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The Philippine Army, by Jose

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Book Reviews



The Philippine Army, 1935-1942. By Ricardo Trota Jose. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1992. x, 268 pages.

It is, perhaps, appropriate that a book such as this, on the history of the Philippine Army, should be written by Ricardo Trota Jose. In the many years I have known Rico, both as a graduate student and as a young colleague in the discipline, he has come across as a serious student who has been learning all he can about the military history of the Philippines and the Japanese occupation of the Philippines. He is a veritable walking encyclopedia on the history of World War II.

Using a variety of source materials, Rico Jose has written a history of the growth and development of the Philippine Army during the Commonwealth from what, he claims, "an academic level," in contrast to previously published works. He used primary sources from the United States (from the National Archives in Washington, D.C. and the MacArthur Memorial in Norfolk, Virginia) and the Philippines (especially from what remains of the Quezon Papers and other private collections), interviews of the military officers and witnesses of the period, as well as from contemporary published and unpublished narratives.

The Philippine Army today is one of the most important institutions of our society and politics. The beginnings of the military force date back from before the Commonwealth. Many Filipinos were enlisted in the Spanish colonial army, in the revolutionary armies of 1896 to 1901, and in the various military and semimilitary organizations during American rule. It was not until the Commonwealth, however, that a distinctly Philippine military defense force was established, for an independent government to be set up after the transition period needed a defense system.

The Commonwealth saw light in uncertain times—war clouds were hovering over Europe—and shortly, war broke out in Asia as well. Thus, the defense of the Philippines became the primary concern of Quezon and the Commonwealth government.

Rico Jose presents the evolution of a defense plan for the Commonwealth, detailing the steps taken to establish the Philippine Army from 1936 to the outbreak of the War and the beginning of the Japanese Occupation in 1942.

From 1936 to 1938, the foundations of the MacArthur defense plan (MacArthur having been sought by Quezon to execute the plan) were laid out. After this period, Quezon realized the flaws of the MacArthur plan. He felt duped by MacArthur into spending much-needed money for a plan of doubtful effectiveness and thus, he began to distance himself from MacArthur. This is a very interesting bit of information which should put MacArthur in a different light in the eyes of Filipinos.

With the creation of the Department of National Defense in 1939, Quezon tried to evolve a distinctly Philippine defense plan. His disaffection with MacArthur dissipated in 1941, when the Philippine Army was called to the service of the United States and was mobilized to prepare for the possibility of war with Japan. The combined Philippine and United States Army (USAFFE) lost the defense of the Philippines in 1942 in the face of the military strength of the Imperial Japanese Forces. Moreover, they possibly lost because MacArthur's defense plan did not consider that the Japanese could mount a sizable invasion of the Philippines. Other factors included budgetary constraints, arms, equipment and personnel shortage. Or, as a recent study indicated, also because "MacArthur acted repeatedly (in late 1941) to thwart a new Washington strategy for dealing with the Japanese: the use of long-range bombers [from the Philippines] for a show of force that might make Tokyo more receptive to reason." Behind MacArthur's "extraordinary" behavior, apparently, was "his promise to his beloved Philippines [that he would] avoid any action that might pull the archipelago into the spreading Pacific war" (John Sharkey, "The MacArthur Mutiny," *The Washington Post*, 5 December 1993).

Throughout the book, Rico Jose very clearly explains the realities which shaped the development and growth of the Philippine Army. One of them is the powerful influence of Quezon. There are many references to what critics called his "dictatorial stance" and the politicization of the military. But to Quezon's credit, he never used the army to keep himself in power. He also kept the army out of politics, at least during elections. MacArthur was also influential, although he often delegated important tasks to his assistants—Ord, Eisenhower, and later, Sutherland.

Other reasons include budgetary limitations, inadequacy of weapons and equipment (obsolete World War I weapons), and officer shortage. There was also continued criticism from various sectors, especially the detrimental effect of the military budget—36 percent of the total in 1936 and over 20 percent in succeeding years—on the allotment for education, and the militarization of society, among others. Problems also existed within the army itself, where the Philippine Constabulary and the National Police were parts of the whole defense system. There were "bad eggs" in the military, who were dismissed from the service, with Quezon himself sometimes personally overseeing this.

