
Book Review

Britain's Pacific war against the U.S.A.: the fall of Singapore

by Mary Burdman

Singapore, The Pregnable Fortress

by Peter Elphick

Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1995

441 pages, index and notes, hardbound, £20.00

The loss of Malaya and Singapore to Japan between Dec. 8, 1941 and Feb. 15, 1942, the greatest disaster in British military history, was the result of *deliberate* British policy. The evidence presented in this book, much of it only released 50 years after the events, provides strong backing for the contention, made by *EIR*'s Webster Tarpley in last week's issue, that the Pacific policy of wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill was to draw the United States into a long-term Pacific war, by deliberately handing the British Empire's assets in this vast region to Japan. Author Elphick himself by no means makes this contention explicitly, but he condemns Churchill as the one man, above all others, who can be blamed for the fall of Singapore. If the reader takes the evidence in this book in the context of overall British imperial policy, it would be hard to escape the conclusion that Singapore did not fall, as the myth has it, due to British blundering, but that Churchill was committed to sacrificing Singapore as a pawn in a vast Asian strategic game, as Tarpley describes.

In 1941, Malaya and Singapore were the Japanese Army's gateway to Indonesia, then under Dutch dominion, and, combined with the assault on the Philippines and other Pacific islands, to Australia. The strategic importance of this colony, which also produced half the world's rubber and one-third of its tin, should have meant it was well defended, but it was not. Instead, Winston Churchill, from the 1920s, played a double game. He was the biggest purveyor of the myth that Singapore Island was an "impregnable fortress," and at the same time, as Chancellor of the Exchequer and as First Lord of the Admiralty, ensured that the fortress was never fortified.

The loss of Singapore not only meant that the Japanese way south was open. It is officially estimated that some 130,000 troops of the British Empire were taken prisoner by the Japanese, the vast majority of them Indian and Australian, though author Elphick puts the figure at closer to 120,000. Many thousands lost their lives in Japanese slave-labor operations. This loss is extraordinary, especially considering that the Japanese suffered only 9,800 casualties themselves. At the same time, Australia, facing imminent invasion, in addition to the losses in Singapore, was forced by Churchill to deploy its soldiers to North Africa and Europe. India, which supplied a full *half* of the British Empire's troops, suffered a terrible famine under the British Raj during World War II.

Another indication of Churchill's perfidy, is that there was never a British Court of Inquiry into Singapore, although wartime inquiries were held into such lesser disasters as the loss of Crete. As prime minister, Churchill said to a Secret Session of the House of Commons on April 23, 1942, just weeks after the fall of Singapore, that such an inquiry "would not be good for our country, and that it would hamper the progress of the war." He claimed there would be an inquiry after the war. Yet, after he was ousted from power at the war's end, Churchill blamed the Labour Party for failing to hold an inquiry, though he himself never demanded one. Churchill was again prime minister from 1951-55, but did nothing, despite the fact that almost all the principal military leaders from Malaya were still alive.

The Japanese forces themselves were totally unprepared for the rapidity of the British collapse in Malaya. Reports sent by the Japanese commander Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita to Tokyo, which were translated by the Americans after the war, said that he was surprised by the lack of real opposition or defense works in Johore, on the southern tip of Malaya, and that he could not believe he would reach the causeway to Singapore Island without savage fighting. There was no savage fighting. General Yamashita's chief intelligence officer, Col. I. Sugita, wrote in 1966, that the Japanese had

expected their advance to be stopped long before they reached Singapore, and, had the British forces used strong defense works in Johore, the Japanese might never have reached Singapore.

Sugita also wrote that Japanese forces were so short of ammunition by Feb. 14, 1942, the day before Singapore capitulated, that some troops had none at all, and Yamashita himself visited the front line to apologize to the troops and tell them to use bayonets. Japanese Lieutenant General Fujikawa wrote in his book *F-Kikan*, that on Feb. 15, "the Japanese were facing an acute shortage of ammunition. . . . Yamashita was concerned with a dwindling supply of munitions and increasing casualties, and he could not afford to let the negotiations drag on much longer if he was to avert the crisis that his armies were facing. . . . If the British had come to know about our shortage of manpower and munitions, and if they had held out for a few more days, they could have defeated the Japanese forces."

But they did not hold out.

