

War and Resistance in the Philippines 1942–1944

JAMES KELLY MORNINGSTAR. ANNAPOLIS, MD: NAVAL INSTITUTE PRESS, 2021,
370 PP.

For a new generation of readers more familiar with conflicts in the Middle East and Central Asia (Afghanistan), the war in the Pacific theater may appear as a distant memory. Yet there is much to learn and admire in the various battles and fronts that made up the resistance to the Japanese imperial army that spread over Southeast Asia. In the Philippines, in particular, all the difficulties of waging war in the jungle against a ruthless enemy tested the physical and mental sanity of the natives as well as their American protectors. Professor Morningstar's book is a timely reminder that wars are indeed hell and that the shedding of American blood in the struggle against fascism has a long and wide history.

While Vietnam brings up images of the challenges of war in the jungle, the war in the Philippines remains distinctive given its mercilessness nature. The heat and diseases of various kinds (pellagra, beriberi, dengue and yellow fevers, dysentery, and malaria) were in some ways as destructive as the Japanese invaders¹. Morningstar intersperses his narrative of the fighting and maneuvers with stories of the ruthlessness of both nature and the various fighting forces against each other and the civilians caught in between. To readers perhaps more familiar with the larger iconic events of the Pacific War—such as the attack on Pearl Harbor, the battles of Midway and Iwo Jima, and its most recognizable hero, General Douglas MacArthur—this book will provide a necessary balance and reality check on the personal toll that wars take on their participants.

Making the best of an impossible situation, Filipinos geared their response to their perceived interests in a new and hostile environment. Some threw their lot with the Japanese invader; others joined the organized resistance. As always happens in such scenarios, vendettas and revenge soon led to assassinations, rapes, and other tragedies of war. Still, there were many instances of heroism and Morningstar does not shy away from reporting them. While some Filipinos became leaders of their own, others looked up to the more experienced American officers to lead them.

As we read through the narrative and the horrors committed, one is left wondering how an invader cannot see the deleterious effect its “methods” may have on

the population it is called on to rule. One wants to ask, “Could not the Japanese troops and their commanders see that their abusive practices, including purposeless torture and raw mutilations of living individuals, would turn the people into diehard enemies?” Much of the horrors perpetrated were enough to turn even the most ambivalent local population against the Japanese.

Still, the Japanese soldier was also admired for his commitment, his courage and fierce loyalty to his country. Morningstar quotes Carlos Romero (1898-1985), one-time Filipino officer and diplomat: “No one can dispute that the individual Japanese infantryman was among the best the world has ever seen. For tenacity, determination, bravery, and devotion to cause, he has few if any peers” (p. 111). This description would sound familiar to Vietnam War veterans fighting the Vietminh. There is not enough space in this review to dwell on the psychological dilemma faced by the Japanese soldier caught between his low position in Japan and his exaggerated status in the colonies, where he stood as representative of the emperor. Morningstar provides a moving account of the challenges faced by these soldiers who were not always clear on the purpose of their mission.

Morningstar’s account also provides short vignettes of the contribution of various communities in the fight against the Japanese army. The Chinese communities (pro-KMT and pro-communist) provided support of various kinds, as well as the Huk and Moro (Muslim) communities. Despite the risk of rape and sexual servitude, women were also instrumental in the resistance. The book includes handy maps about the location of the various guerilla units (p. 136) and the military districts (p. 143) which allow readers to follow more clearly the who, what, and where of the resistance movement.

Morningstar’s greater contribution is to have merged the larger narrative about the war in the Philippines (the generals and their political leaders) with the story of the soldiers and civilians on the ground. The author provides a vivid account of the various initiatives in many parts of the Philippines to organize resistance against the Japanese. He made extensive use of the published records in the country detailing the efforts of local leaders and American military who joined the fight after US forces had surrendered on the order of the High Command. Many of these military units pursued the fight against the Japanese out of sympathy for the Filipino community they had grown attached to or as a commitment to the fight against fascism.

It appears clear from Morningstar’s account that while a Japanese invasion was anticipated even before Pearl Harbor, the United States was much too involved in planning its participation and support in Europe to invest massively in the defense of the Philippines. As a result, the Japanese had a relatively easier hand in their initial invasion of the archipelago.

When General MacArthur learned that organized resistance was alive and fighting on, he stated movingly: “Let no man misunderstand the meaning of that message from the Philippines. Here was a people in one of the most tragic hours of human history, bereft of all reason for hope and without material support, endeavoring, despite the stern realities confronting them, to hold aloft the flaming torch of liberty” (pp. 83-84). Professor Morningstar can be commended for bringing to life the reality of a war theater perhaps lost to modern readers but bound to make them appreciate what their predecessors did to uphold the values that they all share.

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Notes

1. In one quote, Morningstar states the following: “the U.S. Army saw how tropical diseases could drop 10 percent of troops within three days of arriving in the Philippines and 33 percent within a week. It was not unusual to see 50 to 75 percent of unit personnel on sick reports” (p. 92). This quote appears to be referring to the army’s earlier experience in the Spanish-American War.