Managing Political Imperatives in War Time: Strategic Responses of Philips in Australia, 1939–1945

Wednesday 24 Sept. 2014 4:15-5:30pm

School of History Seminar Series

Speaker: Pierre van der Eng, Research School of Management, CBE, ANU

McDonald Room, Menzies Library, ANU

In 1926, the Dutch multi-national electronics enterprise Philips established a subsidiary company in Australia to sell imported Philips products. Philips Australia expanded quickly in the 1930s when it started to produce electric lamps, radio receivers, radio valves and other components that became crucial to Australia’s war effort after 1939. However, the company came under secret service surveillance in 1939 and faced the risk of government takeover as enemy property during 1939–1942. It was excluded from Australian government contracts for war-related communications equipment at a time when it had to cut back on civilian production. Why did this happen to one of the two companies that were crucial to the production of communications equipment to sustain Australia’s war effort? How did the company respond to these threats to its assets and operations? In essence, the firm developed an adaptive corporate strategy in order to respond to the political imperatives it faced; not just minimising political risk, but also positioning itself to take advantage of the opportunities that war-related production offered in the 1940s, followed by production for Australia’s fast-growing markets for consumer electronics and communications in the 1950s.

Pierre van der Eng is Associate Professor in international business at the ANU’s Research School of Management. He is an economist and historian by training and maintains a range of research interests. Much of his published research covers various aspects of the economic history, economy and business of Indonesia and Southeast Asia. A recent research project focused on foreign investment from continental Europe in Australia, which included a case study of the development of the Australian subsidiary of Dutch multinational enterprise Philips Electronics in the context of the rise and demise of Australia’s electronic and electrical goods industry during the 1920s–1990s.