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Author(s)	Paterson, Rob
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上智大学
Sophia University

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The Fall of Fortress Singapore: Churchill's Role and the Conflicting Interpretations

要塞シンガポールの没落：チャーチルの役割と矛盾する解釈

Rab Paterson

Abstract

This short paper is an examination of British and Japanese domestic politics, and the international chain of events, in the years preceding the outbreak of hostilities between Japan and the U.K. until the fall of Singapore in February 1942. After examining these events, and the actions and motives of the main parties involved, this paper attempts to determine the most likely explanation for the relatively rapid fall of Singapore to the Japanese Army in World War II. Particular attention is paid to the role of Prime Minister Winston Churchill in these events as his role has been relatively underresearched and is therefore not so well known, especially to British citizens. In conclusion this paper shows that Churchill and his military/strategic decisions had a huge impact on weakening Singapore, and that this was the single biggest factor in its quick fall in 1942.

要約

この論文は、日本と大英帝国間の戦闘の発生以前から、1942年2月にシンガポールが滅びるまでの、大英帝国と日本の国内政治と、国際的な事象の連鎖の考察。本論文は、それらの事象と、その行為、手段、そして関連する主要政党の動機を考察し、第2次世界大戦での日本軍に、比較的速いシンガポールの崩壊の、最も見込みのある説明を行う。特に注意を払うのは、ウィンストン・チャーチル総理大臣の任務で、それらの出来事の彼の任務については、比較的研究されていない為、特に大英帝国市民には、それほど知られていない。結論として、本論文はチャーチルと彼の軍の、戦略的な決定が、シンガポールを弱めることに巨大な影響を及ぼしたことを示します。これは1942年のその速い崩壊における一つの最大の要因であった。

1: The Fall of Singapore

Disaster

‘The loss of Malaya and the Singapore Naval Base was a disaster of the first magnitude. Never before in the course of British history had such a large force capitulated, and the fall of Singapore came as a terrible shock to the British Commonwealth and to all who had the cause of the Allies

at heart. The man in the street had been led to believe that Singapore was an impregnable fortress upon which the safety of Australia, New Zealand and India depended. This belief had been rudely shattered’.

Major-General S. Woodburn Kirby, British Army,
 Official Historian of the War Against Japan,
The War Against Japan, Volume 1: The Loss of Singapore

The fall of Singapore was a World War II military and public relations disaster for the British in the eyes of the world at the time. Morale in Britain and throughout the Empire was severely affected by Singapore's rapid capture by the Japanese as the loss of Singapore Naval Base meant that Britain no longer possessed any major naval bases in South East Asia and bases in Australia and India were now seriously threatened. Singapore had been seen as the cornerstone of the defence of the British Commonwealth in Asia and Australasia and after its fall Australia was especially threatened because they had already sent a significant proportion of their military forces to Europe and the Middle East to aid Britain in the war against Germany.

In November 1939 both Australia and New Zealand were told that Britain would never allow Singapore to fall nor permit a serious attack on either country and that, if it came to a choice, the Mediterranean would take second place to their security.¹

Singapore fell so rapidly that Australia and New Zealand were naturally at risk and they wanted guarantees of aid that Britain was not in a position to give due to British commitments elsewhere. This prompted many Australians and New Zealanders to accuse Britain of betrayal.²

Many theories have been put forward to account for the loss of the allegedly impregnable fortress of Singapore in such a relatively short period of time. The main theories will be examined in turn in this paper for validity, and to see how they contribute, if at all, to understanding Singapore's fall. The sequence of events in the period leading up to the outbreak of hostilities between Great Britain and Japan on the 8th December 1941, and the Malayan campaign and subsequent surrender of Singapore to the Japanese forces on 15th February 1942 will also be closely examined.

The four most commonly held views are as follows:

1) *Japanese Superiority in Strategy and Strength*. This theory proposes that Japan had been planning and preparing an attack on Malaya and Singapore for some time prior to the outbreak of hostilities. It also argues that together with larger forces they had devised a strategy to take advantage of British unawareness and lack

1 Kirby, S. Woodburn, *The War Against Japan, Volume 1: The Loss of Singapore* (1957), p.472.

2 See Day, David, *The Great Betrayal* (1988).

of preparedness and readiness to achieve the successful capture of Malaya and Singapore.

2) *Incompetent Local Leadership*. This commonly held hypothesis holds the incompetence of the local leadership ultimately responsible for the rapid fall of Singapore to the Japanese. This was as a result of bad planning locally, combined with strategic and tactical mistakes in the subsequent military campaign.

3) *Bad Strategic Planning by the British Government*. This viewpoint suggests that the British government of the time misread the overall situation in Asia, and also Japanese intentions in South East Asia prior to the outbreak of hostilities. Furthermore, after war broke out they gave the Asian theatre a low priority compared to Europe and the Middle East. This in turn led to strategically inappropriate defence policies being pursued by the British government, which were ultimately a major factor in Singapore's relatively easy capture by the Japanese forces.

4) *Churchill The Machiavellian*. This explanation for the fall of Singapore suggests that the British Prime Minister, Winston S. Churchill, deliberately sacrificed Malaya, Singapore, and British influence in South East Asia to draw the US into the war in the Pacific and therefore the war in Europe. This theory seems not so well known in the UK given that Churchill was relatively recently voted 'Greatest PM of the 20th Century' and 'Greatest Ever Briton' in two online polls by the BBC.³

The theory that superior strategy and strength on the part of the Japanese was ultimately responsible for the quick capture of Singapore is favoured by patriotic Japanese to show their military in a good light. They also claim that the Japanese armed forces were better trained and equipped than the British forces. During the war this viewpoint boosted Japanese morale. After the war it restored some measure of prestige because national pride and morale in Japan had been severely damaged by the Emperor's decision to surrender in 1945.

The British government of the time and after has adopted and promoted the theory that incompetent local leadership was to blame for the Singapore debacle. This undoubtedly suited them as it provided ready scapegoats and largely exempted the government and especially the London based leadership of the time from responsibility.

The theory that the British government was to blame has traditionally not received much attention in comparison with the other theories although this has started to be addressed by revisionist historians⁴ in the last ten years, most notably by Dr. Ong Chit Chung, and more recently by Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn who give an especially good background to the historiography.⁵

3 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/575219.stm> (Accessed 28.11.07); <<http://web.archive.org/web/20060514084331/www.bbc.co.uk/history/programmes/greatbritons.shtml>> (Accessed 21.03.07).

4 Here the term is used in the correct, nonpejorative sense and not in the way favoured by contemporary politicians who use this term to try to prevent examinations of their nation's past that may show unpleasant details of historical figures or actions.

5 Hack, Karl, and Kevin Blackburn, *Did Singapore Have to Fall? Churchill and the Impregnable Fortress*" (2004), Chapter 1, Introduction; and Ong Chit Chung, *Operation Matador: Britain's War Plans against the Japanese 1918-1941* (1997).

Churchill's Machiavellian behaviour in sacrificing Singapore is a hypothesis favoured by some so-called 'conspiracy theory' minded historians. This hypothesis has found favour with those who also believe that both the British and/or US leadership had advance knowledge of the impending attack on Pearl Harbour. It suggests that nothing was done to prevent the Pearl Harbour attack in order to drag the US into the war (the British conspiracy) or to give the US the necessary provocation to enter the war voluntarily (the U.S. conspiracy). By calling those who propose this theory 'conspiracy theorists' and their ideas 'conspiracy theories' the validity of these ideas is called into question without questions the facts behind the theories. This dissertation will attempt to address this by giving all these theories equal attention.

In examining these theories, particular attention will be paid to the background of events relating to the situation in Asia at that time and to the decisions taken by the British government that affected Singapore in the period prior to the outbreak of hostilities up to its eventual fall. The course of the conflict in Malaya will also be scrutinised. This will ensure an unbiased decision is reached when comparing the various theories for validity to try and answer the question of what ultimately caused the rapid fall of Fortress Singapore.

2: Japanese Superiority in Strategy and Strength?

*The Doro Nawa*⁶ Unit

'In the second paragraph of *The Hinge of Fate* Mr. Churchill states that "the onslaught of Japan...[which] had been long prepared...fell upon the British and American fronts—if such they could be called—with cruel savagery". Was that really the case?'

Colonel Masanobu Tsuji, Japanese Army,
Chief of Operations and Planning, Malayan Campaign,
*Singapore 1941-1942: The Japanese Version of the Malayan Campaign
of World War II*

Some historians hold the idea that the Japanese had undertaken large scale planning and training far in advance of the actual conflict. They argue that this explains the initial successes of the Japanese military in the war throughout Asia. Masanobu Tsuji, formerly a Colonel in the Japanese Army, refutes this theory. He argues that when the Japanese had been involved in military confrontations with Russia prior to the war in China and Asia, they had engaged in lengthy planning and preparations. This level of planning was not conducted for the coming conflicts with Britain and the US.

6 The term *doro nawa* is a Japanese phrase meaning hastily done or done at the last minute.

Preparations for war against Russia had been continued for ten years in accordance with a full-scale military plan, and there is all the difference in the world between those long-drawn-out preparations and the ones undertaken prior to the Malayan campaign and operations elsewhere in the Pacific.⁷

One of the reasons for this lack of planning was the fact that the decision to go to war in South East Asia was only taken in 1941. In order to see why this was the case, and thereby support this assertion, the international events of the preceding years and Japan's situation must be examined in detail.

