to Singapore and the Malay States from Batavia. In January 1915, he had predicted the February uprising in Singapore.<sup>98</sup> He came to further notice by sending telegrams from Batavia to a 'Harry and Son' in Calcutta, through a Roman Catholic convert who worked as a salesman

<sup>96</sup> Bose, *Indian Revolutionaries*, p. 157; Muzaffar Ahmad, *Myself and the Communist Party of India, 1920–1929* (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1970), pp. 199–254.

<sup>97</sup> Sita Ram, Inspector of Police, 'Report', 30 July 1915, Vb 26-11-1915 C14, ANA.

<sup>98</sup> Bose, *Indian Revolutionaries*, p. 158.

in the shop of the well-established Sindhi firm of K.A.J. Chotirmall and Co. 'Harry and Son' was a known front for the Bengal revolutionary network, headed by Jatin Mukherjee.<sup>99</sup> This seemed to place Abdul Selam at a crucial juncture in Ghadar transoceanic communications. He worked for the mysterious 'Martin', who the British were hunting across the Asian seaboard, the man who would later enter the history of the Communist International as M.N. Roy. Calls by the British for Abdul Selam's arrest and deportation into British territory became a legal *cause célèbre*, given that he had committed no crime against the Dutch.<sup>100</sup> To resolve their problem, the Dutch sent him into internal detention in Kupang, West Timor. There he was suspected of pro-Japanese sympathies, all the while supplying information on their intelligence activities to the Dutch. The Dutch thought him to be an important figure: worldly, versed in many networks; a man with a significant, if veiled, past.<sup>101</sup> Abdul Selam's itinerary—we know only of North India, Rangoon, Singapore, Tokyo, Batavia, Medan—was emphatically transnational. Yet his intersections with nationalism, Islamism, anarchism, and Pan-Asianism led nowhere in particular, or, at least as far as the record shows, came to rest in remote Kupang.

These kinds of worldly lives were not always about connections, although it was connections that the colonial police and, much of the time, these travellers themselves, were looking for. They were more often about glancing encounters, intermittent conversations, partial translations; the co-presence of the spectator, the passing stranger on the quayside, the unrecognised face at the back of the room, the police informant on the margins of the crowd. Worldly people might share a neighbourhood, but never meet, still less become a collective. Although Abani Mukherjee and M.N. Roy were both in China, Java, Tokyo, and Singapore in 1915, their paths constantly crossed but they did not meet until much later, in Moscow.<sup>102</sup> This was a world not perhaps connected 'in its entirety, but highly connected in its parts' across amorphous groups that attested to the relative 'strength of

<sup>99</sup> 'Maverick: Supplement VI of February 1, 1916', CO 273/447, TNA.

<sup>100</sup> Van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War*, pp. 330–31.

<sup>101</sup> H.J. Vermeer, 'Eenige opmerkingen omtrent den Japanschen inlichtingsdienst in Oost-Azië (verkregen door gesprekken met den Britisch-Indischen banneling A. Selam, te Koepang)', 22 November 1915, Vb 30–3–1916 D5, ANA.

<sup>102</sup> For this kind of itinerary, see the important study by Kris Manjapra, *M.N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2010).



weak ties'.<sup>103</sup> Abdul Selam's sojourn in Java occurred at the moment of birth of the Indies' 'age in motion', where the same ideological streams that marked his own life were interwoven with a similar global resonance. 'The present age,' one of its most compelling spokesmen, the Javanese *imam*, Haji Misbach preached, 'can rightly be called the *djaman balik boeono* [age of the world upside-down]—for what used to be above is now most certainly under. It is said that in the country of Oostenrijk, which used to be headed by a king, there is now a *balik boeono*. It is now headed by the Republic. A former bureaucrat only has to show his nose for his throat to be cut, and so on.'<sup>104</sup> It is very unlikely that Abdul Selam and Haji Misbach ever met and we cannot know if one was aware of the other. But rather than solely looking for connections—as the pursuit of the transnational seems to impel us constantly—it is equally important to recreate the neighbourhood itself, the kinds of ideas that arose from it, and the full cast of the home-grown intellectuals who moved through it. The political visions of this period have been described in specific national or doctrinal contexts, but less in the round, as coeval with lives of others. One way to do this is perhaps to look more closely at the ways in which the sites that people shared, and where they sometimes met, shaped experience and ideas.<sup>105</sup>

