

History of World War II: Singapore Threatened, the Japanese Advance Through British Malaya, 80 Years Ago

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*On 19 January 1942, the British prime minister **Winston Churchill** was shocked and disturbed to learn, for the first time, and after more than two years of Britain being at war, that absolutely no field defences had been constructed on the landward side of Singapore, in case of enemy attack. The news that reached Churchill seemed incredible, but it was true, nor should it have been news.*

The Churchill cabinet’s failure to sufficiently safeguard Singapore, a vitally important island and British colony in south-east Asia, was the latest calamity to afflict Britain’s underwhelming war effort. The British had been outperformed by German troops in Norway, in France, in Greece, and now they were facing further setbacks against Nazi Germany’s Axis partner, Imperial Japan.

The English hierarchy, and Churchill especially, had believed the Japanese would dare not engage in military operations against the Western powers. Such a scenario meant war with the United States, the world’s strongest country. Churchill, in fact, thought Japan would be mad to initiate a conflict against America, and one can understand his reasoning on this point.

Yet the Japanese, hemmed in by US expansionism in the Eastern hemisphere, and with their access to petroleum almost entirely severed by the Roosevelt administration’s provocative policies, was left with scant breathing space in the end. Japanese military personnel with a good knowledge of the world, primarily those in its navy leadership, knew perfectly well they

had little chance of winning an outright war with America; but a sense of fatalism and of being trapped drove them on.

By 1939 the city of Singapore had a population of nearly 1.4 million people, a surprisingly high number (1). Singapore was nicknamed “the Gibraltar of the East” and “the key to the Pacific”, and was situated at the southern tip of British Malaya (today consisting mostly of Malaysia), a peninsula over 400 miles long reaching from southern Thailand to Singapore; the latter of which is separated from the Malayan mainland only by the extremely narrow Strait of Johore.



Singapore in 1945 (Licensed under public domain)

Before the First World War, Singapore was nothing more than a commercial harbour, but during the interwar years it came to be recognised as a crucial area of operations. From the early 1920s, Singapore was regarded by London as the most visible symbol of its power in the Far East. (2)

Singapore was ideally placed at the strategic chokepoint, from the South China Sea into the Indian Ocean. Prior to 1940, the island was far enough away from the closest Japanese bases to offer it protection from land and air attack. Furthermore, Singapore had become a key Royal Navy dockyard, barracks and communications centre (3). Since the 1920s, London had poured more than £60 million into fortifying Singapore, a considerable sum at the time.

Britain’s wealth across the generations was accumulated by pursuing certain abhorrent

actions. The American historian Noam Chomsky said “when nations are out for themselves, that’s what you find. That’s why Britain became very rich. It started in the Elizabethan era with piracy. But then it turned to the most vicious forms of slavery in human history. First in the British Caribbean islands, then the American South. That’s why Britain pretty much supported the Confederacy. When they lost that, Egypt, then India. Then England turned to the largest narco-trafficking operation in human history, conquered more of India to try to monopolise the opium trade. So take a look at British wealth - robbery on the high seas; a hideous system of slavery, narco-trafficking. A very wealthy country”. (4)

After World War I, Britain’s elites had highlighted Japan as a potential threat to their empire. This feeling had strengthened with passing years, as Japan enlarged its dominion through military conquests, primarily in Manchuria and eastern China through the 1930s; which the Western powers viewed as encroachment into their own imperial designs in east Asia. The Japanese military command was well aware this rivalry was occurring quite close to Japan’s frontiers, and that they had no presence at all in the Western hemisphere.

The Nazi routing of France, from May to June 1940, ensured the French possessions in southeast Asia would officially come under the control of the pro-German and pro-Axis Vichy regime. This was of major significance to Japan, as their forces swiftly occupied northern French Indochina in September 1940, and then in July 1941, the southern portion of French Indochina. (5)

From Britain’s viewpoint, Tokyo’s acquisition of all of Indochina massively increased the threat to regions like Malaya and Singapore. The new Japanese air and naval bases, in Indochina, were now within a few hundred miles striking distance of the British colonies to the south. In November 1940 a secret British report, intercepted by the Germans, was forwarded to Tokyo from Berlin, which revealed that Britain would not be able to dispatch strong reinforcements to Singapore in the event of war. (6)

During the weeks after Churchill had assumed power on 10 May 1940, he decided the top priority was the defence of Britain, which was under the spectre of a German invasion. With the Fall of France and rapidly deteriorating situation of the war, Churchill was not in a position to send a large fleet to east Asia, should a crisis strike there (7). Ever since that fateful date of 26 July 1941, when Washington had imposed a punishing oil and trade embargo on Japan - which amounted to a virtual declaration of war in itself - a full blown conflict between the Japanese and Anglo-American states was inevitable.

Britain’s colonialists generally viewed the Japanese with contempt. Military historian Antony Beevor wrote, “A state of emergency was declared in Singapore on 1 December [1941], but the British were still woefully ill prepared. The colonial authorities feared that an overreaction might unsettle the native population. The appalling complacency of colonial society had produced a self-deception largely based on arrogance. A fatal underestimation of their attackers included the idea that all Japanese soldiers were very short-sighted, and inherently inferior to western troops”. (8)

In reality the typical Japanese infantryman was tough, resourceful, brave and sometimes capable of terrible brutality, as the Chinese among others could attest to. In the main, this was because the Japanese Army had been artificially indoctrinated with the extreme samurai traditions of the ancient warrior tribe. (9)

Conventional British thinking held that central Malaya, with its hundreds of miles of thick jungle and rubber plantations, would protect Singapore from attack by land. Unlike the British, Japan's soldiers proved to be masters of jungle warfare, adapting to the environment by camouflaging themselves, making excellent use of bicycles, and living off what the undergrowth had to offer.

