

From: Laurie J. Sears, ed., Autonomous Histories, Particular Truths: Essays in Honor of John Smail. Wisconsin, 1993

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Withdrawal and Resistance:  
The Political Significance of Food,  
Agriculture, and How People Lived  
During the Japanese Occupation  
in the Philippines

WHAT IS A FEW YEARS in the history of a country, a people? This question readily comes to mind as I ponder the significance of "the Japanese occupation" (1942–45) in the Philippines while trying to assess conditions during those years compared to the time before and after. Several academics list the period among the five or six major ones in the nation's history largely because Japan deposed America's government and imposed its own.<sup>1</sup> Other scholars reject this assessment as being too Manila-centric and denying Filipinos a creative role in their history. In an elegant synthesis of Philippine historiography, John Larkin proposes periods demarcated by shifts in international trade and the country's frontiers. In his scheme, the Japanese occupation would become merely an episode in the "post-frontier society, 1920–present."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Alfred McCoy has argued well that the occupation did not alter the continuity of a long period that began in the mid-nineteenth century with the expansion of export-crop production.<sup>3</sup>

I concur with Larkin and McCoy's efforts to shift our focus away from elites, capital cities, and those who control central governments. I would also agree, based on the available sources, that in terms of leaving a significant mark on the Philippine social structure and economy, the Japanese occupation was not a major period.

But there is a problem. Even though the Japanese occupation did not change Philippine institutions nor rearrange society, it made a profound impression on

people's lives and it still remains a vital aspect of their consciousness. Practically every Filipino I have talked to during the last fifteen years periodizes his or her life according to events that affected rather directly his or her family—for example, marriage, birth of first child, or moving to this or that locality. This may be a human trait; my American relatives do the same thing. One event, however, that homogenizes idiosyncratic periods into a shared experience in the Philippines is the "Japanese occupation" (in Tagalog, *panahon ng Hapon*) or "war years" (*panahon ng giyera*). For most Filipinos over fifty-five years of age, this is a benchmark in their lives and the lives of their families. Even many younger Filipinos refer to it this way because they have heard their parents' and grandparents' stories of hardship and triumph during those years and because the Japanese occupation continues to be prominent in vernacular movies, comic books, novels, and other media, which itself is evidence for the significance of this period.

This problem, in a way, is a consequence of John Smail's influence. Ringing in my head is his imperative to take "perspective" seriously. "Try to see over the shoulders and through the experiences of people in the country who were involved with and affected by the events," he would say. "Listen to their interpretations and put these alongside of other knowns and other perspectives." Having listened—and having followed John's lead—I am uneasy with both lines of argument about the Japanese occupation summarized above. The view that the occupation was a milestone in Philippine history conforms superficially to what Filipinos often say about the period, yet upon scrutiny it is strikingly different. The former speaks about the change in regimes and colonial powers, while most Filipinos, especially nonelites, refer to a sense of identity, accomplishment, survival, and empowerment. Meanwhile, this self-understanding is overlooked by the other interpretation that Japanese rule had no lasting impact on the economy or the social structure. The perspective I am emphasizing brings out a reading of something significant that is missed if we look for structural changes. When wrestling with how "autonomous history" might be possible, John urges us to consider "visible" and "underlying" properties of autonomy, with an emphasis on the latter. What I am drawing attention to is an element of the "underlying" aspect that a Philippine history of the Japanese occupation needs to include.

I would like to suggest here what a fuller investigation might turn up if we concentrate on how people lived during this period and the significance of their actions for their self-perception and the Japanese regime. The gist of my argument is this: in the face of tremendous violence and destruction, and the imposition of an unwanted foreign military, people had to determine how best to act. Due to the ups and downs of the national and international markets in previous decades, they had some experience to draw upon as they devised alternative ways of living. A significant proportion of the population withdrew partially or entirely to small, largely self-reliant, political and economic communities. For many this was also a means of resisting Japanese rule. In the process, and when it was over, their image of themselves and their fellow nationals rose, as they realized that, having survived while

also resisting, they had contributed significantly to the enemy's defeat. In this broad sense, the Japanese occupation was a major contributor to national pride.

### • Political-Economic Background

In order to make the argument, I must first outline political-economic trends in the Philippines up to 1941 and then show how the Japanese military government, despite some efforts to improve conditions, made matters worse.