A beginning is the urban continuum of Asia. Beyond the Bunds, banks, and mansions of the great cities of Asia lay anti-cities: in the waterfronts, in the Chinatowns, in the lodging houses and night schools, but also in the semi-urban sprawl, away from the older enclaves, in which the recent arrivals, from the countryside and from abroad, tended to lodge themselves. There exiles, radicals on the run, gangsters, and intellectuals all found refuge. It was a world of constant pseudonym, subterfuge, and fleeting encounters, of opportunity and danger. These were places where people were constantly reinventing themselves, and could lose some of their ethnic, religious, and class definition: where, say, a Punjabi sepoy could become a Malay, a

<sup>103</sup> A.L. Epstein, 'The Network and Urban Social Organization, in J. Clyde Mitchell (ed.), *Social Networks in Urban Situations: Analyses of Personal Relationships in Central African Towns* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969), pp. 77–116; Mark S. Granovetter, 'The Strength of Weak Ties', *American Journal of Sociology* 78(6) (1973), pp. 1360–380.

<sup>104</sup> Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion*, p. 193.

<sup>105</sup> My understanding of this emerges from a collaborative project with Sunil Amrith; see S. Amrith and T. Harper, 'Sites of Asian Interaction: An Introduction', *Modern Asian Studies* 46(2) (2012), pp. 249–57.

Dutchman, a Sundanese, a literati, a plebeian, and vice versa, and a *pesh-imam* could pass as a dandy. For single women they were places to perhaps find waged work and anonymity. These spaces pushed communities closer together, sometimes in conflict, sometimes in indifference; but in a crucial sense, particularly within the informal economy of the port cities and their hinterlands, it forced people to live beyond ethnicity. These were places where people of very different origins met for the first time and had to negotiate space, develop reciprocal services, learn from each other, and forge new solidarities.

The limicole spaces between the city and the sea were perhaps the most worldly neighbourhoods.<sup>106</sup> The trail of the *Maverick* in 1915—with its motley crew of American adventurers and Ghararites posing as ‘Persian’ sailors—was a voyage across the maritime underworld of the Pacific and eastern archipelagos. Sailors and longshoremen, as is well known, were at the forefront of international labour movements such as the Wobblies, in the ‘Pentecostal era’ of labour radicalism before the Great War.<sup>107</sup> For the Asia underground, though, the broader informal economy of the ports—boarding house keepers, shop assistants, the rickshawmen who led the wave of anti-Japanese protests in Singapore in 1919—were equally important. They were the ‘floaters’—the ‘immense army of unskilled or semi-skilled’—of the Asian city.<sup>108</sup> It is not too fanciful to speak of a global waterfront of intricate communities and long-distance communications: it stretched from, say, Rotterdam, where Indonesian sailors were active in the international movement, to Java, with its transport unions of ‘Red’ Semarang, to the Eastern Pacific, where the contribution of Chinese and Japanese labour to the trade unions in the United States was of vital importance.<sup>109</sup>

As anti-imperialists began to move across the interstices of empire, they became specialists of this underworld and shared skills. Worldliness was a set of tools that people could take from city to

<sup>106</sup> ‘He was intimately acquainted with what might be called the limicole world, that of minor or middling officials, who lived with one foot upon the shore and the other on the sea . . .’, Patrick O’Brien, *The Letter of Marque* (London: HarperCollins, 1988), p. 47.

<sup>107</sup> Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 10.

<sup>108</sup> Charles Ashleigh, ‘The Floater’, *International Socialist Review* 15 (July 1914), pp. 34–38.

<sup>109</sup> Josephine Fowler, *Japanese and Chinese Immigrant Activists: Organizing in American and International Communist Movements, 1919–1933* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

city as they moved through this urban continuum. Anarchists, who were well-established in these places, and Bolsheviks, who were just beginning to declare themselves, knew that Hong Kong was more open than Singapore; Manila more so than any western European port city. *Ghadar* warned: ‘Never try to run against the government of the place you reside.’<sup>110</sup> Republican Canton and semi-colonial Bangkok and Shanghai were hubs for Indian, Chinese, and Vietnamese revolutionaries and for a burgeoning trade in arms and bomb-making equipment. War may have brought closer policing of the maritime world of Asia, and left fewer places to hide, but each closure seemed to create an opening elsewhere. The late Victor Kiernan once wrote of the ‘protean versatility’ of global capitalism in this era; it was matched by the protean versatility of those who challenged it.<sup>111</sup>