Japan is a country with few natural resources and a relatively large population. Consequently since the 1920s some factions in the Japanese government and military had been looking for ways to expand into territory that possessed the natural resources that Japan needed, especially oil. Japan at this time no longer thought any European powers to be trustworthy allies. The Japanese therefore promoted the concept of 'The Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere' in the early 1930s. The theory behind it was of an Asia free from European domination with Japan at its head. This became a priority of Japanese foreign policy.

A large-scale invasion of China was Japan's most important first step in establishing the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. On the night of September 1931, Japanese Kanto army leaders created an incident, known as the Mukden Incident....Acting without direct approval of military authorities in Tokyo, and certainly counter to the wishes of civilian leadership of Japan, the instigators directed the Kanto forces...The independent action of the Kanto army brought down the civilian government and started a military dominance in Japan.⁸

As a result, Japan started moving more troops and settlers into Manchuria. The League of Nations made passive moves to control Japan, and sent in an investigating team but only issued a report in February 1933, one and a half years after the initial Japanese invasion. This report criticised the Japanese and they resigned from the League in protest.

In July 1937, the Japanese Kanto Army in China staged an incident, which became known as the 'Marco Polo Bridge Incident'. Claiming that the Chinese military had fired upon them, the Japanese started to move more units into northern China and escalate the scale of the fighting. Japan now took a much more vigorous role in promoting Japanese interests in China. Clashes with the Chinese resulted in wholesale slaughter in some areas, most infamously in Nanking.⁹

7 Tsuji, Masanobu, *Singapore 1941-1942: The Japanese Version of the Malayan Campaign of World War II* (1988), p.13.

8 Zhao, Suisheng, *Power Competition in East Asia: From the Old Chinese World Order to Post-Cold War Regional Multipolarity* (1998), p.70.

9 See Chang, Iris, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (1998), and Tanaka, Masaaki, *What Really Happened in Nanking: The Refutation of a Common Myth* (2000), for two conflicting views of the events at Nanking.

With the scale of these Japanese atrocities becoming known, Japan by the late 1930s was under diplomatic pressure from the British, Americans, and various other European powers to pull out of Manchuria. The Japanese military presence there was not popular with the western powers. The Japanese were reluctant to pull out because many Japanese settlers were there and it would be seen as a loss of face. Settling Manchuria with Japanese immigrants was part of their strategy to annex the area for its mineral resources. This would secure these mineral resources and land for Japan. When Japan refused to pull out of Manchuria, the Western powers continued to try and use diplomacy to stop Japan.

In 1938 Japan announced their program for the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere. This program contained specific plans for China/Manchuria only, because it did not want unnecessarily to alarm the European powers. Furthermore, Japan had no definite plans for military expansion into South East Asia at that time. When war broke out in Europe in September 1939 the colonial powers in Asia had their attention focussed on Europe. This distraction allowed Japan to take advantage and spread its influence throughout Asia. Therefore Japan met with Germany and Italy to hold negotiations to divide up the world into areas of influence.

For purposes of negotiations, however, Japan was to indicate that her interests were confined to the region from Burma eastward, including the Netherlands Indies and north of New Caledonia.¹⁰

However, this did not mean that Japan hoped to either take over these areas or confine itself to these areas only. These areas were only mentioned to keep the other 'Axis' powers from intruding on what Japan saw as its sphere of influence. If Japan grew strong enough and decided it wanted a greater sphere of influence, the Japanese could renegotiate with Germany and Italy later. In the meantime, Japan claimed a smaller area in which it would be the dominant power to avoid alarming its Axis allies.

To aid its military forces in China, Japan attempted to cut off the supply route to China from Burma. This it succeeded in doing for a short time via diplomatic pressure on the British who controlled Burma. Troops were also moved into Indochina to stop supplies arriving in China by that route. The European powers were alarmed at this expansion of Japanese power but economic pressure was all that could be exerted at that time. This was because the European powers were more concerned with the war in Europe and the Middle East. They could not use military force to coerce Japan, as their troops were committed elsewhere. The isolationist mood prevalent in the US would not have allowed any military action on their part without provocation. To exert some pressure on Japan, the US, in retaliation for Japan's actions in Asia, started economic sanctions. These sanctions increased and the US

10 Elsbree, William H., *Japan's Role In Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements 1940 to 1945* (1970), p.16.

eventually revoked the commercial treaty that allowed the Japanese to import oil from the Dutch East Indies and the US in July 1941. Cutting off Japan's oil supplies was a serious matter for the Japanese military. They had anticipated this action and in early 1941, the Japanese Army's General Staff Headquarters had asked for a report from the War Office concerning the reserves of natural resources that Japan possessed.

The report stated that Japan had insufficient oil to bring the war in China to a successful (for the Japanese) conclusion. Attacking the Russians would lead to a similar outcome. In both instances their oil reserves would run out before they could secure victory on the battlefield. However, if the Japanese forces were used against the European colonies in South East Asia, specifically the Dutch East Indies, then the Japanese forces could use the oil and natural resources there if they captured those vital areas. This left the Japanese with four choices: (1) they could pull out of Manchuria, which would have been politically unacceptable to the Japanese ultranationalists, who were a major power in Japan at this time. (2) They could maintain their forces in China and run out of oil in a few months due to the embargo. They would then have to give up their gains in Manchuria and also have used up their precious oil reserves for nothing. (3) Another option was to attack Russia in addition to keeping their forces in Manchuria. This would have led to a worse situation for the Japanese than if they maintained their position in China. They would most likely have to pay reparations to the Russians afterwards, in addition to losing their gains in Manchuria and using up their oil supplies. (4) Their only other option was to seize the oil-rich Dutch East Indies. This would inevitably bring Japan into conflict with the US and the British.

To forestall any counterattacks from the US and the British, preemptive strikes had to be undertaken against the naval bases at Pearl Harbour and Singapore respectively. This would have given the Japanese some breathing space to consolidate their gains in South East Asia. It was unlikely that the Dutch or the French would have been able to put up any great resistance as a result of their difficulties with Germany in Europe at this time. The two major obstacles to this were the actual bases at Singapore and Pearl Harbour. They had to be dealt with. However, if Singapore was successfully neutralised and captured, then Burma would also have to be taken to prevent the British attempting to retake Singapore from bases throughout Burma. Taking Burma would also cut off the supply route to China. If Pearl Harbour was attacked and effectively neutralised, then the US bases in the Philippines would also have to be dealt with. The Japanese were faced with a 'Domino Theory' in reverse. Every attack and conquest led to further attacks on new targets being necessary in order to keep their initial gains.

These actions would ordinarily have required a lot of preparation to ensure their success. Prior to the outbreak of World War II in Europe, it would have been unthinkable for Japan to go to war against Britain or the US, even with proper planning. Under the terms of the Naval Limitation Treaty signed at the Washington

Conference in 1922, Japan was only permitted to possess a fraction of the major surface warships that Britain and the US were allowed. The treaty established the maximum capital ship tonnage at the ratio of 5, 5, 3, 1.75, and 1.75, respectively for Great Britain, the United States, Japan, France, and Italy.¹¹

However, with Britain's fleet in a life or death struggle with that of Germany, and the US unlikely to go to war unless provoked, plans were authorised. The decision to advance into South East Asia was only taken in 1941 and therefore the planning only started soon afterwards. This does not show the same level of planning that the Japanese had previously used for impending major conflicts. This suggests that the decision to go to war against Britain and the US was not taken far in advance, as part of some master plan.

Tsuji states that until 1 January 1941, the Japanese Army had no experience of, or plans for, fighting in tropical areas of Asia. He was one of the first officers on the staff of a unit formed in 1941 to plan for operations in tropical Asia and therefore had knowledge of these matters. According to Tsuji, this unit was not held in high regard by senior officers in the military, and did not have much in the way of resources to accomplish its tasks.

It was the duty of the unit to report on all these matters to General Headquarters in Tokyo. Furthermore the scope of research extended over the whole of the Pacific war regions as well as Malaya, the Philippine Islands, Indonesia, and Burma. Funds apportioned to the unit for research totalled barely 20,000 yen.

Even among the commissioned officers chosen for the staff there was not one who had any real experience of the tropics. What is more, in the eyes of those at General Headquarters nearly all the members of the staff were persons to be ignored, or held in contempt, or kept at a respectful distance.¹²

This is hardly the epitome of superior planning, especially when this planning was only undertaken just under a year before war would break out and the planning was not even specific to Malaya and Singapore.

The planning that was more specifically related to Malaya and Singapore was only started a few months before the Japanese invasion of Malaya.

I state beyond doubt and without fear of contradiction that not until September 1941 did we begin active preparations for military operations to the south. This is proof that the Pacific hostilities were wholly and hastily prepared on the '*Doro Nawa*' model.¹³

11 Zhao, p.66.

12 Tsuji, p.4.

13 Tsuji, p.24.

The '*Doro Nawa*' unit was the unofficial name given to Masanobu's unit, which was tasked with the planning of Japanese activities in Pacific Asia. It was not given much manpower, money or time to carry out these tasks.

The '*Doro Nawa*' model for research, with less than thirty people in its household, in a period not exceeding six months, planned the military operations of the whole Army which was to move south, and also the administration of the territories to be occupied, and I declare with humility that it provided the greatest and in fact only instruction book on tropical warfare available to the Japanese armies. I think it was scandalous that the Army should have been so unprepared....Preparations for war against Russia had been continued for ten years in accordance with a full-scale military plan, and there is all the difference in the world between those long-drawn-out preparations and the ones undertaken prior to the Malayan campaign and operations elsewhere in the Pacific.¹⁴

These comments would seem to dispel the myth of massive Japanese planning and preparation for war in Asia with the exception of the Manchuria area and China, where military activities and planning had been taking place for years.