Singapore the vulnerable

At the conclusion of World War I, the British government officially determined that the only possible aggressor it would have to face in East Asia would be Japan—despite the existing Anglo-Japanese Treaty—and therefore that Britain would require a permanent naval base in the region, which was built at Singapore. The "defense" of Singapore was conceived as sending a fleet out from Britain. However, that defense was a chimera.

Winston Churchill played a special role in this period. As Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1928, he made an important alteration in the "ten-year rule," the defense "strategy" Britain had adopted in 1919, based on the assumption that it would not be engaged in a major war for the next ten years. Instead of reviewing this rule at fixed periods, Churchill decided that it should be changed, so that the ten-year period "began" anew every day—in other words, it should be prolonged indefinitely. This policy change was denounced as "disastrous" by Lord Trenchard on March 7, 1945. The purpose of this "infinite" ten years, was ostensibly to save funds, but, as Elphick states, it caused "rearmament to be dangerously postponed." This rule led to the "near-fatal twenty-month gap between the government's realization of international danger in March 1932 and the commencement of rearmament in November 1933."

In East Asia, this policy meant that the Singapore Naval Base and the Navy were far behind in preparedness—which Churchill must have known very well. Yet Churchill was Britain's biggest purveyor—to the United States, to Australia, to India, and to the world—of the myth of Singapore as an "impregnable fortress," and that Britain considered Singapore the second pillar and "eastern bastion of her global defense strategy."

Churchill was also the purveyor of the myth, that Japan did not pose a danger in East Asia, and persisted in this until December 1941, although Japan had been, actually, at war with China since 1931. From 1925 on, Churchill was making pronouncements that there was no need to base a British battle fleet equal to Japan's at Singapore. He was assisted by Anthony Eden—later Britain's prime minister during the British-French neocolonial Suez adventure—first as secretary for the dominions in 1939, and later as foreign secretary.

This book concludes that "Winston Churchill at best misjudged the Japanese situation. At worst he may have deliberately turned a blind eye to the East, prepared to risk the loss of the Far East possessions, sacrificing them for the duration of the war in his ardent desire to get America to come into it." Part of Churchill's strategy was to depend on the "deterrent" effect of the British Fleet—a policy, later used as the Cold War "Mutual and Assured Destruction" strategy of Henry Kissinger, to risk rather than avoid war. On Sept. 10, 1940, Churchill wrote to his chief of staff, Gen. Hastings Ismay: "The prime defense of Singapore is the Fleet. The protective effect of the Fleet is exercised to a large extent whether it is on the spot or not. . . . The danger of a rupture with Japan is no worse than it was. The probabilities of Japan undertaking an attack on Singapore . . . are remote."

But in reality, London stripped East Asia of defenses. By Dec. 10, 1941, when Japan sank the British battleship *Prince of Wales* off Malaya, the whole Pacific was laid bare to the Japanese Navy.

Undercutting Australia

Part of Churchill's policy was to render Australia unable to defend itself, although Australia had entered World War II immediately after Britain did. In November 1939, Anthony Eden, as secretary for the dominions, told the Australian government that Japan would not attack, and then that Britain was "willing and able" to send a battle fleet to Singapore. Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, began to pressure Australia to send troops to Europe, rather than keep them at home to defend their own nation. He insisted that, at most, all Australia had to fear were "tip and run raids."

Churchill was assisted in this by the Anglophile views of Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies, and his London High Commissioner Stanley Bruce. Churchill went so far as to tell the Australian supply minister, Richard Casey, that Britain would abandon the Mediterranean to save Australia—something London had no intention of doing. Churchill assured his prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, who was displeased with this deception, that Britain had always gotten away with such vague promises and no specific commitments before.

Then, on June 13, 1940, Secretary of State for Dominions Lord Caldecote sent Menzies a most secret message, stating that Singapore was no longer the second pillar of British

defense; its place was taken by the Middle East. Caldecote said that Britain intended to maintain its fleet in the Mediterranean. "It would be most unlikely that we could send adequate reinforcements to the Far East," and therefore Britain "would have to rely on the U.S.A. to safeguard our interests there."

Either Churchill was "blinded" on Japan, Elphick writes, "or his refusal to countenance further reinforcements for Singapore was part of a Machiavellian scheme to draw America into a war with Japan if it came." An undefended Malaya would lure the Japanese into attacking, and the United States would likely have joined the war, even without Pearl Harbor, after the Japanese assault on Thailand and Malaya. When he became prime minister in 1940, Churchill wrote in his first telegram to Roosevelt, "I am looking to you to keep that Japanese dog quiet in the Pacific, using Singapore in any way convenient." He sent another letter to Roosevelt in February 1941, admitting that British naval reserves could not stand up to the Japanese, but dismissing the possibility of a Japanese attack.

