



ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXV / 2024

Asia in 2024: Fragile democracies amid global turmoil

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano
Elena Valdameri

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

Vol. XXXV / 2024

Asia in 2024: Fragile democracies amid global turmoil

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano
Elena Valdameri

viella

Asia Maior. The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989.

Copyright © 2025 - Viella s.r.l. & Associazione Asia Maior

ISBN 979-12-5469-681-1 (Paper) ISBN 979-12-5469-682-8 (Online)

ISSN 2385-2526 (Paper) ISSN 2612-6680 (Online)

Annual journal - Vol. XXXV, 2024

This journal is published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & the CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli Extra-europei «Cesare Bonacossa», University of Pavia

Asia Maior: The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989 is an open-access journal, whose issues and single articles can be freely downloaded from the think tank webpage: www.asiamaior.org.

The reference year is the one on which the analyses of the volume are focused. Each *Asia Maior* volume is always published in the year following the one indicated on the cover.

Paper version	Italy	€ 50.00	Abroad	€ 65.00
Subscription	abbonamenti@viella.it www.viella.it			

EDITORIAL BOARD

Editor-in-chief (direttore responsabile):

Michलगuglielmo Torri, University of Turin.

Co-editors:

Filippo Boni, The Open University.

Diego Maiorano, The University of Naples «L'Orientale».

Elena Valdameri, ETH Zürich

Associate editors:

Axel Berkofsky, University of Pavia;

Giulio Pugliese, University of Oxford and European University Institute;

Emanuela Mangiarotti, University of Pavia;

Pierluigi Valsecchi, University of Pavia.

Consulting editors:

Elisabetta Basile, University of Rome «Sapienza»;

Kerry Brown, King's College London;

Peter Brian Ramsay Carey, Oxford University;

Rosa Caroli, University of Venice;

Jaewoo Choo, Kyung Hee University (Seoul, South Korea);

Jamie Seth Davidson, National University of Singapore;

Ritu Dewan, Indian Association for Women Studies;

Laura De Giorgi, University of Venice;

Kevin Hewison, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill;
Lucia Husenicova, University Matej Bel (Banská Bystrica, Slovakia);
David C. Kang, Maria Crutcher Professor of International Relations, University of Southern California;
Rohit Karki, Kathmandu School of Law;
Jeff Kingston, Temple University – Japan Campus;
Mirjam Künkler, Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study – Uppsala;
Noemi Lanna, University of Naples «L'Orientale»;
James Manor, School of Advanced Studies – University of London;
Aditya Mukherjee, Jawaharlal Nehru University;
Mridula Mukherjee, Jawaharlal Nehru University;
Parimala Rao, University of Delhi;
Guido Samarani, University of Venice;
Marisa Siddivò, University of Naples «L'Orientale»;
Eswaran Sridharan, Institute for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania;
Arun Swamy, University of Guam;
Akio Takahara, University of Tokyo;
Edsel Tupaz, Harvard University alumnus, Ateneo de Manila University and Far Eastern University;
Sten Widmalm, Uppsala University;
Ather Zia, University of Northern Colorado;

Book reviews editors:

Elena Valdameri, ETH Zürich;
Marco Zappa, University of Venice;
Teuku Reza Fadeli, Universitas Indonesia

Editorial secretary:

Chiara Benini

Graphic project:

Nicola Mocci.

Before being published in *Asia Maior*, all articles, whether commissioned or unsolicited, after being first evaluated by the Journal's editors, are then submitted to a double-blind peer review involving up to three anonymous referees. Coherently with the spirit of the double-blind peer review process, *Asia Maior* does not make public the name of the reviewers. However, the reviewers' names – and, if need be, the whole correspondence between the journal's editors and the reviewer/s – can be disclosed to interested institutions, upon a formal request made directly to the Editor in Chief of the journal.

Articles meant for publication should be sent to Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com), Filippo Boni (filippo.boni@open.ac.uk), Diego Maiorano (dmaiorano@unior.it); book reviews should be sent to Elena Valdameri (elena.valdameri@gess.ethz.ch).