The idea that the Japanese outnumbered the British and Commonwealth forces has also been put forward to account for the Japanese success. Many historians have refuted this, and British, Australian, Commonwealth and Japanese records seem to bear this out.¹⁵ However, there are some areas where the Japanese military planning was superior to that of the British. One of these areas was in inter-service co-operation in the Malayan campaign.

Inter-service rivalry is always going to exist in any military force. This holds true for the Japanese forces in the 1930s and 1940s. However, the three branches of the Japanese armed forces were successfully integrated and worked together for the common good in the Malayan campaign. The major difference between the Japanese and British forces of the time was the fact that the Japanese were aware that they were in dire straits if their strategy was not successful. Failure to capture their objectives in South East Asia would have terrible repercussions for Japan. This scenario forced the Army, Navy and Air Force of Japan to put aside their differences and work together. Contrast this with the British situation. They lost two of their capital ships, *HMS Prince of Wales* and *HMS Repulse*, through lack of air support, as the Royal Navy and RAF were not coordinated properly.¹⁶ When the performances of the Japanese armed forces and their British counterparts are compared, the Japanese Army, Navy, and Air Force operated together more efficiently and with a greater degree of collaboration than their British counterparts, in the fighting in Malaya and

¹⁴ Tsuji, p.13.

¹⁵ See Elphick, Peter, *Singapore: The Pregnable Fortress: A Study in Deception, Discord, and Desertion* (1995), Chpt. 9.

¹⁶ See Middlebrook, Martin, and Patrick Mahoney, *Battleship: The Loss of the Prince of Wales and the Repulse* (1979), for full details.

Singapore.

Tsuji claims that this cooperation was only present in the Malayan campaign and not generally present elsewhere. It must be born in mind, however, that he was an officer in the Japanese Army in the Malayan campaign, and therefore not totally impartial in his estimation of how well the three services worked together in that campaign.

Such unparalleled co-operation between Army, Navy and Air Force authorities will probably not be found elsewhere than in the Army and Navy Operations Agreement for the campaign in Malaya.¹⁷

Tsuji's lack of impartiality notwithstanding, the Japanese did a much better job of coordinating the three armed services than did the British. The British forces were operating in an environment of mistrust. Each branch of the military was wary of the others and sought to downplay the effectiveness of their rivals as they were all fighting for a larger share of the defence budget for military expenditure, and this adversely affected interservice cooperation. This atmosphere of mistrust was largely created by the British government, which was playing the three services off against each other in the matter of securing funding.¹⁸

Another area where the Japanese had an advantage over the Commonwealth forces was in the level of combat experience. Japanese forces were superior in morale, equipment, and training to a large proportion of the British and Commonwealth forces. Furthermore, many of the units operating under the British in the Malayan campaign had received little training. Some of the Australian and Indian units were only recently formed and had little or no experience of actual warfare. Most of the British and Commonwealth forces had received little training in jungle warfare compared with their Japanese counterparts. Indeed there was no jungle-training school for officers in Malaya at all.¹⁹

However, the Malayan campaign was not a true jungle war because only a small percentage of the fighting actually took place in the jungle. Most of the land war was over strategically vital roads and bridges and it could be argued that the air and sea superiority of the Japanese played a more significant role than their jungle training. This enabled their air force to support their land forces by attacking the British defences, which were relatively unprotected from air attack. Their control of the sea enabled them to stage landings throughout the peninsula and outflank British defences.

So although the Japanese were for the most part better trained in jungle fighting, this does not in itself explain the rapid advance of their forces down the Malayan

17 Tsuji, p.60.

18 See Elphick, chpt.2.

19 Elphick, p.279.

peninsula to Singapore. Their planning does not explain the speed of their advance either. The speed of the Japanese advance and initial successes owes as much to the inaction of British and Commonwealth forces as to the actions of the Japanese. They had planned to take Singapore in 100 days but actually took it in 70. The speed of their advance took them by surprise and their supply chain was stretched to a greater extent than they had planned for. During the final stages of the Malayan campaign the Japanese forces were almost out of ammunition although the British were ignorant of this fact.²⁰ The Japanese planning was not perfect but the British planning was much worse with one of the greatest errors being not to upgrade the quality and quantity of aircraft available for the defence of Malaya and Singapore. This and other British mistakes must therefore be examined in as much detail as the Japanese planning and operations and this will be done in the following chapters.

3: Incompetent Local Leadership?

Scapegoat

‘When things go wrong the public are naturally inclined to blame the man on the spot. Why was this not done and why was that not done? The answer generally is that the man on the spot was not a free agent’.

General Arthur Percival, British Army,
GOC Malaya,
The War in Malaya

One of the more popular theories concerning the fall of Singapore was that the local leadership was woefully inadequate and it is this theory that will be examined in detail here. One of the main proponents of this theory was Ivan Simson, formerly the Chief Engineer of Malaya Command, before and during the Malayan campaign. He states,

The Japanese attack was virile, but by no means so overpowering in men and equipment that a determined defence could not have held or at any rate delayed it. But the enemy had something we lacked—a clear plan, good preparation, the determination and tactical skill to carry it through, with very fit and highly-trained troops, well directed. We lacked all these things and made no serious effort to offset our disadvantages.

While many of our troops were inexperienced, our rapid collapse in Malaya, in my opinion, was more due to unimaginative leadership, both military and civil, than to the troops as this story will attempt to show.

²⁰ Fujiwara, Lt. General Iwaichi, *F-Kikan: Japanese Army Intelligence Operations in Southeast Asia during World War II* (1983), translated by Akashi, Yoji, pp.176-178.

The people in Malaya, especially in Singapore, both military and civil, lived in a fool's paradise. The policy of the government and the fighting services was 'don't worry, it may never happen'. This was backed by a serious underestimation of the Japanese who, it was thought, had more than they could handle after four years of war in China and who, it was said, were near to economic collapse.²¹

Although Simson was probably bitter about spending time in a Japanese POW camp as a result (in his eyes at least) of incompetent leadership, some of his points are valid.

For years the British security strategy in Asia had been to build up Singapore's reputation as an almost impregnable fortress. This, unfortunately, was only true if any attackers obligingly attacked from the sea, where its many guns could be brought to bear. Furthermore any fleet stationed there could also help repel a sea-borne attack. No attempt was made to fortify the north shore of Singapore as the terrain on the Malayan peninsula was thought to be too formidable an obstacle for any attacking force. Simson argues that with the exception of General Dobbie, who was in charge years before the war with Japan, none of the military commanders in Singapore made any attempt to check the validity of this assertion. This was one of the strategic mistakes made by the British in defending Malaya and Singapore. Singapore was only an impregnable fortress if the British also controlled Malaya. If an enemy force took Malaya then Singapore was dangerously exposed as it had little or no defences on its northern side.

Part of the reason for the rapid fall of Singapore was due to further strategic mistakes made by the British in defending Malaya. Simson mentions these strategic mistakes. One of the main ones was over the timing of any Japanese attack.

Probably the most serious mistake of all those made in Singapore, however was the presumption that the Japanese could not land on the east coast of Malaya between November and March, because of the North-East Monsoon. It was tacitly assumed in Malaya, and apparently also in Whitehall at one time, that rough seas and high winds would make troop landings impossible. When I first heard this local belief in September, I informed General Percival that while at the War Office about 18 months earlier my own branch had been sent photographs taken from a British ship (in 1938) of Japanese troops landing on the Chinese coast in rough seas at the height of the N.E. Monsoon. I added that these photographs had been seen by the Military Operations Branch who now considered landings possible in Malaya during the N.E. Monsoon....No action was taken despite the fact that apparently all Army and RAF reinforcements were being timed on the old and false assumption.²²

21 Simson, Ivan, *Singapore: Too Little, Too Late* (1970), p.20

22 Simson, p.48-49.

Simson further claims that both the War Office and Malaya Command should have been aware of a test conducted by General Dobbie in 1937, which proved that such landings were possible.

The other main strategic mistake was Operation Matador. This called for the preemptive invasion of neutral Siam to secure the probable landing zones likely to be used by the Japanese forces. This was a sound plan in theory but the way in which it was 'conducted' left a lot to be desired. Britain did not want to precipitate a crisis in Asia unnecessarily. An invasion of Siam could drive the Thais into siding with the Japanese. Furthermore the British Ambassador to Siam was very pro-Thai and convinced of their loyalty and against any British invasion. Many reasons have been put forward for his faith in Siamese support for Britain, but it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to go into them here.²³ As a result of his objections, an invasion would only be authorised by London when it was certain that the Japanese were ready to invade.

The Chiefs of Staff [felt]...that it was not feasible for the British government to commit itself in advance, and that a decision on Matador would reach Singapore within thirty-six hours of knowledge reaching London that the Japanese were on the move.²⁴

For Matador to be successful, a foolproof early warning system was necessary. This the British did not possess. Therefore when Operation Matador was eventually authorised it was too late, as the Japanese had already landed a lot of their forces. The authorities in London must take most of the blame for this as they, and they alone, could authorise such an operation. The delay in its implementation also led to another, this time tactical, mistake. Troops waiting for the go-ahead while on the Jitra Line²⁵ were reluctant to expend much energy in its fortification if it was not likely to be needed. Their officers wanted to conserve their strength for the coming struggle in Siam as part of Operation Matador. Consequently Jitra was not as strong as it should have been.