Since around the middle of the nineteenth century, the Philippines had been absorbed increasingly into the capitalist, modern world system. As part of the "periphery," it provided raw and semiprocessed materials to the "core." Over time this process affected and conditioned wider circles of people's relationships, communities, and government. By the late 1930s, an estimated 15 to 20 percent of the country's households depended upon the colony's export-import economy for their livelihood. A larger proportion were indirectly affected by this trade and had been drawn into the cash-based national and international market that was predominantly American in orientation.<sup>4</sup>

Most of the exports were agriculturally based, and by 1941 more than 40 percent of the country's cultivated land was devoted to its leading exports, each prominent in particular regions. Abaca grew principally in the Bicol area and in Davao Province in Mindanao. Sugarcane, which by the 1930s had replaced abaca as the premier export crop, came principally from Negros Province in the Visayas and Pampanga and Tarlac in central Luzon. Coconuts were mainly from southern Luzon and parts of Mindanao, and tobacco grew primarily in northern Luzon and the Ilocos area. These crops provided 60 percent of Philippine exports; sugar alone composed 30 percent.<sup>5</sup>

Much of the remaining cultivated land grew *palay* (unhusked rice). Central Luzon, the country's "rice basket," produced 40 percent of the nation's total in the mid-1930s and was a principal supplier to Manila and some rural regions specializing in export crops. Although per capita productivity gradually increased, the Philippines in 1939 was still importing about 4 percent of this food, a staple for most Filipinos.<sup>6</sup>

Much of the country's agricultural output, especially those products destined for export, went to Manila and its vicinity. There factory workers turned abaca fibers into cordage, coconuts into cooking oil, and tobacco into cigarettes and cigars. Stevedores labored on the ships and barges in the country's principal port, and clerks, professionals, and civil servants staffed the offices of shipping companies, banks, legal firms, government bureaus, and so forth.

Integral to the economic and political changes were disruptive fluctuations in prices, jobs, investments, and government claims and services. Prices for export crops, for instance, varied with shifts in international markets and world affairs; indicative of this are the changing values of exports (table 1). During World War I, the demand for coconut oil and copra, from which explosives were derived, was

extremely high, so prices climbed and the Philippine coconut industry expanded. Afterward, however, demand (and prices) dropped drastically. By 1920, only one of the country's forty oil mills was still manufacturing. The number of mills increased by the 1930s but still remained relatively small.<sup>7</sup> The abaca industry climbed to a pre-World War II pinnacle in about 1919 then slid until dropping drastically when the Great Depression hit with full force. *Palay* and rice prices followed a similar pattern. Construction, cigarette and cigar making, shoe and slipper making, and other industries in Manila, too, had their ups and downs, as wages fell, prices jumped, and vice versa. These fluctuations in wages and product values and volume were not synchronized, although most figures show a general downswing from the mid-1920s until well into the 1930s.

Table 1 Average Export Value of Key Exports for Selected Time Intervals  
(in \$/metric ton, except cigars \$/1,000)

	Abaca	Cigars	Coconuts		Sugar
			Oil	Copra	
1899-1908	154	8	118	58	38
1916-1925	207	22	214	96	96
1926-1935	111	19	114	64	69
1936-1940	89	15	76	41	59

Source: Computed from data in "American-Philippine Trade Relations: Report of the Technical Committee to the President of the Philippines," Washington, D.C., October 1944, in U.S., Congress, House, Hearings on S.1610, *A Bill to Provide for the Rehabilitation of the Philippine Islands*, pt. 2, 79th Cong., 2d Sess., 1946, 216-21.

The point is that Filipinos had to cope with an erratic economy. Some managed to make money, pyramid investments, and advance economically. Most peasants, workers, and small merchants, however, were far less fortunate. Exactly how they lived has not been adequately investigated but probably household members moved frequently between the "formal" and "informal" sectors; most families tried to keep some members in both.<sup>8</sup> Collective action for fair treatment, wages, and so on was also woven into this pattern. Daniel Doeppers suggests in his innovative study of Manila that cigarette workers, civil servants, and others in the formal sphere (or what he calls the "upper circuit") returned seasonally to their "home" barrios to help with harvests and thereby obtain rice, moved in and out of informal means of livelihood in Manila, and frequently switched jobs. Manila workers of the 1930s explained to Melinda Tria Kerkvliet that by having family members in several economic settings inside and outside of the city they could better ride out the unpredictable cycles of

hiring and firing, wage cuts, inflation, and strikes. In Bicol, Norman Owen found that people had learned, due to the fickle abaca market, to keep one foot in the subsistence sector. In central Luzon, share tenants in the 1920s and 1930s moved around a good deal, searching for favorable tenancy and working conditions. They also organized to demand larger shares of the crop, fair treatment, wage increases, and other concessions from landlords, government officials, and employers.<sup>9</sup>

Two implications of the foregoing sketch are significant for my purpose. First, while Philippine society was strongly influenced by the world economy, it remained largely agricultural and retained numerous avenues for livelihood that were not directly linked to national and international markets. Second, many Filipinos had experience in dealing with erratic economic conditions, probably the most severe of the century having occurred in the 1930s. Both of these circumstances helped people endure the disruptions accompanying the Japanese occupation.