ASSOCIAZIONE ASIA MAIOR

Steering Committee: Filippo Boni, Marzia Casolari, Matteo Fumagalli, Michelguglielmo Torri (President).

Scientific Board: Guido Abbattista (Università di Trieste), Domenico Amirante (Università «Federico II», Napoli), Elisabetta Basile (Università «La Sapienza», Roma), Luigi Bonanate (Università di Torino), Claudio Cecchi (Università «La Sapienza», Roma), Alessandro Colombo (Università di Milano), Anton Giulio Maria de Robertis (Università di Bari), Thierry Di Costanzo (Université de Strasbourg), Max Guderzo (Università di Siena), Giorgio Milanetti (Università «La Sapienza», Roma), Paolo Puddinu (Università di Sassari), Adriano Rossi (Università «L'Orientale», Napoli), Giuseppe Sacco (Università «Roma Tre», Roma), Guido Samarani (Università «Ca' Foscari», Venezia), Filippo Sabetti (McGill University, Montréal), Gianni Vaggi (Università di Pavia).



CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli extra-europei
"Cesare Bonacossa" - Università di Pavia

Steering Committee: Axel Berkofsky, Arturo Colombo, Antonio Morone, Giulia Rossolillo, Gianni Vaggi, Pierluigi Valsecchi (President), Massimo Zaccaria.



viella

libreria editrice

via delle Alpi, 32

I-00198 ROMA

tel. 06 84 17 758

fax 06 85 35 39 60

www.viella.it

CONTENTS

IX Foreword

MICHEL GUGLIELMO TORRI, *Asia Maior in 2024: Under the sign of a declining democracy*

Articles

- 1 FLORA SAPIO, *China 2024: Preparing for future challenges through self-reliance*
27 STEFANO PELAGGI, *China's Foreign Policy 2024: Strategic assertiveness and diplomatic adaptation*
53 MARCO MILANI & ANTONIO FIORI, *Korean peninsula 2024: A year of political and social upheaval*
83 RAYMOND YAMAMOTO & MARCO ZAPPA, *Japan 2024: Striving for security amidst political turmoil*
125 THAN KIÜ, *Hong Kong 2024: Adjusting to the National Security Law*
143 RIWANTO TIRTOSUDARMO & PETER B.R. CAREY, *Indonesia 2023-24: Jokowi's endgame and the politics of dynasty*
191 CHRISTINE CABASSET, *Timor-Leste 2024: In a changing geopolitical environment, reconciliation as a central pillar*
207 EMANUELA MANGIAROTTI & MARSHELAYANTI MOHAMAD RAZALI, *Malaysia 2024: Trials and trajectory of Anwar Ibrahim's political leadership*
223 RICHARD QUANG-ANH TRAN, *Vietnam 2024: Continued economic growth, change in leadership, and «Bamboo Diplomacy»*
235 EDOARDO SIANI, *Thailand 2023-2024: A general election and its contested aftermath*
251 MATTEO FUMAGALLI, *Myanmar 2024: Whose tide has turned?*
267 SILVIA TIERI & RAIAN HOSSAIN, *Bangladesh 2023-2024: From democratic backsliding to the Monsoon Revolution, towards democratic transition*
291 JAMES MANOR, *India 2024: Authoritarianism checked, then reasserted*
315 IAN HALL, *India 2024: Challenges and contention in foreign policy*
335 CHULANEE ATTANAYAKE & RAJNI GAMAGE, *Sri Lanka 2024: Political, economic, and geopolitical transformations*
355 MARCO CORSI, *Pakistan 2024: Political turmoil and economic instability*
377 SARA BERLOTO & NICOLÒ FASOLA, *Kyrgyzstan 2021-2024: Japarov's seizure of power amidst structural challenges*
399 CARLO FRAPPI, *Armenia 2024: Quo Vadis Yerevan? The difficult path out of the Russian trap*