The position at Jitra was threatened with being flanked by the Japanese as a result of delays in the British decision to advance to 'the ledge'. This was an area of high ground covering the Patani to Kroh road. Due to delays in decision-making in Singapore the Japanese arrived there first and the position at Jitra had to be abandoned. However, Jitra would have had to be abandoned anyway as it was not prepared properly and the Japanese had the advantage of air superiority in that area. This was as a result of London's decision not to send modern aircraft to Singapore in great numbers or in enough time to be of use. This lack of air support also con-

23 See Elphick, Chpt. 6.

24 Kirby, S. Woodburn, *Singapore: Chain of Disaster* (1971), p.121.

25 This was a defensive line set up on the plateau at Jitra and was supposedly an antitank defensive line.

tributed to the fall of Penang. This left the western coast open to the Japanese as they had based amphibious forces at the port in Penang. This gave the Japanese the option of outflanking any of the Commonwealth units operating in western Malaya. Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, Commander-in-Chief of land and air forces in Malaya must take some responsibility for the lack of air power. He did not push London hard enough for the necessary aircraft.

In a letter he wrote to the Chiefs of Staff on 26th October 1940, he said he fully realised that at that time the requirements of Singapore were relegated to third position behind Britain and the Middle East. He added...‘that our job in the Far East is not to press for facilities that cannot be given’.²⁶

If he had pressed London a little harder it is possible that he would have got something from them.

Simson himself arrived in Singapore on 5th August 1941 and took up his duties. Being an engineer, part of Simson's duties were to plan and construct defences that would stop or slow down any attacking forces. He examined the records of his predecessor and saw that he had been unable to get approval to start constructing major defences on the north shore of Singapore Island. Towards this end Simson, developed a series of proposals for fortifying the north shore of Singapore and arranged a meeting with General Percival, the commander of the British forces at that time.²⁷ According to Simson, Percival rejected all his proposals without giving any reasons. He then contacted his superiors in London to see if they could force Percival to authorise the construction of the appropriate defences. The High Command in Britain never took any action in reply to Simson's appeal for help.

Simson also went to see Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart, commanding officer of the 2nd Battalion, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, prior to the outbreak of hostilities. They were one of the few units who trained in jungle warfare. However, Stewart's ideas did not find favour with other Army officers.

The best jungle-trained battalion was the 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. So keen was their Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart, on this type of training that some of his fellow officers considered him a maverick. [However] The Argyll's fought magnificently throughout the campaign and it has generally been accepted that this was due to Stewart's insistence on this specialised form of training.²⁸

Through discussions with Stewart, Simson altered his thinking on static defences, as

26 Elphick, p.229.

27 Simson, pp.35-37.

28 Simson, p.42.

he realised that in most of Malaya they would not work, as they could be out-flanked. Simson met with his superiors to pass on this information.

I mentioned this meeting to General Percival and Brigadier Torrance in late November, only to be told by Torrance, without any remark from the General, that Stewart's ideas on jungle training were those of a crank.²⁹

It would seem then that the commanding officers in Malaya were not very forward thinking and open to new ideas. This in itself does not make them incompetent but this was not the extent of their failings as shall be seen.

Both Simson and Stewart were of the opinion that many of the decisions made by the high-ranking personnel were bad ones. Simson had wanted to train the various groups of engineers present in Malaya but was not allowed to do so. He cites this lack of training and preparation as one possible reason for the failure of many of the demolition charges that failed to go off as planned during the conflict.

But this is just another example of not allowing the Indian sapper and miners, the Australian and British Engineer units to make preparations in time to ensure really effective demolitions.

Had the Chief Engineer's office been permitted, in peace-time to look into Engineer Field Unit organisation, to build mine chambers, etc. for the major road and railway bridges, and later to advise that small demolition squads should actually live in dugouts at those bridges (as in France 1918), errors like this would rarely have happened.³⁰

He was also forbidden to order the construction of large-scale defences in Malaya and the north coast of Singapore. The failure to make provisions for the setting up of guerrilla forces using Malay and Chinese manpower is also mentioned by Simson. He claims that this was never done on any meaningful scale due to the animosity between the local Chinese and the Chinese Secretariat of the British administration.³¹

One of the main problems for the Commonwealth forces was that the vast majority of them were totally ignorant of the nature of antitank warfare. Simson claimed that leaflets prepared by the War Office in London years before were never issued to the troops in Malaya. He was ordered to condense all these leaflets into one document, which was to be issued to all troops. However this was done after Japanese tanks had already caused much damage to Commonwealth forces, and even then the senior officers refused to endorse the leaflet so that it carried little weight when it was issued. He thinks this was one of the major blunders by senior

29 Simson, p.44.

30 Simson, pp.50-52.

31 Simson, p.66.

officers.

The real mistake was not to have distributed the War Office antitank instructions to all Formations and front line troops many months earlier; and then not to use the Chief Engineer's staff in time to prevent just this sort of disaster.³²

As a result, Simson did not hold many senior officers in very high regard, especially General Percival. However Percival was not criticised in the Official History to any great extent, but there were reasons for this.

This may well have been caused by the threat he issued in a letter to the historian, Major-General Kirby, mentioned in an internal minute written on 28th April 1953 by A. B. Acheson, the Cabinet Office official who was acting as secretary to the team of official historians. General Percival's letter 'foreshadows that, if the official history is critical of himself or his fellow-Commanders, he will probably wish to publish a reply', Acheson reported.³³

It would seem then that Percival had some information that would be damaging to the reputation of others higher up in the chain of command, and that he would divulge this if harshly criticised. Kirby only criticised Percival in his own book, which was published five years after Percival's death and was no longer a threat.³⁴

Simson also had problems with the civilian leadership, in particular Sir Shenton Thomas, the Governor. He claimed that Thomas would not authorise the hiring of local labour to aid in the construction of defences on Singapore and obstructed some of his initiatives.³⁵ Parliament in London must shoulder some of the blame for the tardiness in authorising labour as they only passed a bill giving the armed forces the right to hire workers on 29th January 1942.³⁶ This was too late to be of much use. Simson criticised the civilian leadership for looking after the budget as if still in peacetime conditions. Kirby also voiced the same sentiments.

Brigadier Simson was hampered from the beginning by his inability to induce the Governor and the senior Malayan civil servants to abandon the normal methods of bureaucracy and to realise the need for urgent action...old methods were retained and no decision could be reached without the opinion of everyone concerned being obtained by letter, minute or committee meeting. This caused long delays at the very moment when quick decision and action were necessary.³⁷

32 Simson, p.58.

33 CAB 103/340. PRO. in Elphick, p.234.

34 Elphick, p.234.

35 Kirby, pp.227-228.

36 Kirby, pp.230-231.

37 Kirby, pp.227-228.

Air raid sirens were also forbidden, as they would have damaged morale according to Thomas. Even though these complaints may be true it is unlikely that such defences as could be constructed quickly at this late stage would have seriously affected the outcome of the war. The use of air raid sirens would undoubtedly have saved some lives but again would not have affected the final outcome.

Many senior officers also blamed their junior counterparts for the disaster in Malaya and Singapore. The loss of Singapore 'was made easier by the complete absence of prepared defences', wrote commander of the Australian forces General Gordon Bennett:

It was not due to lack of skill in the senior leaders. It was due in the main to poor leadership on the part of the commanders of most units. This poor leadership was responsible for the poor morale displayed by most of the troops. Lack of skill in jungle fighting was certainly one of the causes of failure.³⁸

The senior officers blamed the junior officers and they in turn blamed the senior officers, but both seem to have missed the point. Both sets of officers cited mistakes. However these mistakes were only tactical mistakes. If these mistakes had not been made then Singapore would most likely still have fallen to the Japanese due to their superiority in air power, sea power, and army equipment. Even Bennett recognises this: 'A contributing factor was our lack of air and sea power, the possession of which would have prevented or at least hindered the Japanese invasion'.³⁹ Only the time scale would have been different. Even if Singapore could have held out for a little longer there were little resources available from any of the Allied powers that could come to their assistance. The reason for the fall of Singapore was therefore due to strategic mistakes not tactical ones.

Yet another theory has the premise that the fall of Singapore could be blamed on a traitor in the British forces.⁴⁰ This also misses the point. The reason that the actions of any traitor could be so effective is that strategic decisions made in Britain left gaps in the defence of Malaya and Singapore that could be exploited by the Japanese if they knew of them. However, the Japanese had extensive knowledge of the situation in Malaya and Singapore due to reports from Japanese nationals living and working there, not to mention reports from the indigenous population who were disillusioned with British rule. It is unlikely that reports from one spy could tell them much that they did not already know or suspect from other sources, such as the report from the *Automedon*.

Another argument puts the blame for the fall of Singapore on the Australian

38 Bennett, Lieut-Gen. H. Gordon, *Why Singapore Fell* (1945), p.190.

39 Bennett, pp.190-191.

40 See Elphick, Peter, and Michael Smith, *Odd Man Out: The Story of the Singapore Traitor* (1994), for full details of this theory.

forces. This theory contends that the Australian troops were, apart from a few exceptions, undisciplined and cowardly. It further proposes that they left their positions on Singapore Island without permission and that this enabled the Japanese forces to gain a foothold on the island.⁴¹ Connected to this theory is the criticism of Percival for his deployment of troops on Singapore Island at this time, especially the deployment of the Australian units. He is blamed for spreading his forces too thinly all along the coast and not concentrating them in critical areas. Furthermore, Percival knew of the criticisms previously levelled at the Australian troops and still put them at one of the most vital areas for the defence of Singapore, the area opposite Johore. This resulted in the first foothold by Japanese troops onto Singapore Island in that area, after the Australian troops had fled their positions. Either Percival misjudged where the Japanese would attack or he misjudged the calibre and morale of the Australian troops.