## Economic Collapse Under the Japanese Regime

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The Japanese military regime wanted to convert the Philippines from heavy dependence upon the United States to self-sufficiency in several agricultural sectors, with a view toward exporting the products and their derivatives to Japan and other countries in the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." The plans not only failed but within a year and a half the economy was in shambles where it remained until post-war reconstruction began to have an effect in the late 1940s.

The centerpiece of the regime's plan was to convert within five years half the country's sugar land (which totalled about 200,000 hectares) and "idle and secondary forest" into 450,000 hectares of cotton, and to build a textile industry to supply the Philippines and other parts of Japan's empire. But the first cotton crop, planted in 1942 on only 12,000 hectares and overseen by eight Japanese firms, was poor. The next year was even more disappointing. By then the war was going so badly that the regime apparently abandoned the plan. As a Filipino agriculturalist reported afterward, the cotton project was a "colossal failure."<sup>10</sup> Scanty information suggests a similar end for the regime's efforts to persuade farmers to produce jute, ramie, and other crops not previously grown on a large scale in the Philippines.

Meanwhile, tobacco, abaca, coconut, and sugar production subsided drastically at least as far as the national and "Co-Prosperity Sphere" markets are concerned. By mid-1943, and for the duration of the occupation, according to available sources, little tobacco, abaca, or coconut came to Manila's factories, resulting in a scarcity of cigarettes, twine, rope, cooking oil, and related commodities—a situation that the Japanese military aggravated by commandeering a sizable fraction of whatever supplies were available. Sugar production, too, apparently was erratic, and much of whatever cane was harvested was only crudely refined for local markets or made into fuel alcohol, thus adding sugar to the long list of scarce commodities.

Most production figures for tobacco, abaca, coconut, and sugarcane did not reach pre-1941 levels until the early 1950s.<sup>11</sup>

*Palay* was the other crop the Japanese authorities emphasized. They planned to increase production by 30 percent between 1943 and 1947 by having cultivators enlarge the growing area and plant fast-maturing varieties. There is no evidence that the plan worked. Indications are that where authorities tried to implement it they used coercion and threats, and that the resulting yields were poor.<sup>12</sup> Virtually all sources indicate that by mid- or late 1943 the country's rice supply was smaller than it had been before the invasion, and that it became even smaller in 1944–45. Suggesting that this shortage continued, and perhaps became worse, subsequent statistics show that the amount of rice per capita was 15 percent less in 1947–48 than it had been prior to the Japanese occupation, and that national production did not achieve pre-occupation levels until 1948–49.<sup>13</sup>

Available information on prices also suggests a disastrous economic situation between 1943 and about 1947. By late 1944, official prices for most consumer goods had doubled and tripled. But that was small increase compared to the "black market" prices most Filipinos had to pay. A kilogram of cooking oil, for instance, went from 10 centavos before the Japanese occupation to more than 10 pesos in mid-1944. Eggs, costing a few centavos each before, sold for 30 centavos apiece in mid-1943 and 4.60 pesos one year later. Sugar, 5 centavos a kilo before, was 4 pesos a kilo by mid-1943 and double that a year later. The pattern of rice prices was likely typical of many foods: 6 or 7 pesos per cavan (about 56 kilograms) was paid in 1941, 30 pesos by late 1942, 70 pesos by mid-1943, 250 pesos a year later, 3,000 to 5,000 pesos by late 1944, and as high as 12,000 pesos for a single cavan in early 1945.<sup>14</sup> These were Manila prices, which may have been the worst, but inflation was probably serious in much of the country.

Wages, meanwhile, remained low in Manila and most other urban areas. The Japanese military began its rule by ordering a 10 to 20 percent reduction in wages for male workers and additional reductions for females. In August 1943, the legal maximum wage for unskilled labor was a mere 1.30 pesos per day. That official wages rose to 3 or 4 pesos a day in 1944 was little consolation to the workers. So small was the pay that, even when rice rations were added, many jobs remained unfilled.<sup>15</sup> Nor were prices and wages closely aligned in 1945–46. Not until 1947–49 did wages nearly catch up with prices as the economy returned to the more normal, though still erratic, prewar pattern.<sup>16</sup>

Several developments help to explain why the new government's plans went unimplemented and economic conditions deteriorated so rapidly. First, the military government's plans for cotton and rice production assumed too much. They supposed, for instance, that cotton varieties successfully grown elsewhere would likewise do well in the Philippines. The rice project assumed that the irrigation system was better than it was and that there would be rapid construction of new dams and canals. Apparently many Japanese officials also were confident that Filipinos would welcome the changes and generally cooperate.