Churchill sealed the fate of Singapore in a "Most Secret" directive on April 28, 1941, in which he stated that "Japan is unlikely to enter the war unless the Germans make a successful invasion of Great Britain. . . . It is very unlikely, moreover, that Japan will enter the war . . . if the United States have come in. . . . There is no need at the present time to make any further dispositions for the defense of Malaya and Singapore, beyond those modest arrangements which are in progress. . . ."

Churchill held to this line as late as November 1941, weeks before the Japanese attack. His staff was dismayed. Maj. Gen. John Kennedy, director of military operations of the War Office in London, wrote: "We in the general staff were quite sure that the decisions he gave at this time were dangerously wrong." Chief of the Imperial General Staff General Dill regarded the Middle East as *less* vital than Singapore. In November 1941, according to the son of Field Marshal Archibald Wavell, who was Allied Supreme Commander Southeast Asia, there was a "severe disagreement in the War Cabinet . . . when General Dill wished to reinforce the Far East with aircraft at the expense of the Middle East, but the prime minister overruled it."

Churchill exacerbated the problem, by personally sending "Force Z"—two capital ships, the brand new *Prince of Wales* and renovated *Repulse*—to Singapore, instead of the promised battle fleet. He sent the ships without an aircraft carrier escort, over the strong objections of the Admiralty. The two ships arrived in Singapore on Dec. 1, 1941. On Dec. 10, both were sunk by Japanese airplanes. The result was, as Churchill dramatically wrote: "The full horror of the news sank into me. There were no British or American capital ships in the Indian Ocean or the Pacific except the American survivors of Pearl Harbor who were hastening back to Cali-

fornia. Over all this vast expanse of waters Japan was supreme and we were weak and naked."

No lack of intelligence

Churchill's decisions certainly cannot be blamed on lack of information about the real situation in Malaya and Singapore. There were sufficient warnings of when, where, and how the Japanese would attack.

There have been many myths created—after the war—as to why Singapore fell. One myth was that no British military planners thought that the Japanese could penetrate the Malaya peninsula jungles, and would only attack Singapore from the sea. However, pre-war military leaders knew that there would be no problem for an aggressor to attack Malaya by using the excellent network of roads down its west side. Intelligence gathered by the British and sent to the War Office as early as 1937 foresaw that Japan would attack both Thailand and Malaya, not Singapore island, directly.

The few successful intelligence operations were disbanded. Shanghai-born Defense Security Officer Col. Hayley Bell was dismissed in May 1939, because of his success in uncovering the extent of pre-war Japanese espionage and operations in Malaya, and predicting accurately where the Japanese would land. Both Malaya Colonial Governor Sir Shenton Thomas, and British Ambassador to Thailand Sir Josiah Crosby demanded Bell's removal.

Another case was that of Capt. John Becker, murdered in Singapore in August 1948. Becker had consistently stated that had British forces commander General Percival and others acted on intelligence available from before the war, Singapore need never have fallen. He noted the degree to which Thailand had become a "non-belligerent abettor of Japan" in 1941, and produced much evidence, including of massive Japanese shock troop concentrations in south Indo-China in August 1941, to indicate a near-term attack. His reports were destroyed.

When Malayan Civil Service Defense Secretary C.A. Vlieland attempted to inform London of the lack of defenses of Malaya in mid-1940, colonial officials blocked his reports. Vlieland later wrote: "I do not suppose Churchill's decision to sacrifice Malaya would have been shaken, for even the expressed views of the Chiefs of Staff do not seem to have had that effect." But if information had been sent, "at least it would have been impossible for anyone who read it to say he had not been told." That "anyone" was Churchill, who claimed in January 1942 that he did not know that Singapore Island had no coastal defenses!

Another disaster was the rapidity with which the British lost control of the air. A July 1941 inquiry on the loss of Crete, and many British, Australian, and New Zealand soldiers with it, concluded that the overwhelming superiority of the German Air Force was critical. Australian soldiers were promised by their government, that they would never again

have to fight without adequate air cover. The situation in Malaya led to a disastrous collapse of morale.

