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Rupert Wilkinson, *Surviving a Japanese Internment Camp: Life and Liberation at Santo Tomás, Manila, in World War II*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014. Pp. xi, 234. ISBN 978-0-7864-6570-5.

Review by Eric W. Klinek, Brooklyn, NY (eric.klinek@gmail.com).

The dominant narrative of the Japanese invasion of the Philippines during World War II centers on the Bataan Death March and the horrors its survivors endured during years of captivity. There is a rich literature—memoirs, diaries, and secondary works—about Allied prisoners of war (POWs) in the Pacific Theater, but Americans and British interned at the Santo Tomás camp are underrepresented in these accounts.¹ *Surviving a Japanese Internment Camp* is thus an important and welcome chronicle of their experiences.

Historian Rupert Wilkinson (Univ. of Sussex), author of ten books on American and British society, writes from a unique perspective not only as a scholar, but as a former internee of the Santo Tomás Internment Camp (STIC). In 1934, his parents moved from England to the Philippines, where he was born. In January 1942, at age five, he reported to Santo Tomás with his mother and older sister. Three years later, on 3 February 1945, the US Army's First Cavalry Division liberated him and nearly four thousand other Allied nationals. The present book is avowedly not so much a memoir as a non-exhaustive camp history. Given his age at the time of internment, Wilkinson's "own memories of the camp's early years are fragmentary," but he has consulted "a wealth of first-hand accounts and various histories" (5). He notes that

None of the books I found does what my book does: give a history that is at once "bottom up" and "top down," combining the experience of internees (what they went through, how they coped, and how they felt—including my own experience and that of my family) with the history and politics that landed them in the camp, shaped the camp, and got most of them out in the end. (4)

The author is cognizant of and avoids the pitfalls of over-reliance on memoirs and diaries. Though few Japanese records concerning STIC exist, he has located and translated a guard's logbook for this study.

The book's chapters are arranged thematically, but they also "follow a chronological sequence but overlap in time" (7); this unfortunately makes for a fair amount of repetition. Wilkinson's overarching aim is to explain how STIC internees survived their imprisonment. Though Japanese forces executed several "enemy aliens" for attempting to escape and for maintaining contacts with a guerrilla network, there was no systematic regimen of abuse and torture at STIC, where, "From news smuggled into the camp, internees soon realized that the Japanese army treated military POWs much more brutally than civilian internees" (6). On the whole, Japanese and Taiwanese guards at STIC maintained their distance from the internees, which fostered a not entirely oppressive atmosphere.

Why were civilian and military captives of the Japanese Empire treated so differently? For one thing, the Japanese did not despise civilians as they did soldiers who had laid down their arms. Wilkinson also posits that guards treated STIC internees leniently to reduce subversion within the camp and "protect[ed civilians] enough to deter Allied retaliation against Japanese prisoners and look civilized" (95). These claims need qualification. By early 1944, the Allied populaces were well aware of the atrocities committed during and after the Bataan Death March and during the "Rape of Nanjing" (1937). Japanese soldiers dealt with Filipino, Korean, and Chinese civilians much more severely than they did Westerners. Though beyond the scope of Wilkinson's study, it would be interesting to evaluate the role of race and culture in this discrepancy.

The STIC administrators allowed internees to establish a semi-autonomous governing structure. Various committees provided for the care and well-being of prisoners and insulated them from Japanese overseers both

1. Wilkinson identifies only two book-length histories of Santo Tomás: A.V.H. Hartendorp, *The Santo Tomás Story* (NY: McGraw Hill, 1964), and Bruce E. Johansen, *So Far From Home: Manila's Santo Tomás Internment Camp, 1942-1945* (Omaha: PBI Pr, 1996). Hartendorp was an internee, as were Johansen's in-laws.

inside and outside the camp. Civilians also benefited from the foresight of Manila business leaders and the American Emergency Commission in the months prior to the Japanese attack. Realizing that war was inevitable and that Americans and Europeans would “be imprisoned in some way as ‘enemy aliens’” (21), they preemptively selected Santo Tomás University as a possible internment center. Indeed, when Japanese soldiers entered Manila in early January 1942, Philippine government officials who liaised with them succeeded in securing Santo Tomás for this purpose.

The internee administration, established on the camp’s first night of existence, was critical to survival in STIC. Its leaders tended to be younger, expatriate businessmen who had lived in prewar Manila. According to Wilkinson, the Central Committee (later, Executive Committee [EC]) “set up the nucleus of four committees, covering health and sanitation, food, recreation, and ‘discipline’ (law and order)” (29). It also created a General Code of Regulations to govern the camp. The EC came to occupy a place in the four-level power hierarchy at STIC—from the top down: the Japanese Army outside camp, including the *Kempeitai* (secret military police); the camp commandant and his staff; the EC; and room and floor monitors who kept order in the dormitories and took daily roll.

In short order, the mostly American and British internees formed a new society at STIC.

The STIC internee story is one of dramatic changes, from a life of privilege and access to servants in prewar Manila, the “Pearl of the Orient,” to the initial stress and strangeness of internment, and then, remarkably quickly, the creation of a well-organized community with entertainments, shops, schooling, public health, and access to money and goods from outside.... A strong internee administration, partially elected, worked through a network of committees covering everything from entertainment to running its own jail and the public shaming of thieves and drunks. (2)

Committees established sports programs, a public address “radio” station, libraries, and a camp newspaper; internees attended plays, musicals, and concerts. Wilkinson describes daily life at STIC in detail, as well as follows the exploits of the camp’s Japanese and internee leadership. The reader learns about general living conditions, the construction of cabanas and shantytowns on the university grounds, sex and pregnancy, food, health and hygiene, and children’s experiences.