Second, a few months after the new regime had settled into the Philippines the war began to go badly for Japan. By early 1943, its armed forces were on the defensive on all fronts. And inside the Philippines resistance persisted. These discouraging developments created a chain of consequences that detracted from whatever well-meaning programs authorities had devised for agriculture and other sectors of society. War-related needs diminished the new regime's ability to win over a hostile civilian population and install a legitimate government. Many resources—manpower, money, supplies, equipment, time—intended for their five-year plans were diverted to military priorities. Communication and transportation channels, both within the country and to other parts of the empire, were blocked and destroyed. Consignments of supplies shipped to Japanese soldiers in the Philippines became irregular, making these men more unhappy and probably contributing to their crude and undisciplined behavior toward Filipinos.<sup>17</sup> Increasingly, in both the countryside and urban areas, the military commandeered food and other commodities to provide for soldiers there and to send to forces elsewhere in the empire. Desperate to improve its economic position, by 1944 the government had released 6 to 11 billion pesos of currency (compared to only 300 million in circulation before 1942).<sup>18</sup> All of these conditions caused more aggravation, made the bad economic situation worse, and pushed the regime's credibility still lower.

Third, the fighting and the occupation itself caused immense destruction and disruption between 1942 and 1947. Thousands of hectares of crop land went untended during some or most of this period. Irrigation systems and research stations were damaged or destroyed. The number of water buffalo, the principal draft animal in *palay* cultivation, was reduced by 1945 to about 40 percent of its 1939 population.<sup>19</sup> More than two-thirds of the country's forty-one sugar mills were heavily damaged or destroyed, and numerous rice mills, granaries, coconut and abaca processing plants, warehouses, and factories were beyond repair.<sup>20</sup>

The reaction of a large number of Filipinos to the invasion and the deteriorating economic conditions is a fourth development, and one that merges with the central point of this essay.

## Withdrawal and Resistance

How did Filipinos deal with the immense problems associated with the occupation and how significant were their actions?

The literature is sparse but for some localities—northern Mindanao, Leyte, Negros, Panay, Manila and its vicinity, and central Luzon—I have sufficient information to suggest patterns that seem to have occurred in those parts of the nation and perhaps in others as well.<sup>21</sup>

One can reasonably talk of two, or possibly three, types of area for which there is information: "occupied" and "autonomous." (The latter is sometimes divided into "guerrilla" and "nonguerrilla" localities.) "Occupied" refers to areas in which the Japanese regime concentrated its military forces and government offices.

As hostile as the Philippines was, the military government could not safely disperse its approximately 150,000 troops, several thousand Japanese civilians, and a few thousand Philippine Constabulary. Thus the regime placed its soldiers and governmental apparatus in the provincial capitals and other populated centers. Much of the rest of the countryside and its population clusters were politically and economically "autonomous" in the sense that, first, they were beyond the reach of the regime and, second, sources of livelihood and commerce were not, broadly speaking, dominated by or closely tied to the occupied areas.<sup>22</sup> While the Japanese occupation persisted, many of the autonomous areas developed or became absorbed into rather well-organized resistance movements (hence, in the literature on guerrillas these are called "free" localities while the "occupied" zones are called "enemy" areas).

The first pattern to emerge in both the occupied and autonomous areas is that by and large the Japanese regime was despised, even hated, and resisted. It did have some defenders and advocates—particularly those few who looked upon the Japanese as having liberated the country from American rule or who profited from business transactions with the regime. For most people, however, the regime's efforts to win the allegiance of the populace were not credible in the context of the war the Japanese had perpetrated, the misery they caused, and the rough and often cruel way they treated civilians. This general animosity, together with the widely held expectation that Japan would not win the war encouraged Filipinos to oppose the regime in both obvious and subtle ways.

The obvious ways included participation in numerous guerrilla organizations, about which I shall say more below. One subtle line of resistance was humor. Filipinos delighted in characterizing Japanese as slant eyed and bowlegged, stumbling around with rows of stolen wrist watches hidden in their shirt sleeves and pant legs. In one play on words that reveals their disgust, people renamed the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, which in Tagalog translates as *Sama-samang Kasaganaan sa Lalong Malaking Silangang Asya*, to *Sama-samang Pagnanakawan sa Lalong Malaking Silangang Asya*, (the Greater East Asia Robbery Sphere).<sup>23</sup>

Another indirect form of resistance was footdragging and sabotage. While pretending to cooperate with the government's cotton program, several sugarcane growers deliberately delayed procedures and made "mistakes." At some sugar mills, managers and workers threw sugar and sand into crankcases and otherwise rendered the equipment useless. Within the bureaucracy, according to Onofre Corpuz, civil servants' "acts of administrative delay and obstruction, in countless ways of less-than-full compliance with administrative orders, came to be habitually indulged in, and were condoned as moral and patriotic."<sup>24</sup>