What is striking, above all, is the eclecticism of this world, its independence, and its anti-nationalism. The rebels of 1915 drew on multiple connections and influences: from Mexican revolutionism and Egyptian nationalism to Japanese Pan-Asianism and Irish republicanism.<sup>112</sup> So too did their fellow voyagers, sharing in the ‘grabbism’—to use Lu Xun’s term—of the period: borrowings without deference.<sup>113</sup> One set of ideas that travelled furthest was anarchism: as a doctrine of self-help, of self-governance, a vision of internationalism, and of world less patriarchal. It remained a force in Asia well into the age of doctrinaire Bolshevism.<sup>114</sup> Anarchist networks from Japan, China, and from Europe intersected at the same nodal points: Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Canton and Hong Kong, and Shanghai. It has been argued that many Indian nationalists turned to Marxism in this period because the constant negotiation of borders and exclusions placed them in a position of ‘double jeopardy of oppression’, as workers and Asians, which equated capitalism and imperialism in

<sup>110</sup> *Ghadar*, 29 August 1915, translated in ‘Memorandum’, Acting British Consul Manila, 14 October 1915, FO 115/1908, TNA.

<sup>111</sup> Victor Kiernan, ‘Modern Capitalism and its Shepherds’, *New Left Review* 183 (1990), p. 87. A very early sketch of this argument was given at a tribute meeting to the work of Victor Kiernan in Cambridge in October 2010.

<sup>112</sup> Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, especially pp. 67–68, 95–122.

<sup>113</sup> Shih Shu-mei, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 15.

<sup>114</sup> Arif Dirlik, *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1991); C.F. Yong, *The Origins of Malayan Communism* (Singapore: South Seas Society, 1997); Maia Ramnath, *Decolonizing Anarchism: An Antiauthoritarian History of India’s Liberation Struggle* (Oakland, California: AK Press, 2012).

their minds.<sup>115</sup> But after the First World War, what is striking is how different ideological networks were interwoven, and how they in turn shaped their own environments.

At the heart of this process was a new urban popular culture. Theatre and cinema, modern dress and styles, as much as the press and political pamphlets, set the idioms of politics. Popular cultures in colonial Asia have often been seen as monolithic, atavistic, proto-national—but they were none of these things. For the populations of the port cities, and the surrounding rural world, things from outside, far outside, were often closer to everyday life than things from afar. This exposure to new horizons was not necessarily confined to those who travelled. As social practice and as world-consciousness, for many, transnationalism began at home. This can be seen in the widespread interest in global inter-languages such as Esperanto, in the militant modernism of the Asian city, and its obsession with everyday technologies.<sup>116</sup> It is striking how close the world of protest lay to that of entertainment professionals, such as the South Asian circus men of 1915. Bolshevism announced itself in Kuala Lumpur in June 1920, when a Chinese ‘clown and a humourist’ called Tau Phai Yun played for several nights at the Kuala Lumpur Theatre. The performances stopped early for him to give a lecture ‘advocating anarchist doctrines, abolition of capitalists and governments’. Placards appeared outside the theatre:

We have no Fatherland, the world is our Fatherland  
Freedom means anarchy, Equality is communism,  
Anarchy is real Freedom, communism is real equality.

He was last spotted heading to Calcutta.<sup>117</sup>

To talk of flows and encounters is often to minimise the tribulation and violence that often enfolds them. The new imperial urban frontiers were places of huge disparities of wealth and opportunity, acute exploitation and exclusion, sudden oppression and violence. They thrust political exiles perilously close to the parallel and overlapping networks of police spies and informants. Many itinerant encounters occurred in colonial jails. Biographical histories of the

<sup>115</sup> Harish K. Puri, ‘Revolutionary Organization: A Study of the Ghadar Movement’, *Social Scientist* 9(2/3) (1990), p. 54.

<sup>116</sup> David Arnold and Erich DeWald, ‘Everyday Technology in South and Southeast Asia: An Introduction’, *Modern Asian Studies* 46(1) (2012), p. 1–17.