Even if these criticisms are valid, by this time it was certain that Singapore would fall. Only the timing of its fall was uncertain. The Japanese had air and sea superiority and were in a position to shell all of Singapore. They were also in a position to cut off the water supply as well. So the desertion of the Australians and spreading out of Commonwealth forces would not have made much of a difference as strategic mistakes had already decided Singapore's fate.

It can be seen then, that many strategic mistakes were made before and during the Malayan campaign. These were mainly made by the authorities in London. Many tactical mistakes were also made in the Malayan campaign by senior officers based in Malaya and Singapore, although some junior officers undoubtedly made mistakes as well. However the mistakes that had the most serious effect on the fate of Singapore were strategic mistakes. The responsibility for these strategic mistakes lies more with Whitehall than with Singapore.

4: Bad Strategic Planning by the British Government

Cover Up

'I understood from Kirby verbally that his Terms of Reference from the Cabinet for the Official History was that he was not to throw aspersions on the leaders. How can one write "History" on such terms?...Why do we officially suppress truth?'

Brigadier Ivan Simson, Chief Engineer, Singapore,
from his letter to H. P. Bryson, former senior Malayan Civil Servant,
in *Singapore: The Pregnable Fortress*

41 Elphick and Smith, pp.43-45

The leaders referred to in the letter from Simson were the decision makers of the British government in London. The idea that those leaders were responsible for the loss of Singapore and therefore had something to hide will be explored in this chapter. This will be done by scrutinising the decisions taken by the leadership in London over the preceding years up to the outbreak of hostilities with Japan. This should show to what extent the British government was responsible for the loss of Singapore. To do this effectively, the history of the Singapore naval base must be examined. This also involves exploring the rationale behind the building of a naval base at Singapore, and the strategy for its defence.

After the First World War, the British and the Japanese formed a military alliance. However, the British were wary of Japanese plans for expansion and wanted to station a fleet in Asia to protect interests there. At this time, the Royal Navy was in no position to send a fleet to be permanently stationed in Asia because not enough ships were available. The cost of constructing a fleet was also prohibitive. The only alternative was to build a naval base in Asia, to which a fleet could be sent from British waters in times of need. After much deliberation, the location for this base was decided. Singapore, having beaten off competition from Hong Kong, Trincomalee, and Sydney, was set to be the major base for the Royal Navy in Asia in 1921.

There was then deliberation over where to site the base in Singapore. In 1922, it was decided to build the base near Sembawang, on the northern side of Singapore Island. This would give the base some measure of protection from ships at sea. The decision to choose this part of Singapore for the base has been attacked by strategists as not being the best option.⁴² This is not relevant to this dissertation, because, with the Japanese eventually controlling the air and the sea around Singapore and the Malayan mainland, the base would be exposed to attack no matter where on Singapore Island it was situated. The British planners did not envisage this scenario. They thought that a British fleet would give them control of the sea and planners underestimated the strength of the Japanese air force. Consequently they only considered the base vulnerable to attack from the mainland of Malaya, especially the Malay state of Johore. For any attacking force to get to Johore and be in a position to shell Singapore was not an easy task. The only possible landing zones were either far from Johore and Singapore or else easy to defend against an attacking force. Furthermore, any force landing far from Johore and Singapore would then have to traverse the Malay Peninsula. At this time the Malay Peninsula was mainly impenetrable jungle and no large army could easily travel down it. This left the defence of Singapore from the sea as the only threat they thought they had to deal with.

Construction of the base on a small scale started in 1924 and continued in this way for some time due to cost cutting by the British Parliament. Churchill must take the blame for this because he was Chancellor of the Exchequer at this time. From

42 Elphick, pp.25-26.

1924 until the early 1930's, the Royal Navy, Army, and RAF argued over the best method of defending Singapore against an attack from the sea. The Chiefs of Staff and the War Office were also involved. The RAF wanted to defend it using aircraft that could attack any invading fleet far from Singapore. The Royal Navy and the Army wanted a more traditional approach using fixed heavy guns. After much debate the more traditional defence using heavy guns won the day.

After months of indecision the army and navy view prevailed. In 1926 the CID recommended that, as torpedo-bombers at that date had not proved themselves reliable against naval forces, and as four years were needed to develop the air forces which would be necessary anyway, the first stage of the Singapore defences should consist of close defence and medium-range guns, plus three 15-inch heavy guns. The question whether aircraft should be substituted for the remainder of the planned heavy guns at a later date was left open.⁴³

These guns are commonly believed to have been facing the 'wrong way' in the actual conflict. This is a popular misconception as most of them were in fact used against the Japanese forces on the Malayan mainland. Only two of the 15-inch guns were not used as they could only traverse 180 degrees. Most of the other guns could traverse 360 degrees. The only failing of these guns was the fact that most of the rounds available for them were armour piercing shells designed for use against battleships. These shells were of limited use against infantry. The high explosive shells needed were in very short supply and the War Office and Chiefs of Staff must take responsibility for that oversight.⁴⁴

Of greater significance to the planning of the defence of Singapore was the 'Ten Year Rule'. This was the underlying theory behind the planning of all of the Armed Services as set out by the government in 1919. Basically, it stated that Britain would not be involved in any large-scale war for at least ten years. This obviously handicapped the armed forces in their planning. Churchill further hindered the development of the defences at Singapore when he altered it in 1928. Now each day saw the beginning of a new ten-year period of peace. With the British government taking this view, they were not disposed to spend large sums of money on the defence of Singapore. This attitude was not easily dispelled when the rule was eventually scrapped in 1932.

In considering this change two points need to be emphasised. First of all, there is no doubt that in 1928, and on several occasions before that, the Cabinet decided to extend the application of the Ten Year Rule under pressure from the Treasury. Churchill, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, was therefore primarily responsible

43 Elphick, p.28.

44 See Chung, pp.24-26.

for those changes. Secondly, after the rule was rescinded in 1932 there was a two-year time-lag in implementing rearmament because the rule had left behind it not only a legacy of uncertainty, but also inertia in the government departments concerned with defence.⁴⁵

This ten-year rule resulted in the delay of some construction at Singapore naval base.

When completed, the naval base at Singapore was to be ready to receive and service a fleet from Britain whenever necessary. If war broke out in Asia, Singapore was to be able to defend itself until a fleet could arrive there. The period that Singapore was expected to hold out for until the arrival of a fleet became known as 'the period before relief'.

The 'period before relief' may be defined as the time during which the garrison will have to hold out, beginning on the day on which the garrison is first attacked and ending on the day when the Main Fleet arrives and either defeats the enemy or forces him to withdraw. It is the basis of the whole Defence Scheme for Malaya and governs both the size and composition of the garrison and also the reserves of supplies and stores of all kinds, which are maintained in Malaya in peace. We wish to emphasise that once the 'period before relief' is fixed and arrangements made accordingly, any delay in relieving the garrison after the last day of the period may involve the loss of Singapore.⁴⁶

Initially this was set at 42 days. This was a worst-case scenario, taking into account the location of the necessary ships, the assembling of the fleet, the outfitting of it, and its sailing time. However, this figure was based on the advance notification of a Japanese fleet sailing, and the instant decision in Britain to despatch a fleet. The size of the fleet despatched would depend on the size of the Japanese forces expected to be encountered.

This is where good intelligence was vital. However the British intelligence network was in the process of being reorganised in the mid 1920s. London could not rely on accurate intelligence reports from Singapore, as the intelligence situation there, even after its 'reorganisation', was very complicated. This was due to the many different organisations operating there with their own intelligence networks, which did not often work together.

Inadequate liaison on the military side was matched by the complex and confused nature of the lines of responsibility, which joined the Far Eastern Commonwealth and Empire to London. The separate interests of the Foreign Office, Dominions Office, Colonial Office, India Office, and Burma Office had

45 Elphick, p.33.

46 'Malaya: Period before Relief', COS Paper No. 557, 6 April 1937, paras 2-3, CAB 53/30 quoted in Chung, p.55.

not been co-ordinated before the war; after September 1939 these departments were joined by others such as the Ministry of Information, Ministry of Economic Warfare and Ministry of War Transport to produce a system involving fragmentation, duplication, and at times self-contradiction.⁴⁷

The information making its way to London from one source was sometimes contradicted by information from another.

Over time the period before relief was increased, and by 1938 was set at 70 days with a further 14 days added on for reprovioning. This was again increased to 90 days with 15 more for reprovioning in June 1939. No corresponding increase in the defences or ability to store supplies was made at Singapore. This is surprising as any delays in relieving the garrison were viewed as likely to lead to the loss of Singapore, as has been shown earlier. Churchill had no qualms about increasing the 'period before relief'. This was because he did not think Japan would go to war and, if they did, he thought that the US would help defend Singapore if a British fleet was not sent, as has been covered in Chapter 3. The Chiefs of Staff 'unofficially' increased the period before relief to 180 days on September 1939, when war broke out with Germany. They had further to admit after the fall of France in June 1940 that the period before relief was temporarily indefinite due to the needs in Europe.⁴⁸

The collapse of France, the development of a direct threat to the United Kingdom, and the necessity for retaining in European waters a fleet of sufficient strength to match both the German and Italian Fleets have made it temporarily impossible for us to despatch a fleet to the Far East should the occasion arise.⁴⁹

This decision made the whole Singapore strategy redundant. The reason for the Singapore Naval Base was to provide a base for a fleet. The fleet was supposed to provide the defence of Singapore and Malaya. Without a fleet, the whole defence of Malaya and Singapore was seriously threatened.