Traces of such resistance are mixed with the second pattern: that populations in both occupied and autonomous areas tended to withdraw from the formal to the informal sectors of the economy, a trend that continued until about 1947 when reconstruction commenced. Only a small minority within the formal parts of the

economy could afford the astounding prices for food and other necessities.<sup>25</sup> Most had to find other ways to live, and, while it is difficult to reconstruct their reasoning, some apparently were influenced also by a desire to deny services to the regime. One reason the Japanese military had trouble keeping coconut oil and rope factories operating is that workers, whose wages were nearly worthless, constantly left to devote time to petty trade and to growing their own food. Drovers of civil servants and other salaried and wage-earning families acted similarly.

Money being virtually worthless during the occupation, and hard to come by in the years immediately following it, many people reverted to barter. In Leyte, people swapped dresses, cloth, and soap for fruit, vegetables, and rice. In Negros, refugees from coastal towns who had fled to mountainous villages gave clothing and blankets to their new neighbors in exchange for help with corn planting. Villagers in central Luzon recall swapping rice for furniture and vegetables.

Besides barter, according to Elmer Lear's detailed study, "buy and sell" flourished in the otherwise "numbed" economy of Leyte.<sup>26</sup> The same can be said for central Luzon, Manila, and Panay. Some people made fortunes by accumulating scrap iron, gravel, and other materials and then selling them at high prices to the Japanese army and navy. Most, however, probably were like the jobless schoolteacher in Laguna (southern Luzon) who supplemented his family's modest vegetable garden by traveling to Bulacan where his sister lived, buying metal containers, and then returning to sell them without, he says, "overcharging" villagers who used the containers when making coconut oil and lye.<sup>27</sup> Other villagers dismantled telephone and telegraph lines and sold the wire to Japanese civilians. These sold it to the army, which used it to repair the lines, after which the cycle began again.<sup>28</sup> Commenting on the pervasiveness of "buy and sell" in Iloilo (on Panay), Alfred McCoy notes that fragmentation and markups in nearly every sector of retail trade "inflated prices considerably but allowed thousands of small traders to survive."<sup>29</sup>

Small-scale manufacturing of the sort that used locally available materials also spread, reviving the indigenous production that urban factories and foreign imports had diminished. Now that coffee, chocolate, and soft drinks were nonexistent or prohibitively priced, many people in Cebu, Leyte, and southern and central Luzon returned to making beverages from ginger, coconut, and other plants. They made soap from locally available lime, ashes, coconut oil, and roots. By 1942, soap production in several Leyte villages was so intense that traders could sell it on neighboring islands.<sup>30</sup> People in lowland towns and barrios and in mountain villages learned to weave cloth, baskets, and other "handicrafts" from abaca, tree bark, and similar local materials. Salt making became common in seaside barrios. From plants people made medicines to treat malaria and other ailments.

Critical to adjusting to drastic political and economic changes was access to food. In urban areas, including Manila, gardening became common. City and town dwellers also devised direct links with rural food producers. People in Manila, for

example, traveled by bus and train to Laguna and central Luzon to get rice from farming relatives. Such linkages became so extensive that the Japanese military administration complained that they deterred the rice trade from returning to normal, and officials encouraged producers to "hoard" rather than sell their grain. Villagers who had not planted vegetable gardens previously did so now. And they tended to neglect (or abandon altogether) tobacco, sugarcane, abaca, and the young cotton crops in order to concentrate on corn, rice, sweet potatoes, cassava, and vegetables. In Negros a large sugar landowner divided livestock among his laborers and tenants and assigned to each family a parcel of land for growing corn and other food for the duration of the occupation.<sup>31</sup> Finally, some people resorted to nefarious practices—robbery, banditry, and prostitution. In Manila in 1943, for example, police claimed that thievery was increasing "by leaps and bounds."<sup>32</sup>

A third pattern was movement, as people tried to anticipate where their chances for survival would be greatest. The percentage of the population that moved was probably large, and the general direction was from urban to rural areas and from occupied to autonomous locales. Today, for instance, some Filipinos still associate the terms *magbakuet* and *mamundok* ('to evacuate', 'to go to the mountains') with the Japanese occupation, and one of the first questions they ask each other when reminiscing about that era is "Where did you evacuate to?" Manila's population reportedly dropped from 700,000 to about 300,000 in 1942. Iloilo City, after dropping by May 1943 to less than a third of its 1939 size, stabilized at 35,000, which, McCoy writes, "could be sustained by a handicraft-barter economy" that predominated after sugar shipping and related employment had dried up. Before Japanese soldiers arrived in Tacloban (Leyte), the population had increased but afterward it decreased substantially just as it did in other towns in the area. "By inspiring the Filipinos with fear and then hatred," Lear says, "the Japanese deterred the inhabitants of Leyte from returning to their homes and occupations and settling down to a 'normal' routine. Instead, they listened to . . . the guerrillas and remained in their evacuation places." Many families in Negros's sugar-milling towns also evacuated, some to Bacolod City but many to mountain settlements where they lived off the land and often joined guerrilla organizations.<sup>33</sup>