Special articles

- 421 CLAUDIO CECCHI, *China and India: Cooperation and rivalry in the global landscape and within the BRICS*
441 DAVID SCOTT, *Maritime Asia: A «theatre of consequence»*
459 LORENZO KAMEL, *Gaza and the Demographic Question*

477 Reviews

509 Appendix

IMPERIALISM WITHOUT EMPIRE?
THE SWISS AND THEIR LEGACIES OF TRANSIMPERIAL MERCENARISM

Norman Joshua

Hoover Institution
Stanford University
njoshua@stanford.edu

Philipp Krauer, *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies: A Transimperial History of Military Labour, 1848-1914*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Leiden University Press, 2024, 236 pp. (ISBN 978-9-0872-8414-5).

Due to its political neutrality, economic growth, and multiculturalism, the history of modern Switzerland after 1848 has often been self-characterized as a special case («*Sonderfall*») within the broader dynamics of European history.¹ In contrast to Europe's tainted history of imperialism and colonialism, this distinctiveness seems justified—Switzerland never had a formal colony. However, since the early 2000s, historians such as Patricia Purtschert, Francesca Falk, Harald Fischer-Tiné, and Bernhard Schär, among others, have challenged this view by demonstrating how colonialism, along with the violence and racism that came with it, were integral to the making of modern Switzerland.² Philipp Krauer's *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies* is a significant contribution to this growing body of work.

At the core of the book are the stories of 5,800 Swiss mercenaries who enlisted in the Royal Dutch East Indies Army (*Koninklijk Nederlands-Indisch Leger*, KNIL) in the Netherlands East Indies. In tracing the stories of these young, mostly underprivileged, Swiss men, Krauer shows how young Swiss actively participated in the European colonial project throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Krauer's approach is situated between two historiographical traditions: the so-called «New Military History» a trend which began in the 1960s, that examines military history through the lens of social, cultural, and economic history; and «New Imperial History» which concep-

1. See Clive H. Church and Randolph C. Head, *A Concise History of Switzerland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), chap. 8; On the *Sonderfall* concept, see Georg Kreis, «Sonderfall,» *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*, December 20, 2012, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/049556/2012-12-20/>.

2. Patricia Purtschert, Francesca Falk, and Barbara Lüthi, «Switzerland and 'Colonialism without Colonies': Reflections on the Status of Colonial Outsiders,» *Interventions* 18, no. 2 (March 3, 2016): 286–302; Bernhard C. Schär, «Switzerland, Borneo and the Dutch Indies: Towards a New Imperial History of Europe, c. 1770–1850,» *Past & Present* 257, no. 1 (December 31, 2022): 134–67; Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

tualizes empires as networks of circulation of people, objects, or ideas. In tackling this multi-pronged approach, the author builds upon Daniel Headrick's framework in *Tools of Empire* (1981) by conceptualizing Swiss mercenaries as «agents of historical entanglements» or, living «tools of empire» within the broader scheme of European imperialisms.³

The book asks three main questions. What was the role of the Swiss mercenaries in the perpetuation of Dutch colonial power? How did these Swiss mercenaries interact with each other, their Dutch masters, and the indigenous population? And following Bernhard C. Schär's conception of the «trans-imperial» what was the role of the Swiss in the construction and perpetuation of a «trans-imperial military labor market» that allowed the Dutch to recruit men for their fledgling imperial wars while also providing care and pensions to their veterans?⁴ Ultimately, Krauer examines how these experiences with imperialism helped shape modern Switzerland [p. 18].

In answering these questions, the book's argument is quite straightforward. Through its participation within the European trans-imperial military labour market, «thousands of Swiss mercenaries were also deployed both outside of Europe and after the founding of the modern federal state in 1848[.]» thus contributing to Dutch imperialism and the violence that came with it» [p. 153]. The book's primary contribution is to reposition the Swiss as active players in European imperialism abroad—and show how this participation shaped the history of the modern Swiss nation-state.