The only other way to secure the safety of Singapore and Malaya was to provide the garrison there with modern aircraft in sufficient numbers, and also to ensure that the troops were well trained and armed. Malaya by the late 1930's had a good road network and was no longer impenetrable to tanks and infantry. This benefited the Japanese. As has been shown, the British troops were not well trained, and furthermore, they had neither tanks nor knowledge of how to combat enemy tanks. This left either sending a smaller fleet or increasing the air defences as the only options.

By mid-1940, at which time Britain and Australia together had stationed eight

47 Thorne, Christopher, *Allies of a Kind: The United States, Britain, and the War against Japan, 1941-1945* (1978), p.57.

48 Chung, p.58-59.

49 COS Paper No. 592 (Revised), 15 August 1940, CAB 80/15, in Chung, p.59.

squadrons comprising 88 first-line aircraft in Malaya, the Joint Planning Committee had become convinced that an air strength of 22 squadrons comprising 336 first-line aircraft were required to safeguard the defence of Malaya, the north-eastern half of the Indian Ocean, and British North Borneo....⁵⁰

By December 1940, the military leaders in Asia estimated that they would need 29 squadrons with 566 aircraft adequately to defend British interests in Asia. Neither of these figures was ever met, as the government in London never made provisions for them to be sent. Indeed when war broke out the number of aircraft available for the defence of Malaya and Singapore was 167. Many of these were obsolete and none was a match for the Japanese aircraft. The fact that 55 per cent of the British aircraft were lost in one day illustrates this perfectly.⁵¹

The only fighter aircraft that Britain had at that time that were a match for the Japanese were Spitfires and Hurricanes. The Spitfires were kept for the defence of Britain and the spare Hurricanes were sent to Russia. Tanks were also sent to Russia. There were no tanks in Malaya at all.

During the six months from June to December 1941, Britain dispatched to Russia a total of 676 aircraft and 446 tanks. These totals well exceeded the highest estimate for the requirements of Malaya command. In addition, many more aircraft and tanks were sent to the Middle East, together with most of the newly raised battalions of the British and Indian Armies.⁵²

The US was also supplying Russia and it was likely that they could have increased their supplies to Russia to spare British supplies to go to Asia. However Churchill wanted to maintain the prestige of Britain in Russia by supplying material in its hour of need.

Churchill and his old crony Beaverbrook, the Minister for Supply, have to share much—although not all—of the blame for diverting hundreds of aircraft to the Soviet Union (numbers which the United States had offered to make available to the Soviets instead and which Britain donated only to uphold the prestige of the British Empire in Stalin's eyes)⁵³

Even if the US could not supply the extra equipment, it is unlikely that diverting a small part of the aircraft and tanks from Russia would have made much of a difference to the fortunes of the Russians. However those supplies would have had a

50 Pritchard, John, 'Winston Churchill, the Military, and Imperial Defence in East Asia', in Dockrill, Saki, ed., *From Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima: The Second World War in Asia and the Pacific, 1941-45* (1994).

51 Pritchard, p.45.

52 Elphick, p.268.

53 Pritchard, p.45.

greater effect in the Malayan theatre of operations. Moreover, much of the supplies sent to Russia never reached their destination due to the losses of the Arctic convoys. Some of the Hurricanes that arrived in Russia were never taken out of their boxes and used.⁵⁴

Churchill commands some sympathy because Russia and the Middle East were engaged in a war at this time, whereas the Far East was only threatened with one. But while threat was growing larger, the defence resources of Singapore and Malaya were not. Only when war actually broke out did resources start to arrive. By then it was too late.

When the crunch came in December 1941, the 18th British Division, originally intended for the Middle East and trained for the desert, was 'found' and diverted to Singapore, but the main part of it arrived only ten days before the surrender. Fifty-one Hurricane fighters in crates, which reached Durban on 18th December, were also diverted and transhipped to Singapore together with pilots and ground staff, again to arrive too late.⁵⁵

Churchill could have authorised aircraft, tanks, and men for the Far East sooner, but he misread or underestimated the Japanese. He must take responsibility for the lack of military equipment in Singapore and Malaya.

The shortage of tanks in Malaya, which was also down to Beaverbrook and Churchill's insistence on giving priority to the reinforcement of Russia, was to prove instrumental in the rapid collapse of British resistance to the Japanese invasion.⁵⁶

The sending of reinforcements so late in the day was also a mistake. A large percentage of the reinforcements were hardly involved in any action at all. They were only sent to Singapore because the Australians and New Zealanders were about to accuse Britain of betrayal if they were diverted to Burma or the Dutch East Indies where they would be of more use. Churchill passed on the responsibility for the destination of these reinforcements on to General Wavell, Commander of British forces in Asia, rather than take it himself.⁵⁷

The situation regarding the despatch of a fleet was also a major fault of Churchill's. It has already been shown that it was impossible to send a large fleet to Singapore. A fleet of some size was to be sent but Churchill and his Admirals disagreed over its composition. The Admirals wanted a larger fleet made up of older

54 Pritchard, p.271.

55 Pritchard, p.270.

56 Pritchard, p.45.

57 See Kirby, pp.214-217.

battleships to engage the Japanese fleet but Churchill wanted a smaller, faster fleet made up of newer ships, as he was worried about protecting supply convoys. Churchill won the day and a fleet consisting of the aforementioned *HMS Prince of Wales* and *HMS Repulse*, together with the aircraft carrier *HMS Indomitable* and five destroyers was planned to be sent to Singapore. *HMS Indomitable* ran aground in the West Indies and was not replaced. This was a major mistake by Churchill and the Admiralty, as with the air cover an aircraft carrier could provide, the two capital ships may have been saved. As it was, the fleet sailed with no air cover to Singapore. Once there the fleet went on patrol without any air cover from the RAF and the capital ships were sunk soon afterwards by Japanese torpedo bombers.⁵⁸ Partly this was due to the shortsightedness of Admiral Phillips, commander of the fleet, who believed capital ships immune to air attack. Poor interservice coordination between the Royal Navy and the RAF must also take part of the blame. As this stemmed from Churchill's pitting the services against one another for funding while Chancellor of the Exchequer, he was indirectly responsible for this disaster. He was more directly responsible as he was the major force behind the small fleet being sent in the first place.

It can be seen then that the British government was largely responsible for the poor situation that Singapore was in at the outbreak of the war with Japan. Furthermore, by making major strategic mistakes they contributed to some of the military disasters that happened during the Malayan campaign. These disasters had a large effect on the performance of the British and Commonwealth forces in Malaya and Singapore. This in turn led to the fall of Singapore itself.

5: Churchill the Machiavellian

Salvation

‘No American will think it wrong of me if I proclaim that to have the United States on our side was to be the greatest joy....England would live; Britain would live; the Commonwealth of Nations and the Empire would live. How long the war would last or in what fashion it would end no man could tell, nor did I at this moment care. Once again in our long island history we would emerge...safe and victorious. We should not be wiped out....Being saturated and satiated with emotion and sensation, I went to bed and slept the sleep of the saved and thankful’.

Winston S. Churchill, British Prime Minister,
The Second World War

⁵⁸ For the full story behind this disaster see Middlebrook and Mahoney, *Battleship: The Loss of the Prince of Wales and the Repulse* (1979).

The above was the reaction of Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill to the news that the United States had entered the war against Japan in the Pacific. To say he was delighted would be an understatement. Churchill had been trying to get the US to take some kind of firm military stand against the Japanese for some time, as Britain was not in a position to do so with its commitments to the war in Europe and the Middle East.

Should the region, or even a portion of it, fall to Japanese control, the western Pacific would become a Japanese lake, cutting off the Commonwealth from the mother country. Manpower and resources would no longer reach the British Isles, making their defence that much more problematical. Britain, moreover, would have to divert its resources to this area to defend it, or else concentrate on fighting the Germans and give up Asia and the Pacific.⁵⁹

In the early days of the Second World War in Europe, in order to get Australian and New Zealand forces to leave their homelands and travel to Europe and the Middle East to fight for Britain, Churchill had to promise that Britain would defend Asia if Japan declared war. This was where Singapore Naval Base was to come into play. It was designed to hold out against any attacking force until a British fleet could arrive and make Singapore a base from which it could conduct operations to defend the Empire in Asia. This was the reason for the construction of the naval base at Singapore in the first place. The Australians and New Zealanders therefore viewed Singapore as essential for their defence.

As a result, the Australians were looking for guarantees from the British that a fleet would indeed be sent if war broke out with Japan in Asia, but no firm, specific commitment was given.

They were given assurances. These varied in degree and were sometimes hesitant and devious, and nearly always they were less than specific; yet they were always accepted by the Australians.⁶⁰

The most likely reason why Britain gave assurances, but not definite ones, was that they never expected to have to send a fleet in the first place. However in the event they did have to, having given no firm guarantees they could not be accused of breaking their promises.

Two months after the war in Europe began the British government was still issuing assurances about Australian defence. British ministers were gambling on her hand never being called by Japan entering the war. The stakes were high, not

59 Iriye, Akira, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific* (1996), p.97.

60 Elphick, p.61.

only the safety of Australia, but possibly the future of the British Empire itself. The hole card was the United States fleet based on Japan's eastern flank at Pearl Harbour; and the cards in hand looked strong. There were the navies of France and the Netherlands, both countries with important Far Eastern empires of their own to protect, and the shadow of Russia lying on Japan's western flank, perhaps waiting to avenge herself for the defeats she had suffered in earlier years. In all it seemed a reasonable hand to bet on, considering that British ministers had seriously underestimated both Japan's desire to make war and her capabilities for doing so.⁶¹

Churchill therefore felt reasonably secure in assuring Australia and New Zealand of British support in their defence, as it was an assurance he felt he would most likely never have to fulfil.

