

IN MEMORIAM: HARRY J. BENDA

George McT. Kahin

Harry J. Benda died on October 26, 1971, just short of 52 years of age. His relatively brief career as a Southeast Asia specialist was enormously productive, and our understanding of the social and political history of Southeast Asia, and of Indonesia in particular, would today be much the poorer without him. With his death we have lost one of the preeminent scholars in the field.

I first came to know Harry Benda from a letter he wrote from New Zealand seeking a fellowship from Cornell's recently launched Southeast Asia Program. At that time our Program's fellowships were restricted to Americans and Southeast Asians. But his letter was superb, and in it his intellectual qualities came through with great force as he explained at length his reasons for wanting to become a specialist in modern Indonesian political history. That letter and his unusual background--seven years of residence in Indonesia (two as an internee of the Japanese), and a junior lectureship in political theory in New Zealand's Victoria University while completing his M.A. there--indicated a man of unusual promise. His clearly outstanding qualifications persuaded the Program that we should make an exception and offer him a fellowship, even though this meant establishing a new precedent which opened up our fellowships to residents of any country.

Certainly Harry Benda gave us no reason to regret that decision. He came to Cornell in 1952 and within three years completed his Ph.D. in Government, a record which I believe was not subsequently equalled. Those were the days when outside funds for overseas research were scarce, especially for non-Americans studying in the United States. Thus, it was primarily on the basis of Cornell University's library holdings that he wrote his dissertation on the role of Indonesian Islam during the Japanese occupation, an excellent study which later was published as *The Crescent and the Rising Sun*.

In that book and in his subsequent articles and monographs on Indonesian and Southeast Asian history he reappraised and analyzed with a fresh eye processes of history whose previous accounts had usually been strongly stamped by a heavily parochial, Western-centered point of view. He helped shake up some of the long settled, but shallow and rigid perceptions of Indonesian and modern Southeast Asian history, and did much to raise the standards of historical research on the area. In these fields he was one of the first of the revisionists, and his perceptions and trenchant criticisms of past work encouraged a new generation of scholars. These qualities marked his lectures as well as his writing, and in his speaking he brought to bear with particular effectiveness the wry and ironic sense of humor that was one of his special characteristics.

Through his writings he also made a major contribution to the teaching of Southeast Asian history. In addition to his sharply focused and deeply penetrating monographs was his coauthorship of *The History of Modern Southeast Asia: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Decolonization* (with John Bastin) and *The World of Southeast Asia: Selected Historical Writings* (with John A. Larkin). In editing Yale's Southeast Asia Studies monograph series he broadened considerably the possibility for other, particularly young, specialists on the area to publish significant research, and thereby made available a larger body of materials useful in teaching.

He also played an important role in stimulating research among scholars from the countries of Southeast Asia, helping several of them to pursue their studies and research at Yale, and also enlarging the opportunities for others to carry out research in Southeast Asia itself. The outstanding example of this effort was in Singapore, where the successful launching of its Institute of Southeast Asian Studies owed much to Harry Benda's efforts. He devoted enormous energy, time, and resourcefulness to helping get the Institute firmly established and then served for fifteen months as its first director. Without him I think it highly doubtful that the Institute would have developed the momentum necessary to sustain viability and growth. Moreover, along with his two successors, he did much to ensure that, once established, the Institute's research would be marked by breadth and objectivity.

Harry Benda's interest in Southeast Asia was not limited to its modern history. The fate of his parents at the hands of the Nazis in his native Czechoslovakia and his own experiences during the Japanese occupation in Indonesia must have stimulated his inherently humanitarian outlook. Whatever the case, he maintained a continuing concern with contemporary events in Southeast Asia and a keen sensitivity to the suffering which he perceived. Thus, he was deeply disturbed by the 1965 mass killings and subsequent jailings in Indonesia, and he acted to arouse the consciousness and consciences of other scholars with respect to that tragedy. And beginning as early as 1965 he was vocal in his sense of outrage at the American intervention in Vietnam. This led him to join a small group of Asian scholars supporting Eugene McCarthy in the 1968 elections and to write a policy paper on Vietnam for use by McCarthy's supporters.

Harry Benda's contribution to developing Southeast Asian studies was evidenced especially in the time and energy which he devoted over the course of many years to strengthening this field at Yale. He took a justifiable pride in his central role in establishing a strong graduate program there. The Yale administration's lack of recognition of the importance of this effort and its arbitrariness in 1970 when it withdrew its support from the University's program of Southeast Asia studies were understandably deeply dispiriting to him. I last spoke to him shortly after that decision, and his outlook was then heavily clouded by his disappointment at the University's abandonment of a program he had done so much to build and sustain.

Harry Benda has made Yale known throughout the world for the quality of the young scholars whom he trained. If that University's administration should belatedly appreciate the contribution which he made to its reputation in Southeast Asian studies, it is unlikely to find a scholar who can fill the void left by his death.