In Chapter II, Krauer provides an overview of the shape and dynamics of the trans-imperial military labour market that emerged in 19th century Europe. He points out that during the second half of the 19th century, the Dutch employed Swiss mercenaries in large numbers. This was due to the Dutch wars of colonial expansion in the Malay Archipelago, namely the costly Java War (1825-1830) and the Aceh Wars (1873-1912). Meanwhile, the European economic crisis of the 1870s also provided a steady supply of young volunteers to the Netherlands [p. 44]. Beyond socioeconomic motivations, Swiss volunteers were drawn by the allure of adventure and the prospect of traveling to the far-flung East Indies [p. 64].

Of course, the life of a colonial soldier was not all adventure, pomp, or glory. In addition to the rigors of military training, Chapter III vividly illustrates how Swiss soldiers encountered the monotony and boredom of military discipline, the social and racial hierarchies in the colonies, the threat of tropical diseases, disillusionment (and insubordination), and ultimately, the nature of colonial violence itself. The author contends that «Swiss mercenaries contributed in various manners to the maintenance and

3. Philipp Krauer, *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies: A Transimperial History of Military Labour, 1848-1914*, Global Connections: Routes and Roots 9 (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2024), 18.

4. On the notion of the «trans-imperial,» see Schär, «Switzerland, Borneo and the Dutch Indies.»

proliferation of a colonial regime of awe, fear, and violence» [p. 80]. The vivid accounts from Swiss mercenaries – such as Jean Aimé Theodore Humberset, who noted in his diary how his unit burned down several villages during the Borneo War against the Sultanate of Banjarmasin (1859-1863); Karl Schmid, who «praised the courage of a compatriot who sneaked behind enemy lines and set fire to a village» during the Aceh War (1873-1912); or Hans Christoffel, who, as a unit commander in the infamous *Marechaussee*, oversaw the violent counterinsurgencies against the Alas and Gayo people during the Aceh War in 1904 [p. 80]. Three years later, in 1907, Christoffel and his unit were deployed to Flores, where they massacred 795 people in a three-month long expedition [p. 82]. Just like the other Europeans in the KNIL, the Swiss recruits originated from the lower strata of society, and they ultimately became perpetrators of colonial violence [p. 83].

In addition to the normal ebb-and-flow of martial life, the author also discusses the Swiss mercenaries' relationships with local concubines (*njai*) and the sexual life of the soldiers. Speaking about the 'vices' of barracks, Krauer explains how concubinage, abolished only in 1913, was often exploitative and abusive [p. 84]. Swiss soldiers recorded their own racialized views of these relationships – Heinrich Brandenberger, for instance, complained how the *njais* «kept up to six men at a time», and Arnold Egloff calls the *njai* was «like a cat», as she «did not remain faithful» and «only loved money, but not the man who would give it» [p. 84]. The mixed-race children of these relationships, often abandoned and/or marginalized, became an underclass within Indies society [p. 85]. However, some Swiss also married their *njais* and brought them back to Switzerland, such as Brandenberger, who married Lina Sampet in 1911, and settled with her in Switzerland in 1920 [p. 85].

One of the book's most interesting aspects is its analysis of how Swiss participation in imperialist projects helped shape Swiss national identity. Quoting historian Rudolf Jaun, the author notes that in the absence of military victories or defeats due to its neutrality, Switzerland instead built its martial-nationalist discourse upon the battles fought by Swiss mercenaries from the 16th to the early 19th centuries.⁵ However, after the formation of the Swiss federal state in 1848, the state distanced itself from the colonial mercenary histories, as they were considered anathema to the self-perceived liberalism of the Swiss political class [p. 65].

The lasting influence of colonialism was also evident in a domain for which Switzerland is renowned for – finance. Central to Chapter IV are the flows of remuneration, from the Dutch colonies and the metropole to the

5. Rudolf Jaun, "Armee Und Nation: Schweizerische Militärdiskurse Des 19. Jahrhunderts Im Widerstreit," in *Die Konstruktion Einer Nation: Nation Und Nationalisierung in Der Schweiz, 18.-20. Jahrhundert*, ed. U. Altermatt, C. Bosshart-Pflugger, and A. Tanner (Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 1998), 150–51; Krauer, *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies*, 65.

