



LEARN

Araw ng Kagitingan: The untold story of resistance and bravery of the working people

Alladin S. Diega, 09 April 2022

For most Filipinos not aware of US objectives¹ in the Pacific Rim, its return to reclaim the Philippines from Japanese occupation through excessive bombing was an acceptable price to pay for what was thought as liberation. Some 100,000 Filipino civilians died in the retake, the business district of Manila destroyed, along with most of public utilities, factories and stores, including many of the most beautiful houses. In the Visayas, Cebu City was razed to the ground.

The country is already hosting Japanese² companies, immigrants, and investors, even before and after the US' formal colonization in 1898.³ At that time, Imperial Japan was expanding in East Asia beginning in its invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and attack to China in 1937. On the other hand, the capitalist US was trying to gain a foothold in Asia and penetrate China, while using the resource-rich Philippines as a launching pad. The last two were both struggling and transitioning out of feudalism.

The US entry subverted years of local resistance against Spain which culminated in the 1896 Philippine Revolution. While most of Philippines' elite quickly capitulated to the US,⁴ the toiling Filipinos—mainly the peasants and workers and many progressive individuals from the local elite, continued their resistance.

When the first workers union the Union Obrera Democratica (UOD) was established on February 2, 1902 with Isabelo Delos Reyes as head, it declared freedom from US colonization as a main agenda aside from workers' livelihood improvement. The call was also taken by Congreso Obrero de Filipinas, the first union federation founded in 1913 under the leadership of Crisanto Evangelista.⁵ The same was true for the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (old PKP), founded in 1930, with workers and peasants as main contingents.

As it happened, Japan finally attacked US' naval base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and its bases in the Philippines on December 8, 1941, and captured Manila on January 2, 1942. The invaders'

¹ It can be glimpsed from what the war accomplished: it mobilized the US economy out of the Great Depression, with 17 million new civilian jobs created, industrial productivity increased by 96%, and corporate profits taxes doubling. See: Alexander Field, *The Impact of the Second World War on US Productivity Growth*, the Economic History Review, 61, 3, (2008)

² Lydia Yu-Jose, *World War II and the Japanese in the Pre-war Philippines*, Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, 1996

³ Largely a crumbling colonial power, Spain sold the Philippines at US\$20 Million to the US under the Treaty of Paris

⁴ From 1898 to 1946; punctuated by the Philippine Commonwealth (1942-1945) and the Japanese occupation (1942-1945).

⁵ Teodoro A. Agoncillo, *The Revolt of the Masses*. University of the Philippines, 1956

leniency towards the obedient elites was in contrast to its ruthless treatment of communists, assisted by local informers.⁶ The first front of PKP leadership which included Crisanto Evangelista, Pedro Abad Santos, and Agapito del Rosario, was captured in January 24. The Japanese tried to convince them of their anti-US imperialism stance and that Philippine independence would be given. Refusing to collaborate, Evangelista and del Rosario were tortured and killed. Abad Santos also refused, but old and sick, was spared.⁷

Beginning with the harvest season in 1942, the PKP mobilized people to keep the rice harvest from enemy hands. Once ripened it was quickly harvested, threshed and hidden. It destroyed Japanese or collaborators' threshing machines, and transports. Warehouses containing rice seized by the invaders were raided and burned, with rice whisked to safety.

On March 29, 1942 the Hukbalahap was inaugurated, and a military committee was formed, with women and men from the PKP elected as officers. Starting in Central Luzon, it expanded to Tanay, Rizal. Later, it extended all the way to Laguna-Tayabas region, in the towns of Santa Maria, Paete, Longos, Nagcarlan, Cavinti and Mauban along the Sierra Madre Mountain range and eventually, in the lowlands of Santa Cruz up to San Pablo.

The Hukbalahap did not compete with other anti-Japanese groups. At the beginning of the war, it sent a mission to Bataan and met with Major Claude Thorpe, officer-in-charge appointed by Douglas MacArthur. At first Thorpe wanted the PKP-led guerrillas under his command, but the PKP insisted on independence. Thorpe eventually agreed and prepared to supply the local resistance with arms. Sadly, Thorpe and his team were captured and killed in late 1942.

Some USAFFE⁸-led guerrillas were eager to led direct action against the enemy, but were prohibited by MacArthur who was in Australia. MacArthur ordered them "to limit hostilities and contact with the enemy to the minimum necessary for safety" and "concentrate on developing intelligence net."⁹

Why the unexpected attitude? Under the War Plan Orange, designed for the Philippines in 1925, there is no plan to really defend the country as a whole, except to hold for six months around Manila Bay, particularly in Corregidor. According to former U.S. governor-general in the Philippines William Cameron Forbes in 1927, "I doubt very much if any real effort will be made

⁶ Members of the Makabayang Katipunan ng mga Pilipino, or Makapili, a group formed in December 8, 1944 to give military aid to the Imperial Japanese Army.

⁷ Teodoro Agoncillo, *The Fateful Years: Japan's Adventure in the Philippines*, Vol. I R.P. Garcia Publishing Co., Philippines, 1965

⁸ US Army Forces in the Far East, a military formation of the US Army active from 1941 to 1946

⁹ Leapfrogging or island-hopping strategy was employed in the pacific war, choosing areas with least resistance from enemy

to defend the Philippine islands as such. They are indefensible and from a military point of view not worth defending.¹⁰”

Despite the lukewarm attitude of colonial officials against the Japanese invaders, PKP-led labor and peasant unions voluntarily formed labor battalions to help organize military defences. Over 50,000 workers and peasants were organized and put under the command of the US Corps of Engineers. The defensive perimeter in Calumpit crossing point on the Pampanga River for instance, enabled to hold up Japanese forces while the USAFFE retreated to Bataan for the strategic position.¹¹

It should be noted that since the US occupation up to the commonwealth years of Manuel Quezon, efforts to get free from the new colonizer did not wane, either through mobilizations exemplified by workers and peasants, or political negotiations led by colonizer-appointed political leaders such as Quezon.¹² Some elements in the US congress were sympathetic to the Philippines but overall, the US attitude as a colonizer prevailed, and the occupation would last up to 40 years.

Had the US returned back Philippines’ independence early enough things would have been different. A fully independent Philippines would have still needed the help of US and its allies, and the country would still be occupied for three years to supply Japanese military’s need, but after Japanese defeat, the country would only revert back to its former status as a free nation. And without the flagrant destruction of Manila’s business district and Cebu’s infrastructures by US’ “liberation” forces, the Philippines would have not needed huge loans from the World Bank, originally known as International Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Rather than remaining as a limiting example of bravery of US and Filipino soldiers, the Araw ng Kagitingan should also serve as a *totem pole* for Filipino working people’s bravery and sacrifices, and their continuing struggle for better lives and more democratic society.

¹⁰ Renato Constantino and Letizia R. Constantino, *The Philippines: The Continuing Past*, Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1978, pp. 18-19

¹¹ William J. Pomeroy, *The Philippines: Colonialism, Collaboration, and Resistance!*, International Publishers, 1993

¹² Manuel L. Quezon, *The Good Fight*, D. Appleton Century Co., 1946