Urban populations, though, did fluctuate. Manila apparently grew to more than a million people by 1944; Iloilo had 80,000 by mid-1944. Other towns such as Cabanatuan in central Luzon also regained their pre-occupation size. One reason was the Japanese military's offensives launched in late 1943. In the hope of escaping the fighting, many families fled to more populated areas despite the generally worse economic conditions there. Later, though, when American troops reinvaded, droves of people left the cities once again, trying to escape the bombing and fighting against Japanese forces and installations centered there.

While evacuation was generally urban to rural, it was not necessarily to the smallest or most distant villages. Many people probably gravitated to small towns and larger villages, wanting to avoid being isolated and thereby vulnerable to Japanese patrols, bandits, and rival guerrilla groups. In parts of central and southern

Luzon householders who had been living in their fields now moved their houses into the barrios. People living in tiny barrios migrated to larger ones. There was also considerable movement back and forth between villages and towns (*bayan*).

Some urban families, having no particular place to go, wandered into strange barrios seeking permission to build a shelter and scratch out a living until they could safely return to the cities. Most evacuees, however, probably had relatives in rural areas with whom they could stay. Possibly a fair number of households left a married son or daughter in the city while the rest of the family moved to the countryside, figuring that this way they could keep both the rural and urban options open.

The fourth pattern derived from the fact that a move from an urban to a rural area also tended to be a move from an occupied to an autonomous area. Occupied areas suffered the brunt of Japanese policies and abuses, and later the most danger and destruction from invading American forces. Autonomous areas tended to be safer, they had more food, and they allowed people the opportunity to create something positive under otherwise harsh conditions.

By 1943, food shortages were becoming so serious that late that year President Jose Laurel told visitors that his most pressing duty was "to save our people from starvation." "In the provinces," he continued, "the situation is not so serious as in Manila" because beyond the city one could live on sweet potatoes, cassava, bananas, and the like.<sup>34</sup> Such government agencies as the Natural Rice and Corn Corporation (NARIC), *Bigasang Bayan* (BIBA), and Neighborhood Associations were disorganized, poorly funded, weak vis-à-vis the Japanese forces, and too corrupt to alleviate Manila's shortages.

In the provinces, food was more predictably available in autonomous areas than in occupied localities. For people in the autonomous sections of Lanao and Cotabato (in Mindanao), for example, finding food was usually a lesser problem than it was for those remaining in the Japanese-occupied coastal towns. In northern Mindanao, people in the valleys and inland areas, where populations had swelled with refugees from the coast in 1942–43, were raising their own food and satisfying other needs. Hence, "few would change their way of life for the life of those who went to live in Japanese-occupied towns" where "their food is scarce, their clothing patched, their fear constant."<sup>35</sup> Leyte's farming barrios had a fair amount of food while by 1944 famine threatened in the occupied towns and provincial capitals.<sup>36</sup> People in the villages of Negros and Panay, many of them refugees from Japanese-controlled towns, usually had adequate, albeit less than desirable, nourishment from corn, sweet potatoes, and vegetables. Rice and meat were scarce.<sup>37</sup> Villagers in Bulacan and Nueva Ecija (central Luzon) recalled that rice was more plentiful in 1942–47 than before or after. This they attributed to favorable weather and the Hukbalahap guerrilla organization.

Although not all guerrilla groups were sufficiently organized and disciplined to affect food production or distribution, several were. In central Luzon, because of pervasive animosity before the occupation between landlords and tenants, and

because the Hukbalahap had evolved largely from the peasant organizations of the 1930s, this guerrilla organization enabled many tenant farmers to retain most of their *patal* production and deterred landlords living in occupied areas from entering Hukbalahap strongholds to collect their rents. In parts of Mindanao, Leyte, Panay, and Negros, other guerrilla groups helped to restore order so that villagers could resume farming. They also exercised enough authority and enjoyed sufficient legitimacy among residents, especially from mid-1942 to late 1943, to help retain food—particularly rice—within autonomous areas and keep it away from Japanese troops.