Swiss state, which resulted from the business of mercenaryism. To be fair, colonial soldiers were not a path to wealth. Recruits did accept large signing bonuses when securing their contracts, but most of these funds circulated domestically as they were mostly spent in the colonial training depots of Harderwijk and Nijmegen [p. 97]. In terms of regular pay, however, the levels were quite low – a fact that is well-established in the literature. A soldier's weekly pay was one guilder in 1860, an amount which only increased marginally to 1,65 guilders in 1867 [p. 99]. According to the author, what was important was the constant transmission of pensions and veterans benefits to retired mercenaries in Switzerland. The transfer of these monies depended upon the «trans-imperial labour market» established a century earlier, which consisted of a network of actors and institutions, first the Dutch Consul General in Bern; Dutch private companies J. van Daehne & Co., Furnée & Co., and C.J. Sutterheim; and Swiss Cantonal War Commissioner (such as the one in Basel), and Swiss banking service providers such as Marcuard & Cie [pp. 103-5]. Many of these institutions employed Dutch officials and former Swiss mercenaries or other citizens that had direct experiences in the Dutch colonial sphere. The author suggests that the flow of colonial money from the mercenaries – either from signing bonuses, legal or illegal compensation, or pensions and veterans' disability benefits – supported the livelihoods of the poorer strata of Europeans, even for a country without colonies such as Switzerland.

Ultimately, in chapter V, the author endeavours into post-colonial studies, as he discusses the discursive representation of imperialism and colonialism through the general collective memory of the Swiss nation. Building upon Gloria Wekker's work on the Dutch Empire, the author traces how, through the mercenaries' «colonial gaze» reflected through letters, postcards, memoirs, diaries, and newspaper articles, the Swiss became active participants in the long history of European colonialism.⁶ These personal archives of Swiss mercenaries contain what the author calls the permeation of a «colonial logic» that was built upon a dynamic relationship between the «European self» vis-à-vis the «extra-European other» [p. 128]. The Swiss mercenaries ultimately reproduced the colonial stereotypes of Javanese, Malay, or other «natives» as «simple people», «easily contented», or having a generally «peaceful character».⁷ Meanwhile those from the Outer Islands (Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, or other islands) were considered «savages» the Chinese and Arabs were «untrustworthy», as they were traders – one even compared them with Jews (!), and so on [pp. 130-5]. These

6. Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Krauer, *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies*, 121–22.

7. For an excellent discussion on the coloniality of these stereotypes, see Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1977).

stereotypes and discourses were distributed and transmitted to the lower classes of urban and rural Switzerland [p. 149]. So much, perhaps, for «*Sonderfall Schweiz*».

While the book makes use of an impressive range of German, French, and Dutch official and private sources – from archives to diaries and photographs – the book's reliance upon European sources means that indigenous perspectives remain largely absent, albeit for a few exceptions. In terms of racial stereotypes, perhaps it would be beneficial to see how the indigenous population viewed the German-speaking members of the KNIL in comparison to their other counterparts. Further, the book could have benefited from the voices of other actors – such as Swiss financiers, traders, engineers, plantation owners, or missionaries. Another interesting path to take is, of course, to examine how other European nation-states benefited from colonial flows of mercenary remuneration such as the case here with the Swiss.

Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies makes a significant contribution towards the historiography of Swiss exceptionalism by revealing Switzerland's entanglements in European imperialism. In tracing the personal accounts of Swiss mercenaries within the KNIL and the networks that they produced, the author offers compelling evidence that Switzerland was an active and complicit actor in Europe's colonial history. The book's strongest contribution lies in its rich multilingual archival work and its ability to connect the Swiss tradition of mercenaryism to the broader debates on the nature and consequences of Dutch and European colonial, racial, and economic entanglements abroad. In this regard, *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies* serves as a crucial addition to the literature on Switzerland's global history and her role in the European global imperial networks.