Churchill went further than other ministers felt prudent in his assurances to the Australians, so that they would send troops to Europe and the Middle East.

As the man in charge of the Admiralty it fell to Churchill to try to convince Richard Casey [Australian Minister of Supply] that Britain would indeed send a fleet to the Far East were it ever needed, without putting it in so many words. Convinced as he was that there was no serious threat from Japan, especially against Australia, Churchill found no difficulty in providing the framework of the sort of assurance Casey was seeking, without being too specific. He even said that Britain would abandon the Mediterranean if it became necessary to save Australia. This did not much please Chamberlain when Churchill told him about it, making the point that Britain had always before got away with vague promises and avoided giving specific commitments, and anyway, no one could make decisions in advance of the event to quit the Mediterranean.⁶²

The actual wording of Churchill's assurance to the Australians, approved by the War Cabinet, was as follows:

We wish to make it plain that we regard the defence of Australia and New Zealand, and of Singapore as a stepping stone to these Dominions, as ranking next to the mastering of the principle fleet to which we are opposed, and that if the choice were presented of defending them against a serious attack, or sacrificing British interests in the Mediterranean, our duty to our kith and kin would take precedence.⁶³

61 Elphick, pp.61-62.

62 Elphick, p.63.

63 WP(39)135, 21 November 1939, CAB 66/3; WM90(39)4, 21 November 1939, CAB 65/2, from Pritchard, John, 'Winston Churchill, the Military, and Imperial Defence in East Asia', in Dockrill, p.33.

This assurance by Churchill led to Australian forces being despatched to the Middle East to bolster British forces there.

Churchill became Prime Minister on 10th May 1940 when Neville Chamberlain resigned. Also in May 1940, around the time of the retreat at Dunkirk, the armed forces Chiefs of Staff advised the British government, that due to the tide of war turning against Britain and France, it was unlikely that a fleet could be spared for duty in Asia. However, a few days later, the same British government told the Australians that they still intended to defend the Empire in Asia. The position of Singapore in the eyes of the British government worsened still further by mid June.

On 13th June, however three days after the entry of Italy into the war, Menzies received from Lord Caldecote, Secretary of State for the Dominions, a most secret message that revealed for the first time that Singapore was no longer the number two bastion in Britain's global defence policy; its place had been taken by the Middle East....It would be most unlikely that we could send adequate reinforcements to the Far East...and would have to rely on the USA to safeguard our interests there.⁶⁴

Putting forward the idea that Singapore was more highly valued than the Middle East and the Mediterranean and then later depriving it of resources in favour of these areas and, later, in favour of Russia, led to feelings of betrayal by the Australians and New Zealanders. They accused Churchill of promising them anything in order to get them to send troops to Europe and the Middle East. When they tried to call in those promises they found that Britain was not in a position to fulfil them. They felt as if they were being sacrificed to save other areas and Britain.

Churchill had long maintained that the Japanese would not go to war against a great nation like Britain. Churchill had voiced this opinion over the years, between the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939, right up to the Japanese attacks on Malaya in December 1941. In March 1939 he said: 'Consider how vain is the menace that Japan will send a fleet and army to conquer Singapore....Do not therefore let us worry about this bugbear....'⁶⁵ These sentiments regarding 'fortress' Singapore were repeated again and again.

[Churchill] repeated in November 1939 that the Japanese would not embark upon the 'mad enterprise' of trying to take [Singapore]. Japan would surely not declare war, he assured the Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand in August 1940, 'unless Germany can make a successful invasion of Britain'—a belief he reiterated to the Defence Committee in April 1941. As for a Japanese attack on Singapore', he told the Cabinet in the following July, 'he did not

64 Elphick, p.64.

65 Churchill to Chamberlain, 25 March 1939, PREM 1/345, in Thorne, p.3.

believe that anything of the sort was contemplated', and again to the Australian and New Zealand Prime Ministers in September: 'I cannot believe the Japanese will face the combination now developing around them'. In October it was the same: 'he did not now believe that the Japanese would go to war with the United States and ourselves'....'Possible but unlikely dangers' were what he was seeing on 12 November' [1941].⁶⁶

It is unclear whether Churchill actually believed these assurances or whether he uttered them to try and steady the nerves of the Australians and New Zealanders, and to try and prevent them from protesting over the lack of a large British fleet in Singapore 'as promised'.

With British forces in action in Europe and the Middle East, they were not in any position to send large modern units to Singapore.

Wherever one looked, in other words, Britain's Far Eastern position in 1940-41 was one that she could not sustain on her own....Everything thus depended on Washington. As the Chiefs of Staff put it in May 1940, when envisaging an Italian entry into the European war, 'we must rely on the United States of America to safeguard our interests in the Far East'. A month later, as France plunged towards defeat, they repeated that 'it will be vital that the United States should publicly declare her intention to regard any alteration of the status quo in the Far East as a *casus belli*'.⁶⁷

Sir Shenton Thomas, the governor of Singapore was in London on leave in July 1940 and met with the Chiefs of Staff to discuss the Singapore situation. A report was produced for the War Cabinet on 5th August 1940. It stated that Britain was in no position to do much if Japan declared war. The 'promised' large fleet was not available and neither were modern aircraft, due to demands elsewhere taking precedence.

This news did not please Churchill and he was worried over the effect the report would have on his allies.

Churchill considered the report so pessimistic that he decided not to have his War Cabinet discuss it or to send copies to the Australian and New Zealand governments. He did agree that, in great secrecy, a copy should be sent to Air Chief Marshall Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, C-in-C Far East, at his headquarters in Singapore, but that it should not be seen by the governor or anyone else.⁶⁸

66 WP(39) 125, CAB 66/3; CAB, 8 August 1940, CAB 65/14; DC(Ops.), 29 April 1941, CAB 69/2; CAB, 21 July 1941, CAB 65/23; WP(41) 212, CAB 66/18; DC(Ops.), 21 Oct. 1941, CAB 69/8; CAB 27 Oct. 1941, CAB 65/23, in Thorne, p.56.

67 WP(40) 168, CAB 66/7; WP(40) 203, CAB 66/8, in Thorne, p.71

68 Rusbridger, James, and Eric Nave, *Betrayal at Pearl Harbor* (1991), p.98.

Unfortunately, this report found its way into the hands of the Japanese via the Germans, who had captured the ship, the *Automedon*, on which it was being carried. Also captured were some British codes, secret mail for the Far Eastern Command, a substantial sum of money, and the report of a successful bombing raid on the Italian port of Taranto. This was a similar operation to that conducted by the Japanese at Pearl Harbour almost one year later. Rusbridger argues that the realisation that a large fleet was not going to be sent to Singapore was the catalyst for the Japanese to start planning their Malayan campaign, as they had received the report from the Germans in early 1941. This corresponds to the time when Tsuji claims planning started. Rusbridger also claims they based their tactics at Pearl Harbour on those used by the British at Taranto.⁶⁹

The British never confirmed the loss of the documents on the *Automedon* and little information has been made available concerning the loss of the ship itself.

An old Foreign Office index of files that have never been publicly released shows that at least three separate files once existed concerning the loss of diplomatic material on the *Automedon*. When asked if these could now be made available, the Foreign Office replied that they had all been destroyed, as the contents were ‘not considered worthy of preservation’.⁷⁰

This is not the only mention of controversial files being internally ‘lost or destroyed’. Ivan Simson, Chief Engineer for Malaya Command in Singapore claims that files containing ‘awkward’ information were ‘lost’.

After ten years in the War Office, I know of cases where files were ‘lost’ if they contained awkward documentary evidence of responsibility for delays or mistakes by a particular branch or individual.⁷¹

It would seem then that some cover-ups have taken place over the years to save some individuals from embarrassment. The British would have been especially keen to keep the knowledge that Japanese tactics at Pearl Harbour may have originated in Britain. However, it is impossible to state what was actually lost without having access to the files and Rusbridger is just speculating.

In the years prior to the Pearl Harbour attack, the US was not keen to become embroiled in a war. Rivals, who were very keen to keep the US out of any conflict, were challenging President Roosevelt. With the Presidential elections due in November 1940, Roosevelt did not want to do anything to alienate the voting public, who were already suspicious of British motives in trying to get the US into the

69 Rusbridger and Nave, pp.98-104.

70 Rusbridger and Nave, p.106.

71 Simson, p.52.

war. Churchill was aware of this and while sympathetic to Roosevelt's plight, would have welcomed any opportunity to get the US into the war.

Here again, the destiny of the region came to hinge upon the United States. It was no longer a question of upholding the status quo. It was more a matter of whether the United States would become involved in order to prevent Japanese take-over of the region, or whether the latter would succeed in doing so before America had a chance to pre-empt it.⁷²

Previously the US had adopted a policy of deterrence and this did not change to any great extent. Roosevelt decided to maintain the US fleet at Pearl Harbour as a warning to Japan. This decision was taken in spring 1940. This warning however, did not entail taking any real action. Therefore this did not have much effect on the Japanese and the security situation in Asia deteriorated further.

With the Japanese becoming ever bolder in Asia, and the British unable to spare the forces to deal with them, talks took place between high ranking British and US military men in Washington in February 1941. The Americans resisted British efforts to get them to make a commitment to defend Asia from the Japanese. The irony here is that the situation with the British and Americans is similar to that between the Australians and British. Both situations had one party wanting a definite commitment and the other trying to avoid such a commitment. However, with the US policy of stationing the fleet at Pearl Harbour as a warning not affecting the Japanese, they therefore started applying economic sanctions against the Japanese, culminating in the total oil embargo in July 1941, as has already been mentioned.