The Philippine Army has been written about as part of larger subjects—in the context of U.S. colonial policy or defense plan in the Pacific, or the various services during the Commonwealth—and all these have proven useful for Rico Jose. But his book details the various services in the context of the national defense plan and examines the problems that have influenced the growth or hindered the development of these forces. This is significant in understanding today's military establishment and some of its more serious problems, which obviously have historical antecedents.

The Philippine Army as a conventional military force follows national policy—self-defense against foreign aggression, and defense against internal insurgency and rebellion. In his presentation, Rico Jose analyzes the flaws of the defense system which made it less than an effective plan, especially in the light of the charged international situation of the time. This analysis has some contemporary relevance and there are lessons to be learned from the expensive experiment in the 1930s. Then as now, the problems have a familiar ring—a politicized army, poor equipment despite the huge budgetary outlay, factionalism, shortage of capable, well-trained and professional officers and men, among others. The historical perspective is useful in dealing with some of the military's deep-rooted problems.

Rico Jose's book reads well—and the arrangement of the chapters provides a clear picture of the development of the Philippine Army in the Philippines even, or especially, for someone less inclined to this specialized topic. In some portions, it would have been useful if some prominent names were mentioned (if only to make the narrative less "bloodless"), especially of those professional military men who were pioneers in their field or were outstanding young men selected for special training in the Philippines or in the United States, or had a hand in the shaping of the military establishment in the Philippines even after 1946. I kept asking the question "Who were they?" because of their relevance to the postwar history of the Philippine Army. It was also a little difficult to follow the chronology when years were seldom indicated when referring to certain developments.

I missed a bibliography which is normally the first section I look at in a scholarly work. I had to go over the notes to get a mental list of the materials used. The book did use important archival materials (RG 165 from the U.S. National Archives, for instance), but there are many more manuscripts that Rico Jose could have used to develop in detail some sections of the book which were lightly touched. The Filipino perspective of the book is commendable to complement previous works from a different viewpoint. As the author states, he hopes that further research and inquiry into the Philippine military would result from this work—hopefully one that will focus on the institution of the army in the sociopolitical context of our time.

There are only a few misprints. I wish, though, that the binding of my copy had been more durable—some pages began to unravel as early as

Chapter 1! These are minor points, though. Rico Jose's book is a significant contribution to the historiography of Philippine military history and should be read, especially by all dedicated Filipino military men and women.

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Story of a Province. Surigao Across the Years. By Fernando A. Almeda, Jr. [No. 2, Philippine National Historical Society] Quezon City: Heritage Publishing House, 1993. xv, 308 pages, 32 unnumbered pages (bibliography, indices).

Fernando A. Almeda is not a trained historian, and he deserves credit for his first attempt at serious historical writing, that is, writing meant to be a permanent record of a segment of human truth. In 308 pages, he condenses the history of a province from its prehistory to its present. This is neither easy nor—within such a brief compass—possible. The result will be one of two things: a mere chronicle, or an unbalanced picture that highlights certain aspects while blurring more important factors, leaving the reader with several unanswered questions.

Almeda divides the "story" of Surigao into seventeen chapters of unequal length. The shortest is Chapter X, "Huracan: Winds of Terror" (six pages), and the longest is the last, Chapter XVII, "Wartime: They Fought Alone" (45 pages). Five chapters summarize three centuries of Hispanic rule and Christianization, while seven chapters detail the half-century of the American takeover in 1899 to the liberation from the Japanese in 1944.

Historical writing, of course, is just as valid as its sources. Without them, one writes not history but fiction. Unfortunately, in the bibliography one looks in vain for basic archival sources essential to this type of writing. Some original documents are mentioned but they are few. One wishes mission and parish records had been consulted. This is the basic weakness of the book, and may explain its imbalance.

The initial five chapters that show Surigao's privileged geographical location seem more of an apologia than a scientific description that would prepare the reader to understand the kind of society that subsequently developed in the region. Why, for example, dedicate an entire chapter trying to identify the mysterious island of San Juan or compare it with the mythical Atlantis? If the island existed, how then did it affect the growth of Surigao?

Surigao, after all, is indeed the land, its rivers, coasts, seas—but more importantly, its people, without whom the natural advantages of the north-