Although autonomous areas generally had more food, people there still suffered serious shortages. Probably the worst times occurred in late 1943, much of 1944, and the first half of 1945. Largely because a considerable amount of food remained in the autonomous areas, particularly those controlled by guerrillas, and because guerrilla organizations hampered the occupation government's ambitions, Japanese leaders decided in late 1943 to augment their forces with several thousand soldiers and push into these regions. The drive lasted well into 1944, during which time crops and food stores were destroyed or captured, people fled, and confusion replaced what modicum of tranquillity had been achieved. In northern Mindanao in 1944, for instance, large Japanese patrols "now often came against us," wrote a priest who had joined the guerrillas,

and they did not keep, as formerly, to the coast roads and towns, but followed our own back trails of supply and communication. They machine-gunned the forest ravines and canyons, they established garrisons in our very mountain fortresses. . . . They raped, tortured, bayoneted, burned houses and crops, drove off animals, carried away clothing and even plows.

Starvation "now began to claim victims" and "hundreds" died from malnutrition.<sup>38</sup> In parts of Panay, Leyte, and possibly elsewhere, the offensive caused disarray among some resistance organizations who began to fight among themselves over remaining territorial and population bases. Similar havoc may have erupted in 1945 as a consequence of the widespread fighting between joint American and Filipino forces and retreating Japanese troops. Particularly intense in northern Luzon, the Visayas, and sections of Mindanao, battles may partly account for reports in 1946 that in these areas "it is literally true that barrio people are dying of hunger."<sup>39</sup>

Political conditions, too, generally were better in the autonomous areas. Partly to restore order and partly to resist the new central government, communities in autonomous localities established their own governing bodies, which included elected village councils, committees to arbitrate disputes and impose punishments, and either armed groups or affiliations with other guerrillas. Some autonomous governments even issued their own money, regulated local commerce, and published newspapers.

On some islands, Negros and Panay, for example, rather elaborate and more-or-less unified governing organizations, consisting of "civilian" and "military"

units, served to link autonomous areas. In other parts of the country, where these areas were less integrated, guerrilla groups sometimes fought each other over territory. A man who had lived with his family in an evacuation settlement in mountainous Ilocos recalled that the Japanese never bothered them (except "at the very end when they were running from the Americans"). It was the guerrillas who sometimes "extorted food and other things and acted like they owned the place when they came to our barrio."<sup>40</sup> Abusive guerrillas apparently were atypical, however, and the more lasting effect of local governance and guerrilla resistance was positive. In Mindanao, even Muslims and Christian guerrillas often were able to cooperate, and antagonism between the religious populations reportedly was less pronounced during this period than before—and maybe since.<sup>41</sup>

As local government and guerrilla organizations were established in northern Mindanao, people in autonomous areas "developed a new sense of purpose." They farmed more intensively, soldiers kept peace and order, and Japanese money was banned. "We were free men again, listening openly to the radio, traveling roads and trails without fear . . . our soldiers were between us and the enemy."<sup>42</sup> This is typical, I suspect, of the experience of many in the autonomous areas, perhaps not every day but in the long run. This and the self-provisioning of food, clothing, and other necessities—all in the context of defying the military administration—created a stronger sense of community among people in autonomous localities than probably existed in occupied zones. This feeling was conveyed by a Filipino who had lived in Manila during the first part of the occupation and in southern Luzon for the remainder.

Manila was gloomy and depressing. People were suffering. They were hungry. There were many beggars. There was despair. People just wondered when the bad dreams would be over. When I moved away, though, to be with relatives, I found that people in the barrios were more confident. They were living better, more organized, more positive about things, more light-hearted, and freer. It's because there we were far away from the Japanese and we were part of the guerrillas.<sup>43</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

The Japanese regime and the destruction that accompanied the war resulted in terrible economic conditions in the Philippines, which lasted until the late 1940s, after which the principal features of the prewar economy and government were reestablished. The Japanese occupation, in short, had no profound impact on Philippine political and economic structures, and in these terms it does not qualify as a major period in the country's history.

Yet in other ways the period is extremely significant. These include the way people see themselves—individually and collectively—and how they internalize the history of their regions and nation. These terms also involve a sense of accomplishment, pride, and integrity. Admittedly these are amorphous and difficult to convey.

convincingly to others. Yet I think one must take them into account if one is to take seriously the ways in which people understand what happens to them. In these terms, the Japanese occupation becomes a major period in Philippine history. Indeed, it may surpass all others. A comparable period would be the one at the turn of the century when Filipinos struggled against Spanish, and then American, domination and endured economic and political turmoil. Distinctive features of the Japanese period, however, are that withdrawal and resistance were virtually nationwide, rather than confined only to certain regions of the archipelago; and that Filipinos triumphed.