Britain meanwhile was very wary of antagonising the US in the Pacific, as they wanted the Americans to take a stronger line against the Japanese. In the hope that the US would reciprocate, London stated that they would declare war on Japan if the Japanese attacked America in any way. Churchill also tried to influence US public opinion by sending filmmakers to the US to make anti-German propaganda films.⁷³ Furthermore,

if there existed any faint hopes of an American-Japanese understanding being reached in the final period before Pearl Harbour, they received little encouragement from London. The reason for this, of course, lay as much in Europe as in Britain's exposed position in the Far East. What was desired above all was an American entry into the war—the current, German war—and if a showdown with Japan would provide that supreme blessing in addition to its direct, Asian benefits, then so much the better. 'I suppose', wrote an Assistant Under Secretary at the Foreign Office in August 1941, 'that the chief objective at the present

72 Iriye, p.97.

73 Rusbridger and Nave, p.123.

moment in our foreign policy is to get America fully into the war'. The Prime Minister's own anxiety to see such an outcome had long been evident.⁷⁴

Towards this end, Churchill downplayed the 'Final Report' from Sir Robert Craigie, the British Ambassador to Japan, which incidentally was supported by his American counterpart, Joseph Grew. It claimed that the American oil embargo on Japan was pushing Japan towards war rather than away from it. Churchill banned the report from being circulated as it went against his plans for drawing the US into the war.

Rusbridger and Nave also argue that the British had prior knowledge of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour but did not pass on that information to the Americans.⁷⁵ They claim that this was so that the attack would therefore draw the US into the war. Admittedly this was the outcome that Churchill and the Allies wanted. However, Churchill was of the opinion that Singapore could not hold out against the Japanese without US military aid. However, Singapore was only fourth in his priorities now. He therefore sent most of the available resources to the Russians, the Middle East, and Europe.⁷⁶ This was because he thought that the US would eventually intervene in any war in the Pacific, with luck, before Singapore would fall. For this US intervention to be effective, the US fleet at Pearl Harbour would be vital. Churchill, therefore, would not knowingly sacrifice it just to get the US into the war. The loss of the US fleet would leave Singapore without any source of rescue. The loss of Singapore could easily, and almost did, lead to the loss of India. This would have resulted in the opportunity for the Germans and Japanese to link up in Persia if the Germans could advance through Russia. There was a chance of this happening as the Germans had advanced to the Black Sea by December 1941 and were preparing to advance into the region between the Black Sea and the Caspian and onward into Persia. The oil in the Persian region would then be lost to the British. This Churchill did not want, not even if it resulted in the entry of the US into the war.

It seems likely, then, that if the Machiavellian plotting by Churchill was responsible for the US losses at Pearl Harbour, and consequently the loss of Singapore, that this was not intentional. It does seem likely, however, that Churchill conspired to draw the US into the war, using every means at his disposal to do so.

In his exuberance over the significance of the event, Churchill broadcast a speech on 15 February 1942, in which he spoke of his having 'dreamt of, aimed at and worked for' American involvement.⁷⁷

Although this comment caused much resentment among Americans, especially his

74 Sir D. Scott memo., 15 April 1941, FO 371, A3823/118/45, in Thorne, p.73.

75 See Rusbridger and Nave, chpts. 7 and 8.

76 See Elphick, chpt. 9.

77 Sbrega, John J., *Anglo-American Relations and Colonialism in East Asia, 1941-1942* (1983), p. 9.

claim to have ‘worked for American involvement’, it is not likely, however that the destruction of a large part of the US fleet at Pearl Harbour and the loss of Malaya and Singapore were part of his plan.

Even with Churchill authorising the transferring of modern aircraft and well-trained, experienced troops to Singapore, when hostilities broke out in December 1941, it made little difference to the eventual outcome. With the time it took for these reinforcements to arrive in Singapore, they arrived too late. Indeed some Hurricane fighters were never used and some units never fired a shot in anger before being taken prisoner.⁷⁸ The only way Malaya and therefore Singapore could have been saved was if reinforcements and modern equipment were sent much earlier and proper use was made of them. That this was not done was not due to any scheming on Churchill's part. Rather this was due to policy and strategic mistakes being made by Churchill and the British government over the preceding years.

Conclusion

Halfhearted Half Measures

‘In retrospect, the battle for Malaya was lost, even before the first shot was fired, in the corridors of power at Whitehall. Malaya was starved of the necessary reinforcements and the commanders on the spot were expected to make bricks without straw’.

Ong Chit Chung

Operation Matador: Britain's War Plans against the Japanese, 1918-1941

Britain obviously never expected to go to war with Japan while fighting a major war on two other fronts at the same time. If this had been expected and planned for then a different strategy would have been employed for the defence of Singapore. However the ‘fleet’ strategy was the strategy chosen by the government and Singapore was stuck with it. Over the years when the base was being built up until the outbreak of war, Singapore was consistently denied the resources it needed to make the ‘fleet’ strategy effective. Therefore,

At the time that hostilities began it was obvious to all that the RAF with its 158 obsolete aircraft, instead of the agreed minimum of 336 modern aircraft including a long-range striking force, would be unable either to carry out its task or to retain air superiority over northern Malaya.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ See Elphick, Chpt. 9.

⁷⁹ Kirby, p.251.

After the war started, the loss of the capital ships from the small fleet actually sent meant that Japan effectively controlled the air and seas around Malaya and Singapore.

Without command of the sea and with such a weak air force that he could neither prevent an invasion nor support his troops in action, General Percival had no hope of holding north Malaya with his one partially trained and inexperienced formation without armoured support.⁸⁰

As has been seen no tanks were forthcoming. All that Percival and the other commanders in Malaya and Singapore could hope to do was to buy some time for reinforcements to arrive.

However, due to Churchill relegating the defence of Singapore to a position behind that of Britain, the Middle East and Russia, no reinforcements were readily available. By the time reinforcements were available it was too late for Singapore. Even if the commanders in Malaya and Singapore had been more tactically aware, they would not have been able to make much of a difference, due to the handicaps they would have had to work with. Singapore's fate was sealed by policy decisions and strategic mistakes made in London.

The loss of Malaya and Singapore Island is, however, attributable to a more fundamental cause than mistakes on the part of the British commanders. Even had they made no errors, Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, Lieutenant-General Percival, and Air Vice-Marshal Pulford could not have saved the naval base and the island in the circumstances prevailing at the end of 1941, and they cannot be blamed for the disaster. The basic cause lay in Britain's failure, for reasons dating back to 1919, to provide in advance of the outbreak of war with Japan balanced naval, land and air forces adequate to defend the area.⁸¹

The only way the loss of Singapore could have been avoided was by taking the decision to equip it properly, and in good time, before the outbreak of hostilities. This was not done as Singapore was relegated to fourth place in Churchill's order of priorities

The responsibility or blame must rest squarely on the shoulders of Churchill. It was Churchill who placed Malaya below the Middle East and Russia in terms of priorities. It was Churchill who consistently underestimated the Japanese threat.⁸²

80 Kirby, p.251.

81 Kirby, p.254.

82 Chung, p.249.

The decision to put Britain's defence before that of Singapore was obviously correct. The decision to do the same with the Middle East was understandable from a geo-strategic viewpoint, however disagreeable it was for Australians and New Zealanders.

There was no justifiable reason to place Russia before Singapore, though. This was a major strategic mistake by Churchill as it was only done to maintain British prestige. However Britain lost more prestige with the loss of Singapore, their 'impregnable fortress', than they gained by supplying Russia. Without the necessary resources, there was no way for Singapore to be saved. Churchill gave Singapore too little and asked of it too much.

If, as seems likely, Churchill gambled on the US saving Singapore, then he badly misjudged their intentions as well as those of the Japanese. That he misjudged the intentions of the Japanese is beyond doubt. To avoid these mistakes becoming common knowledge, Churchill stalled the appointing of a Court of Inquiry into the fall of Singapore.

I do not at all wonder that requests should be made for an inquiry by a Royal Commission, not only into what took place upon the spot in the agony of Singapore but into all the arrangements which had been made beforehand. I am convinced, however, that this would not be good for our country, and that it would hamper the prosecution of the war.⁸³

The fact that an inquiry would not be good for Churchill's reputation would also have figured in his thinking. Contrast this with the situation in Crete where Churchill was very critical of the local commanders and held a Court of Inquiry immediately afterwards, while the war was raging. Churchill had less involvement in the fall of Crete than he did in the fall of Singapore and therefore took a harsher line with those held responsible in eyes of the Court of Inquiry. The fact that Churchill never authorised an official Court of Inquiry into the fall of Singapore after the war had ended speaks volumes.

No single person can be held totally responsible for the fall of Singapore. However some individuals were obviously more responsible than others. Churchill can be seen to be more responsible than any other. He gambled on Singapore's defences never being tested by the Japanese, and lost. Overruling his admirals, he sent a substandard fleet and promptly lost two badly needed capital ships. It must be borne in mind that he had many different areas occupying his attention, and had fewer resources available than the British world situation demanded. However, a lot of the blame for the lack of military resources being available must also be given to Churchill. His decisions on military spending over the years leading up to the outbreak of war can be seen to be flawed when viewed with the aid of hindsight.

83 Eade, Charles, compiler, 'Secret Session Speeches' (1946), in Elphick, p.4.

Therefore after careful consideration of the facts, the conclusion that Churchill was more responsible than any other individual or factor for the loss of Singapore is inescapable.

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