

# BOOK REVIEWS

**Agoncillo, Teodoro. *Fateful Years Japan's Adventure in the Philippines 1941-1945*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2010.**

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## **I. The Book and its Thesis**

**T**eodoro A. Agoncillo's *Fateful Years Japan's Adventure in the Philippines, 1941-1945* is a first-hand account of the three years of Japanese Occupation that narrated history from above than from below before giving a new perspective of the historical actors who have been, during the time it was written, misinterpreted, maltreated and maligned in the years during the Philippine reconstruction after the Second World War.

Agoncillo is best known as the historian who writes using the Filipino point of view. In *Fateful Years*, he used this method extensively though not forgetting to analyze the macro scale of events that led to the Japanese Occupation. From examining global factors, Agoncillo dissects the local factors then proceeds to inject his personal narratives while not sacrificing the execution of the historical method.

The timeline of the book begins not in 1941, as the title suggests, but in 1848 as Chapter 1 implied when Japan began to rise as an imperialist country in Asia who masqueraded their imperialist cause by calling their empire a "Co-Prosperity Sphere." Agoncillo places the year 1941 as the beginning of the Japanese conquest of Southeast Asia with Siam and Indo-China on 11 March 1941<sup>1</sup> then ending the year with the attack on Pearl Harbor on December. The narrative ended on September 1945 when Jose P. Laurel, Benigno Aquino, Sr. and Laurel III were imprisoned in Japan and scheduled to be on trial in the People's Court in the Philippines<sup>2</sup>. The starting and ending point of the book's

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<sup>1</sup>Agoncillo, Teodoro. *Fateful Years Japan's Adventure in the Philippines 1941-1945* (University of the Philippines Press, Quezon City: 2010): 19.

<sup>2</sup> Agoncillo, *Fateful Years Japan's Adventure in the Philippines 1941-1945*, 836.

timeline shows Agoncillo's macro to micro methodology: from being a nation who was building an empire to the impact of the downfall of that empire to the Filipinos. The book itself, divided into two volumes, follows this thought: volume one discussed the overarching events and people who were the prime movers of the Japanese Occupation while volume two concentrated on how the Filipino people responded to these overarching events, the people's daily struggles, and their fervent hope that MacArthur will return as he promised. Agoncillo initially attempted to be "objective" by using valid, historical documents in the initial sixteen chapters of the book's seventeen chapters. By chapter seventeen, Agoncillo gave in to the injection of his personal experiences to reflect the people's sentiments during the period and in analyzing the Japanese Occupation retrospectively. By being objectively subjective, Agoncillo asserted that first, the Japanese Occupation failed because the Filipinos stood by the Americans, the colonizer who treated them with dignity and respect and second, the historical actors of the period particularly those who were branded as collaborators with the Japanese were helping the Filipino independence cause.

Agoncillo's first argument is evident in his accounts of the Filipino temperament in Manila and its nearby provinces on their complete trust and dependence that America will return and liberate the country from Japan. Agoncillo showed this not through documentary pieces of evidence but by narrating his observations of the people's actions during the period. These narrations are the parts of the book's narrative that do not have citations, and we can safely assume that these came from what Agoncillo wrote in his diary that he kept during the war<sup>3</sup>.

Among the minute details that Agoncillo provided are the rumors connected to the latest military or political development<sup>4</sup>, sarcastic words used by the people, and stories of people's experiences on the extent they will do to combat hunger<sup>5</sup>. In these snippets of the Filipinos' life during the Occupation, Agoncillo highlights that the ordinary Filipinos disdained the Japanese since they treat the Filipinos like slaves who will work for the need of the conquerors but

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<sup>3</sup> In Volume One's Preface, xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Is of the fight at Bataan and Corregidor: 162-164; In people's opinion of Laurel as a collaborator after a failed assassination attempt: 378-379; On education: 447-450.

<sup>5</sup> Stealing rice (in PNR stations): 509-512, (by community leaders): 523-524; Stealing valuables of a woman emigrating to the northern provinces: pages 519-520; the elite selling their wealth to the poor: 524-526; buy and sell by fake agents and by enterprising professionals: 531-533, 536-540; Sisid rice: 541; substitutes for basic needs: 541-546; demoralized society: 548-550.

forgetting the needs of the conquered people. In a way, the Filipinos witnessed the decline of ethics and morals because of the need to survive, a need that the Japanese did not heed since they were busy funding their Co-Prosperity Sphere. The Filipinos did not experience the same struggle to survive under the Americans (as a conquered people as well) thus, the Filipino loyalty to the USA and not to Japan.