<sup>117</sup> Abstracts of Secret Intelligence, Straits Settlements, for July 1920, FO 371/5356, TNA.

village abroad, like that of Abani Mukherji, are laced with ‘closed chapters’ and parallel fictions—imagined international pasts—that generated plausible legends. The underground cast a long, cinematic allure in popular culture and the political imagination.<sup>118</sup> Equally, those who travelled it lived with distrust and imminent betrayal: this was why the often-fragile connections across villages abroad had to be so carefully cultivated. The worldliness of the waterfront was often one of competition between Asian and European seamen, and of exclusion.<sup>119</sup> Cooperation was a kind of ‘rough tolerance’ at best.<sup>120</sup> It all too easily broke down in mistrust, misunderstanding, and mutual incomprehension. It was also embarked upon in a time of deepening ethno-nationalism. But essentialism does not always imply exclusion. The hardening ethnic identities of the region had already, prior to colonial and nationalist interventions, taken on a hybrid character. Later nationalisms found it convenient to forget this.<sup>121</sup> At the level of social practice, though, worldliness arose and persisted because it was necessary, and it endured into the inter-war era, when a new generation of radicals animated these urban worlds, and attempted to weave them together, with all the mistranslations, misadventures, false alliances, and schisms this brought. For all this, there was an enduring sense that, in the words of Phan Boi Chau, they were ‘fellows suffering the same sickness’.<sup>122</sup>

This lay at the heart of the universalism of a generation: it was born out of the shared experience of those who had no fatherland, and for whom the world was a fatherland. It was expressed in a banal internationalism that existed alongside other worldly commitments—to faith, to political ideology or to ‘nation’—and one which their more exclusive claims never really set aside. It was rarely vocalised as a

<sup>118</sup> Christoph Giebel, *Imagined Ancestries of Vietnamese Communism Ton Duc Thang and the Politics of History and Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004); Michael B. Miller, *Shanghai on the Métro: Spies, Intrigue and the French Between the Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>119</sup> Baruch Hirson and Lorraine Vivian, *Strike Across the Empire: The Seamen’s Strike of 1925 in Britain, South Africa and Australasia* (London: Clio, 1992).

<sup>120</sup> Christopher MacEvitt, *The Crusades and the Christian World of the East: Rough Tolerance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).

<sup>121</sup> Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), pp. 158–76.

<sup>122</sup> Firuta Motoo, ‘Vietnamese Political Movements in Thailand: Legacy of the Dong-Du Movement’, in Vinh Sinh (ed.), *Phan Boi Chau and the Dong-Du movement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 150.

systemic creed but left its residue in others.<sup>123</sup> One of the most vivid chroniclers of the underground was Tan Malaka: a sometime Comintern agent, later its renegade, and one of Southeast Asia's most visionary political philosophers: prophet of a socialist 'Aslia'. His travels to Europe in 1913, his return to the Indies, and his long years of exile took in most of leading stops on the itineraries of the period: Berlin, Moscow, Canton, Manila, Hong Kong, Amoy, Shanghai, Singapore. Drawing upon his testament, Abidin Kusno has described how in the worldly, plebeian, resourceful milieu of Shanghai in 1932, Tan Malaka experienced a moment of 'transnational awakening'.<sup>124</sup> He was also conscious of how fragile this moment was. Fleeing from Hong Kong to Singapore in 1937, he noted a growth of ethnic enclaves on the island, and contrasted it to an earlier sojourn in 1927, when it still seemed to be a more open, inclusive urban landscape. Nevertheless, he spend four years there, teaching English in a Chinese school, living in a Chinese neighbourhood, with Chinese friends, a Chinese passport, and working for Indonesia's freedom.<sup>125</sup> Like many of the thinkers of the Asian underground, he was repeatedly drawn to the semi-colonial periphery of the city, and saw there a vision of a free Asia. This, perhaps more than anything else, creates a bridge between very different histories of struggle, from Singapore in 1915, Shanghai in 1932, and—towards the end of an era—Singapore in 1937. It was a sense of a time between empire and nation, of the spaces besides empire and nation, and of an Asian underground that had the potential to turn empires inside out.

<sup>123</sup> I am evoking here, of course, Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: SAGE Publications, 1995).

<sup>124</sup> Abidin Kusno, 'From City to City: Tan Malaka, 'Shanghai and the Politics of Geographical Imagining', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 24(3) (2003), p. 337.

<sup>125</sup> Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. II, pp. 102–12.