Wilkinson claims that social equality and economic inequality characterized the camp. This is too categorical. Women, for example, had little say in the male-dominated internee leadership. But all prisoners, regardless of prewar class status, pitched in to tend the gardens and clean the latrines. Economic inequality, on the other hand, was obvious from the beginning. The Japanese Army had not planned to care for captives in the territories it occupied. Consequently, internees at STIC were initially responsible for feeding themselves, though they did receive some Red Cross aid. Local businesses also provided food for the camp. To offset supply difficulties, Japanese guards opened the camp’s main gates several hours each day to allow prisoners to procure food and supplies from contacts—mostly former Filipino servants—on the outside. This “package line” at the front gate was essential to survival, though it also resulted in an economic disparity between the camp’s “haves” and “have nots.”

The “haves” typically enjoyed the means to acquire food and supplies from their contacts in Manila and the luxury of occupying the shanties and cabanas on the campus grounds. There was no general pooling of resources at STIC, and some prisoners sold food and goods to others. “Most internees seemed to accept the camp’s quasi-capitalist economy—‘campitalism,’ to coin a word” (42). By early 1944, the tide of war had turned against Japan; fearing collaboration between internees and guerrillas, the Army closed the STIC package line. Japanese overseers also took more direct control of the camp, and internees who had passes to live outside the camp lost that privilege. The Japanese Army began providing food directly, but in ever smaller amounts. The camp administration’s closing of the “porous prison” reduced economic inequality, but also subjected internees to a starvation diet. Malnutrition and disease became so severe that, upon the camp’s liberation, some GIs described its inhabitants as “walking skeletons” (124). Ten to twelve percent of STIC internees perished in captivity.

Throughout January 1945, as American ground forces returned to the island of Luzon, the Japanese garrison began leaving STIC. Gen. Douglas MacArthur ordered “Flying Columns” of the First Cavalry Division to Manila to liberate the camp. Wilkinson provides a succinct overview of the Army’s race from Lingayen Gulf to the city.

The subsequent Philippines Campaign (1944–45), particularly the Battle of Manila, has been too long neglected in World War II historiography. As American tanks approached the university on the evening of 3 February 1945, “nearly all the Japanese and Taiwanese garrison, some 68 men, had holed up in the Education Building” (150). The Japanese commandant successfully negotiated safe passage for the guards in exchange for the release of nearly two hundred internee-hostages. GIs permitted the garrison to leave early on the morning of 5 February. The internees were now liberated. The Americans did shortly thereafter capture some of the guards, but the majority likely died in subsequent fighting on Luzon.

The final chapter, “Significance,” is the book’s least effective and least necessary. As Wilkinson explains: “There was no one World War II. Different people experienced it very differently. This was true even at a single prison camp such as Santo Tomás. I want this final chapter to recognize the variety but also ask general questions. In what ways were our Japanese overlords particularly cruel, and why? Who was responsible for how they behaved: the Japanese people as a whole or their militarist elites?” (178). These questions are too complex to introduce at this late point in the book. Wilkinson can only engage in a brief theoretical discussion of atrocities and the motivations for them.² Are atrocities the product of national cultures or of training, brutalization, group-think, the breakdown of social norms, situational factors, the dehumanization and “otherization” of victims, or some combination of these? No single answer can suffice across space and time.

The author’s final conclusions about atrocities writ large are unsatisfying: “Japan’s bad treatment of prisoners reflected brutal policies toward its own soldiers—except that ‘brutal’ in the Japanese military lexicon meant instilling ‘spirit’ versus Western decadence” (179). But this contention is irrelevant to the history of STIC. The author admits that “Most Santo Tomás internees did not see or experience ‘atrocities’ in the usual sense of that term. There is no record of rape by Japanese in the camp. The closest thing to atrocity suffered by most internees was the slow-motion assault of increasing starvation” (187). That there is “no record of rape” does not mean it did not occur. The book could have benefited, too, from a more in-depth discussion of the differences between the Japanese and Taiwanese guards.

Wilkinson also writes that “Experiencing their enemies close-up made Santo Tomás internees less lavishly racist than the American media back home” (183–84). Such a broad claim, however, requires more convincing substantiation.³ The surviving internees disagreed about what motivated the Japanese military to commit atrocities: some emphasized that Japanese soldiers were willing to fight to the death; others blamed military leaders and gangsters who indoctrinated the Japanese populace. Wilkinson opines, “Ordinary [Japanese] soldiers, who did not get to know Westerners, were more likely than the camp commandants to swallow the official line that Westerners were arrogant and decadent” (185). The term “ordinary soldiers” is a loaded one, as debates about World War II atrocities have made clear (see note 2 below).

On the plus side, the author helpfully identifies several topics in need of further research. He mentions, for instance, that internee leaders provided aid to military POWs at Cabanatuan—it would be interesting to learn just how this network operated. He also alludes in passing to a “general lack of white-black racism” in the camp and observes that American internees tended to identify themselves by nationality, not race (183)—some discussion here of the experiences of the fifty African-American internees would help paint a clearer picture of life at STIC.

Rupert Wilkinson has produced a compact, eminently readable, thoroughly sourced and documented account of a neglected aspect of captivity during World War II. He clarifies how internees survived their ordeal in Santo Tomás and how the imprisonment experiences of Allied soldiers differed from those of civilians. *Surviving a Japanese Internment Camp* does a valuable service by opening promising new lines of inquiry for students and historians of World War II in the Philippines.

2. The identification of motives and causes of atrocities is extremely problematic. In the 1990s, Christopher Browning, in *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (NY: HarperCollins, 1992), and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, in *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (NY: Knopf, 1996), reached drastically different conclusions about what motivated a particular German unit to murder civilians en masse in Poland during World War II.

3. See, e.g., John Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1986).