David Steinberg contends in a thoughtful, well-argued essay that the legacies of both the Philippine Revolution and the Japanese occupation are ambiguous, preventing each from becoming a "sea-anchor of tradition" that could help keep "the nation secure in its own self-image" and contributing instead to the "doubts about its identity."<sup>44</sup> True enough, he says, during the Japanese occupation Filipinos fought, resisted, and sacrificed heroically. But the postwar political scene—particularly the presence of an elite divided by charges and countercharges of collaboration and the rise to power of corrupt and self-seeking opportunists who had served the Japanese—demeaned the wartime sacrifices.

Steinberg is correct in asserting that the meaning of the Japanese occupation and its aftermath can be equivocal. I doubt that any nation's great moments are free of blemishes or even of embarrassing flaws. Nevertheless, people look to them for strength and with pride, as I believe Filipinos do to the Japanese period. Steinberg emphasizes the failings of the elite but from the angle I have tried to follow here the ambiguous performance of the elite is all the more reason why the period was and remains significant for much of the population. Stated simplistically, while many of the elite (not all) floundered and disgraced themselves, the populace (again, not everyone) relied upon themselves to defy, subvert, and survive one of the most adverse and oppressive regimes in the country's history. This historical event and the qualities it brought to the surface—including a scepticism toward government and elites—are very much part of the anchor of what it means to be Filipino.

In broad terms, Filipinos faced political and economic adversity in two ways, both of which contributed to the importance of the period. First, they withdrew from those sectors of society and the economy that the Japanese were trying to control; and, second, they resisted the regime. Each activity covered a spectrum of behaviors. Withdrawal ranged from fashioning buy-and-sell networks for small commodities in Manila to evacuating to the mountains and living entirely off the land. Resistance ranged from the indirect action that avoided confrontation with the oppressors to direct assaults on soldiers and stores of supplies. The two spectra often intersected. Autonomous localities frequently became support areas for guerrilla organizations, and self-reliant forms of livelihood deprived the regime of labor and resources. Motives and intentions for each range of action often combined the wish to provide for and defend one's family and the desire to resist oppression.

Willard Elsbree has argued that the Japanese occupation was a major turning point for Southeast Asian countries because it contributed immensely to nationalist movements and because Southeast Asian nationals gained valuable experience when the Japanese involved them in government.<sup>45</sup> His point is less well taken for the Philippines, however, than it is for Indonesia, the country his book emphasizes. The nationalist movement was well developed in the Philippines before 1941, and Filipinos had long had important roles in government under the Americans. Moreover, agreements between Americans and Filipinos in the 1930s had already assured independence for the country by 1946.

But in a broader sense the Japanese occupation made a major contribution to the development of Philippine nationalism. For the first time in the country's history, the people defeated a foreign invader. And they did so in their own creative ways, despite prodding from some prominent Filipinos to support the new regime, return to the occupied cities and towns, and resume their previous economic activities. I am not forgetting here the material and psychological support Filipinos received from Americans, the military victories in the Pacific, and the expected return of MacArthur's forces. One can acknowledge these without detracting from what Filipinos did themselves. Their resistance involved organizing and supporting guerrilla movements as well as innumerable acts of defiance, refusal, and obstruction. It was national, yet not nationally centered; each region and locality had its own means, organizations, and leaders. Maybe not until after it was over did individuals fully realize what they and their fellow Filipinos had been doing, and what separately, but also collectively, they had accomplished. They had defeated a regime they considered unjust. And they had fallen back on their own resources—their land, their labor, their families and friends, their courage and stubbornness—to resist, win, and survive with dignity and pride.

## Notes

I am grateful to Bruce Cruikshank, Jack Larkin, and Norman Owen for thoughtful and intensive comments on an earlier draft of this essay. Others to whom I am thankful for assistance are Dan Doeppers, Ron Edgerton, Grant Goodman, Norie Hata, Rey Ileto, Melinda Tria Kerkvliet, Masato Matsui, Glenn May, Al McCoy, Jock Netzorg, Shiro Saito, Peter Xenos, Akira Takahashi, and Hiromitsu Umehara. This chapter initially appeared, in a somewhat different form, in *Agriculture and Food Supply in the Second World War*, edited by Bernd Martin and Alan S. Milward (Oberer Haldenweg: Scripta Mercaturae Verlag, 1985). I thank the previous publisher for permission to reprint it in this special volume for John Smail, mentor and friend.

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Teodoro A. Agoncillo and Milagros C. Guerrero, *History of the Filipino People* (Quezon City: Garcia, 1970); and Renato Constantino and Letizia R. Constantino, *The Philippines: The Continuing Past* (Quezon City: Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1978).

<sup>2</sup>John A. Larkin, "Philippine History Reconsidered: A Socio-economic Perspective," *American Historical Review* 87 (June 1932): 595–628.

<sup>3</sup>Alfred McCoy, "Politics by Other Means: World War II in the Visayas," in *Southeast Asia Under Japanese Occupation*, ed. A. McCoy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 11–30.