Agoncillo's second argument was a bold assertion especially during the time of its first publication in 1965. Twenty years after the war, there was a historian who portrayed those who worked with the Japanese by actually saying they worked *for* the Filipino people.

In chapter seventeen, he shifts the use of third-person omniscient ("They") to first person ("I") then dissects the USAFFE and MacArthur<sup>6</sup>, the Japanese High Command<sup>7</sup>, Laurel and other Filipino leaders<sup>8</sup> Retrospectively. That is, Agoncillo used the common emotions of the period (which he felt too, as he stated in the Preface) as springboards to rationally criticize the myth of invincibility of the USAFFE, the inhumanity of the Japanese, and Laurel's blind obedience to the conquerors. Elsewhere in this paper, I called this method being "objectively subjective" where Agoncillo as the historian can feel his emotion as an eyewitness yet took a step back to see the bigger picture of the Occupation's grand narrative.

Agoncillo surmises that in the grand scheme of the war, even historical actors are humans who are subject to their own moral codes and social norms. They were performing their duty based on what they perceive as their roles in society. For Agoncillo, the world is a theater and war is one of its many stages where the humans must perform their roles. As a historian who uses the Filipino point of view, Agoncillo portrayed the leaders of the Second Philippine Republic as leaders who shielded the Filipino people to an even more brutal Japanese treatment had they not cooperated with the Japanese Military Administration. This is most clear in chapter eight where Agoncillo showed the inside story of the Philippine Executive Commission (PEC) using the minutes of its meetings as his source. Perhaps Agoncillo knew of the people's limited knowledge and tunnel vision when it comes to the leaders of the PEC and the Second Philippine Republic that he used sources from those who attended these meetings so that those who read the *Fateful Years* will have a bird's eye view of the Filipino leaders' temperament of the period. These minutes contain the leaders' constant

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<sup>6</sup> Chapter 17, section 2.

<sup>7</sup> Chapter 17, section 3-4.

<sup>8</sup> Chapter 17, section 5-7.

concern on (1) how to alleviate the people's sufferings especially when the fight in Bataan and Corregidor was ongoing, (2) how independence may be gained and (3) how to find the correct words that will appease the Imperial Japanese Army but will not alienate the Filipino leaders to their people.

Supplementing the minutes of the meetings are Agoncillo's oral interviews with the leaders mentioned in those sources and who happen to be alive when he was writing the book. In his endnotes, Agoncillo will even annotate his sources using his own experiences as the reference. Again, he was objectively subjective in writing the story of the Filipino leaders of that time: he stuck to his sources and his analysis while not relying on his emotions to narrate this phase of the Occupation.

Veering away from the political side, Agoncillo peppered the reader with vivid details of the day to day struggle of the Filipino in chapter eleven. Here he portrayed the scarcity of food as the be-all and end-all of Filipino existence and how the leaders—though blinded by the orders of the Japanese High Command—tried to alleviate the Filipino's sufferings. Such is the way the leaders of the Second Republic operated: they walked a tightrope of appeasement and non-aggravation yet in the end, were branded as collaborators.

He was, however, careful with this thesis and will not directly state this until the Epilogue.<sup>9</sup> Agoncillo slowly revealed this halfway in the book when he first used Laurel's *Memoirs* in chapter eight. Whenever the actions of the Second Republic need explanations, Agoncillo banked on *Memoirs* or to his interviews with the Jose P. Laurel himself.

## II. Sources Used

Agoncillo's preference on Laurel is understandable. Laurel has proven himself to be a man of integrity despite the humiliations he experienced from both the Americans and Japanese just because he served as the president of the Second Republic. In portraying the perspective of the Second Republic and its leaders, Agoncillo relied on official documents of the Japanese Military Administration courtesy of the Department of Information, the laws formulated during this time and also the official newspaper arm of the Japanese Propaganda Corps, Tribune.

Purist historians will dispute Agoncillo's sources since the contents of these documents were heavily censored by the military authorities. Agoncillo was discerning on how he used these documents, seeing beneath the words, reading between the lines on how the Filipino leaders carried a double-edged

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<sup>9</sup> Chapter 17, section 6.

sword on their statements and how the military authorities will always assert their authority without considering the situation of the Filipinos.

In narrating what happens behind the scenes of the national events, Agoncillo uses data from oral interviews with the key personae of the Second Republic, from documents he personally gathered during the Occupation or from diaries of other eyewitnesses. His unpublished primary sources outnumber the published primary sources, using even radiograms, leaflets, and posters. This method of document selection gives the reviewer an impression that Agoncillo preferred to narrate the Japanese Occupation from the perspective of those who did not intend to be published: documents that were written solely for the purpose assigned by the need of the times. What Agoncillo wants is to illustrate the milieu of the period very similar to what happened in the past without the drama and bravado usually present in the published primary sources about this topic.