British aircraft were obsolete, despite the fact that already in March 1941, Malaya's Command General Staff had issued a booklet, "Japanese Army Memorandum," which listed the capabilities of Japanese fighter and torpedo-bomber aircraft, and acknowledged that the British equivalents were "vastly inferior in performance." In May 1941, a new Japanese Zero fighter plane was shot down in China, and examined by Allied forces. The information that this plane could fly much faster than any of the RAF planes in Malaya, was sent to the London Air Ministry, but to no effect. London refused to give Malaya any new aircraft.

The Empire's armies

The British Empire did not fight with British troops: India was its main source of soldiers. Despite the fact that India had been fighting for its independence from Britain for decades, the Indian Army was expanded rapidly after 1939 to defend the Empire, becoming the largest non-conscript army the world has seen. A picture published in 1991, on the 50th anniversary of the fall of Hongkong, showed a former British officer standing in front of the wall where the names of the defending soldiers were inscribed. There was one name, written over and over: "Singh." The "British" troops who fell in Hongkong were Sikhs.

The Malaya campaign demonstrated the worst aspects of

British imperial military operations. Almost 50% of the troops who fought for the British were Indian; another 20% were Australian. This situation contributed to the collapse. In addition, during wartime, training, equipment, and leadership of these troops were disastrously neglected. Many of the Indian soldiers who arrived in Malaya had never even *seen* a tank before they were attacked by Japanese tanks. (The British forces did not have a single tank in Malaya.) Untrained Indian reinforcement troops, all very young men, were shipped out to the final battles against the victorious Japanese onslaught. During the campaign, more experienced troops were deprived of their officers (who were mostly British, although some Indian officers were being commissioned after the 1920s), who were used to form new battalions for other war theaters. The older battalions were put in the hands of raw officers, most of whom could not even speak Urdu, the language of the Indian Army. Many, of course, were also racists. These bad officers were just thrown into battle in Malaya, with disastrous results.

So bad were conditions that official British documents, released in December 1993, revealed that there was concern "at the highest level" about the "loyalty" of Indian officers and soldiers in East Asia, the Middle East, and in Europe, to the British Raj. The Indian Independence League and Indian National Army both operated in Malaya, with Japanese backing.

Australian troops did not fare much better. As Australia's

Churchill's model: Scipio Africanus

Winston Churchill's incompetent military strategy can best be understood by contrasting his views with those of Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

The opening of the war found MacArthur the military adviser to the colonial government of the Philippines, where he was attempting to create a military establishment which would defend the Philippine nation once it achieved its promised independence. Upon escaping from Corregidor, MacArthur did not declare "I shall return" with the intent of returning as a colonial master, but to liberate a nation that was to become a free republic. Colonies were to become sovereign nations and imperial Japan was to be reformed, its industrial capacity restored, for the economic development of the entire region.

By contrast, Churchill saw himself as the prime minister to His Majesty the King, sovereign of an empire that enslaved one-fourth of this planet. The policies of this

imperial occupation can be compared with those of the Nazi occupation in almost all respects. Churchill's models drew on the imperial traditions of Rome and Venice. One such model was Scipio Africanus, the Roman proconsul who took command of the Roman Empire following the catastrophic defeat at Cannae by the army of the great Carthaginian leader Hannibal. While Rome debated whether to mobilize another army to challenge Hannibal in the field, Scipio chose an opposite course of action—or inaction. Seeing Hannibal as another imperialist general from a rival empire, he allowed the Carthaginian to ravage most of the Italian peninsula, until Hannibal was unable to support his army. In the meantime, Scipio simply renegotiated the terms of subjugation with the people who had been ravaged by the army of Hannibal or simply were in no position to challenge the power of an even weaker Rome.

Thus Churchill saw Japan, as Japan saw itself, as another imperial power, whose occupation held in safe-keeping, so to speak, the British king's imperial possessions, until a more appropriate time would come for their reoccupation.—*Dean Andromidas*

Imperial Force Chief of Staff in Malaya, Col. J.H. Thyer, wrote of the last Australian reinforcements to arrive in Singapore: "Some had sailed within a fortnight of their enlistment. A large proportion had not qualified at a small arms course. . . . Some had never seen a Bren gun and none had handled a sub-machine gun or an anti-tank rifle. Worse still, was that some had never handled a rifle." Yet, in 1993, when files on the mass "desertions" of Australian troops in the last days of the Singapore debacle were first released, the British press was full of commentaries on the unsuitability of the "Austrian race" as soldiers.