That the Japanese had taken to the jungle like grouse to heather was a remarkable occurrence; their conquest of much of eastern China had not involved jungle fighting, and neither was Japan's mainland covered extensively with trees. (10)

Since late November 1941, the British in Hong Kong and Malaya had been expecting a Japanese invasion at any moment. The British presence in Hong Kong further north was, at this point, a century in existence, and of the territory's modern history Chomsky stated, "Hong Kong, of course, had a fair degree of independence, but we should bear in mind that that's recent. Hong Kong was stolen from China by British savagery, as part of their effort to destroy China in their huge narco-trafficking operations. The West may like to forget that, but I'm sure the Chinese don't". (11)

British Malaya was a mineral rich area, with its tin mines and sprawling rubber estates. These natural deposits were essential to a war economy, and coveted by a resource poor nation such as Japan. The British colonial administrator, Shenton Thomas, described Malaya as "the dollar arsenal of the Empire" (12). From their bases in French Indochina, during the early hours of 8 December 1941 Japan's units audaciously landed on the northern tip of Malaya, at the coastal city of Kota Bharu, and also at the Kra Isthmus in southern Thailand.

Having overall command of Japanese operations in Malaya was Lieutenant-General Tomoyuki Yamashita, the new commander of the Japanese 25th Army. He was personally known to the Axis dictators; in December 1940, the 55-year-old Yamashita had undertaken a clandestine military mission to Europe, where he visited Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini (13). Yamashita was one of the greatest commanders in the history of the Japanese Army. In Malaya, the British and their allies easily outnumbered Yamashita's troops; but the latter's fearless generalship would prove pivotal in the weeks ahead.

Military author Mark E. Stille, a retired US Navy commander, acknowledged that, "Both at an operational and tactical level, the Japanese were continually able to gain surprise. Their 'driving strategy' kept the British off balance and kept the initiative in Japanese hands. It worked primarily because the British thought it impossible even to attempt. Under the bold leadership of Yamashita, it was a formula for victory". (14)

The Japanese militarists estimated Malaya to hold almost as much importance as the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) (15). The Dutch East Indies was the world's 7th largest oil producing country in 1930, and by 1940 it had risen to become the planet's 5th biggest oil producer, behind America, the USSR, Venezuela and Persia (Iran).

Both the British and Japanese believed Malaya and Singapore as strategically inseparable. British troops would not be able to hold Singapore, should Malaya be overrun by Yamashita's divisions. As news reached Britain's commanders, of the amphibious Japanese landings at Kota Bharu in northern Malaya, Japan's bomber aircraft conducted their first raids over Singapore at 4:30 am on 8 December 1941. Singapore was lit up like a Christmas tree with its city lights on, an easy target for the Japanese pilots who enjoyed air superiority over Malaya.

On 10 December 1941, Tokyo's bombers dealt a grievous blow to the British Navy, when they destroyed two of its landmark battleships off the east coast of Malaya, the 'HMS Prince of Wales' and 'HMS Repulse'. The loss of these two vessels signalled the end of British sea power in the Far East (16). News of their sinking, which also resulted in 840 sailor deaths, was met with dismay in England.

The British position in Malaya became critical from the beginning of the enemy's arrival. With the Japanese having secured their bridgehead at Kota Bharu, 125 miles to the west in the northern Malayan town of Jitra occurred "one of the British Army's most unlikely and complete defeats during the entire war", Stille wrote (17). A single Japanese battalion, supported by a company of tanks, defeated an entire division of British-led Indian troops in prepared positions in just over a day, by 13 December 1941.

The next serious engagement took place on 30 December 1941 around the town of Kampar, in western Malaya, just over 140 miles south of Jitra. Though the British artillery repulsed several Japanese assaults and inflicted numerous fatalities, Japan's reinforcements compelled the British to begin withdrawing from Kampar on the night of 2 January 1942. (18)

Among the worst disasters of the Malayan campaign for Britain's forces (and their allies) occurred along the Slim River, around 40 miles south of Kampar. At 3:30 am on 7 January 1942, 30 Japanese tanks rolled forward with reckless abandon, and went on a 6 hour turkey shoot against the British-trained 11th Indian Division. The British and Indian troops were well armed with anti-tank weapons, artillery and mines, but they were poorly deployed and caught by surprise. By 9:30 am on 7 January, some 3,000 British and Indian soldiers were taken prisoner and hundreds killed. (19)

The Malayan capital city, Kuala Lumpur, situated about 50 miles south of the Slim River in central Malaya, lay ripe for the taking. Four days later, Kuala Lumpur fell unopposed to the advancing Japanese on the evening of 11 January 1942. It was still over a week before Churchill would discover that Singapore, located 200 miles to the south-east of Kuala Lumpur, had no field defences facing landward.

While the British colonialists thought little of the Japanese, this was not often the case with frontline troops. Major Walter Boller, a British officer in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC), said of the Japanese soldier almost 30 years after the war, "He hadn't the mentality I suppose to think for himself. He just obeyed orders, and he came at you with everything he had, even if it meant losing his life. He didn't care about life". (20)

Gilbert Collins, a gunner in the British 14th Army, insisted that "The Japanese was a good soldier. He was a good soldier. When he was told to do a job, he would stop there until he died". (21)

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Notes

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- 20 *The World At War: Complete TV Series* (Episode 14, Fremantle, 25 April 2005, Original Network: ITV, Original Release: 31 October 1973 - 8 May 1974)
- 21 *Ibid.*

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