The book's secondary sources provided the global outlook of the Japanese Occupation. Since Agoncillo's main thrust is to write what happened using the Filipino point of view, most of the secondary sources used were written by Westerners. Again, Agoncillo's macro to micro methodology is reflective of his selection of sources. It is impossible to write the history of the period without proper contextualization, and Agoncillo preferred to use the Western perspective for this because the Philippines will not have been involved in the Second World War if it was not a colony of America, or so the Westerners thought.

In interpreting the intentions of the Japanese, it is necessary to read the sources written by the Japanese eyewitnesses of the period or for easier reading, Agoncillo read the transcripts of the trials of General Masaharu Homma, General Yamashita, and Prime Minister Hideki Tojo after the war. Agoncillo placed the references of these transcripts only on his Epilogue.

Placing the sources about the Japanese key players' perspectives towards the end of the book shows Agoncillo's own experience of the war that he tried to write the events as to how he and the other eyewitnesses lived it: faith and hope with the eventual American liberation but disdain and hatred towards the conquerors and their collaborators during the Occupation. These feelings faded years after the war, replaced with retrospect and the realization that MacArthur left because the Philippines was never America's priority and the collaborators were the Filipino leaders who did what they can to protect the Filipino people from the worst Japanese brutality.

### III. Book's Contribution

The trend of books about the Japanese Occupation of the Philippines is to highlight the brutalities of the occupiers, the guerrilla fighting, or the politics of collaboration. *Fateful Years* is the first book to treat the topic academically, stepping away from the emotion-filled writing while not sacrificing the lessons to be learned during one of the hardest times of the nation's history. In 1965 when some historians were busy manufacturing primary sources, and some were lamenting the tragedy of the war, Agoncillo rose to posterity when he put into print how the Filipino showed their best despite being at their worst. He emphasized this using the primary sources that were previously placed in the dustbins of history utilizing it in a way unheard of during the book's first publication: highlight the socio-cultural life of the Filipino during the war from the eyes of both the conquered and the conqueror.

Towards its end, *Fateful Years* will be the first among the few books to offer the point of view of the Filipino leaders who, twenty years after the Liberation, have been branded as political puppets by the history textbooks. This is the book's strength more than Agoncillo's innovation in being "objectively subjective" in treating his subject matter. He tried to make the reader understand the leaders' situation so the reader will be the one to judge if that leader is a collaborator or not.

It is also the suspension of judgment that sets *Fateful Years* apart from all of the books written about the Japanese Occupation. For devoid of ideological leanings and armed with only the facts, Agoncillo lets the reader critically analyze the historical actors of the era by laying out a complete picture of the Occupation in the political, economic, military and cultural areas without injecting his own analyses. Agoncillo reserved a separate chapter for it and rightly placed it at the end of the book. By the time the reader reaches this last chapter, the reader might have formed his own analysis which may be similar or different to that of Agoncillo's. In any case, it was Agoncillo's methodology that facilitated it, and the reader is left to judge if forgiveness should be given to the people who acted out of duty and loyalty.

Agoncillo's prose is also an easy read for both professional historians and history enthusiasts. His narrative flowed from one phenomenon to another and had it not been for the endnotes and the occasional block quotes, *Fateful Years* would seem a work that belongs to creative non-fiction. The ability of Agoncillo to employ creativity without sacrificing historiography is an achievement for any historian since he showed how the art of writing could be

balanced with academic writing to entice the reader in reading the text while continually reminding them that the elements of the narrative are all historical facts. A reader's quick survey of the paragraphs of the entire two volumes shows that almost all of these have endnotes. Those that do not have the endnotes are the parts which are Agoncillo's eyewitness accounts.

*Fateful Years* is a book for undergraduates, graduate students and history enthusiasts who are willing to be immersed in the Philippines during the years of the Japanese Occupation. Its unwillingness to provide the drama and bravado of the war years makes it an excellent source for persons who are willing to learn what the life was like during these times. Meanwhile, its groundbreaking analyses on the actions of the Filipino leaders during this period and Agoncillo's method of retro-examining the events during the war are interpretations worth examining by amateur and professional historians. For here was a historian who advocated for a Filipino point of view in interpreting our nation's history but was brave enough not to interpret the historical events in the country using the then dominant idea of hating Japan and the Japanese.