Of course, London had little heed for the welfare of British soldiers either. While the British had not found it possible to send in a new division in enough time to have made any difference, the ill-fated 18th Division, 20,000 men, was sent to Singapore, to arrive 10 days before capitulation. The next step was the Japanese slave-labor camps.

The British also refused to raise any forces from one group in Malaya who would have fought the Japanese: the Chinese. China was already fighting Japan for its life, and the Chinese—the largest ethnic group in all Malaya—had most to suffer at Japanese conquerors' hands. But, for colonial political purposes, the British refused to arm them. Only a few units were formed, and then only at the bitter end.

The campaign

From the Japanese invasion on Dec. 8, the British campaign in Malaya was one continuous, 60-day retreat. Rumors, bad or absent commanders, leaked secret orders, lack of equipment, wrong information, panic, and headlong flight, repeatedly determined events. So many disasters could scarcely be accidental.

The British had a plan for a preemptive move into Thailand, before the Japanese struck. This plan was aborted, in part due to the intervention on Dec. 7 of British Ambassador to Bangkok Sir Josiah Crosby, a homosexual, who insisted that Thai Prime Minister Field Marshal Luang Pibul, actually close to the Japanese, was "loyal" to Britain. Crosby had the backing of the Foreign and Colonial offices. In fact, the British also failed to warn Washington, although the Japanese assault on Malaya and Thailand preceded that on Pearl Harbor by over an hour. (All the Japanese assaults in the Pacific were within hours of each other. Pearl Harbor lies on the other side of the international date line.)

Two days later, Churchill's Force Z was sunk. The ships had no air support at all, because the British had already lost the airfields in northern Malaya—with panicked personnel fleeing rumors of a Japanese attack. Strange events, including unsubstantiated reports of a Japanese landing on the Malayan coast, left Force Z exposed to Japanese airplanes.

The repeated disasters led to a complete collapse of morale among the troops. Troops were left behind as their lines of retreat were often destroyed by other British forces; many units fled so fast, that they failed to implement any denial

policy. The Japanese dubbed the vast quantities of supplies the fleeing British left them, "Churchill supplies," which included such items as newly printed military maps of Singapore Island! Airfields, railroads, and roads, all were left practically intact.

In Singapore itself, chaos reigned. There were no shelters against air attack; civilians, especially women and children, were not evacuated by the government. At the orders of the British commanders, both Commander-in-Chief Brooke-Popham and General Percival, no defenses were built on the north side of the island facing Johore until the very last moment, leaving the already demoralized troops to fight unprotected.

The siege of Singapore, Churchill's "citadel," lasted one week. Churchill himself wanted to prolong it, but at an enormous cost to human life. After everything London had done to create disaster in Malaya, on Feb. 10, as the last retreat on Singapore Island was beginning, Churchill sent an order to General Wavell: "There must at this stage be no thought of saving the troops or sparing the population. [There were 1 million civilians in Singapore—ed.] The battle must be fought to the bitter end at all costs. . . . Commanders and senior officers should die with their troops. The honor of the British Empire and of the British Army is at stake."

But the Australian and Indian forces were not so ready to die for the Empire. One reason for the rapid collapse of Singapore, was what the British commanders chose to call "desertion" by these troops. Allied Commander General Wavell stated in his report on June 1, 1942: "For the fall of Singapore itself, the Australians are held responsible." Senior British naval officer Rear Admiral Spooner wrote on Feb. 10, days before the surrender, that "the present state of affairs was started by the AIF, who just turned tail became a rabble and let the Japs walk in unopposed." An entire regiment of the Indian Army also "disappeared," defecting to the Indian National Army. British troops also fled. Elphick writes: "Excepting the special circumstances of 1917, when Czarist forces deserted to the Bolshevik cause, the Singapore experience is probably the highest incidence of desertion from any army, anywhere, at any time." How did it happen? He records one incident: An Indian Army British major reported meeting Australian soldiers on the streets of Singapore, and asked them why they were not with their units. Their response was, that they had not come to fight without air cover, and were leaving. The officer told them, that that is what Indian and British troops had been doing for two months. The Australians' response was "more fool them."

The conflict with the British Empire is not over. In 1993, when the files on the "desertions" were finally released, the British press scandal-mongered for days about Australian "cowardice." But, of course, it was the leadership of U.S. Gen. Douglas MacArthur and his patriotic supporters in Australia, who drove the Japanese back from the Pacific by 1945.