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Book Review #6
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McLane, Charles B. Soviet Strategies in Southeast Asia:
An Exploration of Eastern Policy under Lenin and Stalin.
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966. 563 pp.

It may, perhaps, seem amazing that there were already communist movements active in Southeast Asia in the early 1920s, but they did exist. Charles McLane in this book, Soviet Strategies in Southeast Asia attempts to assess the impact and influence of the Soviet Union on these fledgling movements and their development. As such, the book encompasses events that occurred in Indochina, Indonesia, Malaya, Burma, and the Philippines. Since this work is in many ways a synthesis, the author acknowledges his debt to authors who have studied individual countries, e.g, Ruth McVey and I. Milton Sacks, but he, himself, spent extended research time in the region, personally interviewed several dozen important Southeast Asians, and examined colonial administrative records wherever available. The book contains a handy map, a valuable chronology, an appendix of short biographies, and a twenty-two page bibliography that indicates official records, general works, and the author's interviews. McLane also notes the difficulty concerning the reliability and extent of sources, but he has succeeded, nonetheless, in providing an even-handed account of the Soviet's ongoing and continuing interest in colonial Southeast Asia.

Perhaps the most important conclusion to be drawn from

this book is that the Soviet Union played no role in Southeast Asia comparable to its activities in China. The Soviets and the Communist International (Comintern) showed sympathy for and interest in the communist movements but provided only fluctuating ideological guidance and rarely direct material support or advice. It was mainly the examples of the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communist Party that influenced Southeast Asian communists.

There were a number of obstacles to direct Soviet involvement in the region. First, Lenin, Stalin, and the Comintern were, and continued to be, primarily concerned with events in Europe. Second, the distance and language barrier precluded a very active role for Moscow in remote Southeast Asia. Third, the area was under the colonial administration of European powers with whom the Soviets at times, e.g. the 1930s, wished to officially cooperate. Thus, it should not be surprising that communism in these countries evolved in a particularly "local" flavor beyond Moscow's immediate control. True, there did exist a Far Eastern Bureau of the Comintern (Dalburo) in Singapore, a Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat (PPTUS) in Hankow, and a South Seas Communist Party, but information as to the activities of these organizations remains sketchy and does not indicate extraordinary success. It is also true that representatives of Southeast Asian parties studied in Moscow and participated in the Comintern, the Red Peasant International (Krestintern), and the Red International of Trade Unions (Profintern), but in most cases communist leaders

continued to lack systematic guidance from Moscow and simply picked up policy guidelines through whatever channels were available.

Thus, the direct impact of Moscow on developments in the Far East should not be over-exaggerated. The absence of direct ties becomes readily apparent when the implementation of Moscow's policy changes, e.g. the Sixth and Seventh Comintern Congresses and Andrei Zhdanov's September 1947 speech, is studied. These policies were usually adopted only after excessive delay and continued to reflect purely local situations. In one instance, McLane convincingly examines the series of communist uprisings that occurred in Southeast Asia after the Southeast Asian Youth Conference in Calcutta in February 1948 as not having been the result of a call-to-arms ordered by Moscow because of the disintegrating international situation. In fact, communist parties in the region had their own plans for revolt by that time, and there was already a war in Indochina well underway.

In concluding, McLane again emphasizes the persistent Soviet interest in the East from very early on. In this respect it was the Second Comintern Congress that established the basic issues to be addressed by Southeast Asian communist parties: the relationship of colonial revolutions to a European revolution, the attitude of communists to nationalist movements, the interdependence of peasants and workers, the responsibilities and duties of metropolitan communist parties, and the timing of communist uprisings. The tactics changed, as

Soviet foreign policy changed, but the issues remained the same.

In contradiction to Moscow's persistent interest, McLane notes the continuing low priority ^{for} to the Soviet Union of events occurring in the area. "Drift and indecision" (p. 480) characterized Stalin's Eastern policy primarily because of the European orientation of the Soviet Union and the Comintern, the Chinese failure of 1927, and domestic pressures in the early 1930s in the Soviet Union. As an interesting consequence of this benign neglect, the author indicates that Soviet strategy in Southeast Asia tended to be "more abrasive" which resulted in "the virtual extinction, by 1953, of all but two of the parties." (p. 481)

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Finally, Stalin's policy toward the East bore the lasting impact of the Soviet failure in China in the 1920s. First, that involvement exhausted Soviet reserves for any other colonial effort. Second, the Chinese fiasco discouraged any further colonial engagements. Third, as a result of Moscow's discredited policies, the Chinese communists actually emerged in a better position to influence Southeast Asians than if they had come to power with Stalin's help.

The book itself is divided chronologically: 1917-1928, 1930-1935, 1935-1941, 1941-1947, and 1948-1954. Each section begins with an overview of Soviet policy and then continues with an examination of individual countries and the relationship of Soviet and Chinese policies to that country. The book is comprehensive and very well written. It seems that

it could be read either as an introduction to communism in Southeast Asia or as a conclusion after the study of individual countries. McLane's work remains a good, fair treatment of the impact of Soviet policies on the development of communism in Southeast Asia.