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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## In Defence of Singapore's Military History

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*Singapore needs a national narrative. But in constructing such an edifice, we must be wary of the pitfalls of 'canonization' and casting our 'national heroes' in a light that is far removed from their beliefs, values and the peculiar milieu of their time.*

SOME 90 years ago, at the stroke of the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, the 'war to end all wars' was brought to a close. The year 2008 marks the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the First World War. Each year, 11 November is commemorated throughout much of the Commonwealth as Remembrance Day, in the United States as Veteran's Day and in France as Armistice Day. From the Tommies in the fields of Flanders to the Anzacs on the sands of Gallipoli, they are all honoured on this day.

In Singapore, we too have a day in which the nation reflects upon the sacrifices of freedom fighters whom we have come to embrace as our own. Come 15 February every year, on Total Defence Day, students are reminded of the importance of Total Defence and the deeds of Singapore's very own war heroes such as Lim Bo Seng and Adnan Bin Saidi. Upon leaving primary/secondary education and national service, these very same students are more likely to remember 15 February simply as the day after Valentine's Day. In Singapore, where pragmatism is the de facto national ideology, we should perhaps re-examine the role of military history in public discourse and nation-building.

### The Utility of Singapore's Military Past

In a recent edited volume, *Nation-Building: Five Southeast Asian Histories*, Wang Gungwu, arguably Singapore's most established historian, noted that in most contemporary Southeast Asian countries, historians are obliged to "contribute to nation-building efforts by writing national history". Military historians are no different. Indeed, the tension between epistemology – the study of the nature and origin of human knowledge -- and patriotism was evident in the life and work of the father of modern military history, Hans Delbruck (1848-1929).

In his lifetime, Delbruck failed to convince fellow academics of his legitimacy as a historian and to the conservative political-military leadership of Imperial Germany, his patriotism. In a self-written epitaph

on his gravestone, Delbruck proclaimed: “I sought the truth, I loved my country.” Can military historians in Singapore afford to seek the ‘truth’ and be patriots at the same time?

In Singapore, we have come to accept our pre-independence military past as part of our national history, particularly events and personages from the Second World War. Never mind that Lim Bo Seng was an anti-Japanese Chinese patriot loyal to the Kuomintang government of Mainland China and Adnan Bin Saidi was a commissioned officer of the Malay Regiment who died leading a valiant defence of the Pasir Panjang sector of Singapore before the fall of the island to the invading Japanese army. We see ourselves as the legitimate heirs of their martial legacies, reconfigured according to our post-colonial conception of the nation.

Herewith begs the question: Should Singaporean military historians engage in the creation of a national narrative, an endeavour often derided as ‘myth-making’ and ‘non-analytical’ by academic historians? More importantly, can home-grown Singaporean military historians, particularly those born and raised in the post-1965 environment afford to be objective and patriots at the same time? Perhaps we can if we consider these three points: context, context and context -- that is, contexts of the past, present and future.

### **Context of the Past**

From the rebellion of the Trung Sisters against the Han Dynasty in ancient times to the Viet Minh’s decisive military victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, Vietnamese military history is replete with numerous wars of national liberation. Unlike Vietnam, Singapore does not have the luxury of a usable pre-modern, pre-colonial military past. Neither can Singapore invoke the armies of an anti-colonial revolutionary past. As such, it is perhaps inevitable that in order to construct Singapore’s very own military history, we have to draw upon our colonial past.

The caveat is that whatever lessons and analogies drawn must be examined in its relevant context. Students and users of Singapore’s colonial military past must be aware that figures such as Lim Bo Seng and Adnan Bin Saidi exist in a specific time and peculiar space. In short, it must be recognized that the strategic circumstances and the socio-economic-political milieu of then and now are very different.

### **Context of the Present**

In Singapore, we do not have a pure warrior ethos or military families that transcend generations. A martial Spartan-like mentality where every able-bodied young man is expected to ‘come home with his shield or on it’ is inconceivable and ultimately self-destructive. The Confucian adage ‘just as one would not use good iron to make a nail, one does not use a good man to make a soldier’ seems to hold true for many Singaporean Chinese families who dream of their offspring as lawyers, doctors and scholars, but rarely as soldiers.

In the context of a manpower-scarce city-state, it is perhaps unsurprising that we should at best aspire to the hybrid notion of the ‘soldier-scholar-statesman’. Given the force of our circumstances and the peculiarities of our case, is there any room for full-bodied public discourse on military/security history? Can we create an environment where young Singaporeans can comfortably engage with these issues in a congenial, interactive and non-threatening manner?

A good example is the recent series of *Cold War in Southeast Asia* public lectures organized by the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore and the History Channel. Such events provide a platform to discuss Singapore’s and the region’s security history in a desensitized and open environment and facilitates discourse between subject matter experts and the public, particularly amongst young Singaporeans. In time, this will enable the development of a Singaporean sense of

historical consciousness.

### **Context of the Future**

Military history is a useful tool in explaining and shaping a Singaporean national identity and consciousness, and in time to come, a Singaporean strategic culture. However, we must be wary of using it as a crystal ball to predict future events or pre-determined outcomes.

Indeed, it is very seductive to use an episode from military history to prove some universal lesson from the past or predict a pattern. A familiar one is the ‘history repeats itself’ pattern. History does not repeat itself. It never has and never will. What does repeat itself is unpredictability, better known in military parlance as the ‘Fog of War’.

In Singapore, there is a need for a national narrative to remind Singaporeans that we have arrived as a nation with our own unique national history and national heroes. Military history has a place in nation-building. But when drawing upon historical analogies, the user must be aware that the socio-economic-political milieu of the past, present and future does not fit in any coherent linear fashion and continuum. It must be appreciated and understood in its own unique context.

To portray our adopted national heroes in a way in which they never intended, thus bestowing upon them ‘exaggerated dimensions’ and an ‘unnatural appearance’, would be a grave travesty of their memory and the values that they fought for.

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