

## MALAYA IN WORLD WAR II

### The Revolving Door of Colonialism: Malaya 1940-46

Henry P. Frei

#### I . The Sleeping Old World

As always over the past four hundred years, Malaya was unprepared for colonial change. In 1939 no one expected Malaya to become the fulcrum of a four-century upheaval of political and military power. When war began to rage through Europe in early 1940, most Europeans living in Malaya were more concerned about their families in Europe. How fortunate to be living in Southeast Asia! War would not touch them there. It was an absolute conviction that nothing on earth could ever disturb the peace in the vast British Empire.<sup>1</sup>

It was a belief held throughout Malaya. Not only by the 18,000 Europeans, but also the Asians. A polyglot population they included two million Malays, almost as many Chinese, and one million Indians and Tamils who worked on the rubber estates and railways, plus Armenians, Arabs, Javanese, Burmese. To them war was not only unlikely, it was an event they did not even comprehend. There had never been a military governor, no occupying army, and the whole country was “ruled” by a police force which employed less than 200 British officers.<sup>2</sup> Yet one year later, entire Chinese rubber plantation villages such as Titi in Perak were wiped out by the invading Japanese forces.<sup>3</sup>

To make sure that no one had any doubts about eternal peace and business as usual in the British Empire, colonial administrators kept telling the polyglot populace that there would be no war with Japan. And this up to the last moment. Until 7 December 1941 no one realized that Singapore was a city on the brink of war. So steeped in the British fostered myth of security lived white man that in the end he believed his own propaganda. This included the overall Commander-in-Chief, Air Field-Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham. When the Japanese armada rounded Cap St. Jacques at the tip of South Vietnam on 6 December 1941, he preferred to believe that it was headed for Bangkok and not bracing for a landing on the Malayan Peninsula. He consequently failed in the last moment to launch operation Matador which could have forestalled the Japanese invasion already on the Thai and Malayan beaches up north.<sup>4</sup>

In that final stage before the war, the British did bring in troops from their widespread empire

to defend Malaya. 80,000 South Asians from the Indian subcontinent, and 20,000 troops from the Australian continent diverted to Malaya in the last moment. But the Australian soldiers had sailed off with tanks painted yellow, anticipating a desert war. Their equipment and tactical methods were designed to fight the Germans in Africa and Europe. A few minutes in the Malayan jungle convinced General Bennet that his Australian troops had to start their training from scratch.<sup>5</sup>

The Japanese, too, were little prepared. In the early stage of WW II they had been massing on the northern fringes of their empire, anticipating an advance into the Soviet Far East.<sup>6</sup> But when most of Europe fell to Hitler, the Japanese military was ready to take over Europe's centuries old colonial system in limbo and assume its new task as Asian master. Colonel Tsuji Masanobu put in charge of the Malaya campaign, had to radically revise the tactics to be used against Soviet forces in Siberia and Manchuria for battling in the torrid zone of the tropics. Long distance logistics across the Siberian tundra had to be rethought as moves through the tropics.<sup>7</sup> By the time the Manchurian ponies were landed on the Malayan beaches, they had lost their fur and proved useless for moves through dense jungle in sweltering heat.<sup>8</sup> And when the first Japanese marines stormed ashore, many were in the dark about whom exactly they were fighting. It was only on the beach of Singora, that Private Miyake learnt about the declaration of war and, to his surprise, that they would be fighting the British.<sup>9</sup>

## II. Malaya: Showplace of Arrival and Departure of Colonialism

No one need have been surprised at this fourth change in colonial mastership. Malaya had always been a showcase of changing colonial systems. Each time the colonial change had been swift and thorough. In this respect Malaya differed from other Southeast Asian colonies. The East Indies were Dutch for centuries, Indochina always French, Burma and India British, and only the Philippines had experienced one big change as an old Spanish colony, when after three hundred years it became an American colony. Malaya, however, had been the revolving door of various brands of colonialism for well over four hundred years.

It was in Malaya in 1511 that Europe's first modern colony in Asia was created. It was called a 'factory' at first, and meant as a trading facility and replenishing base for the Portuguese expeditions east. They soon learnt that in order to keep a 'factory' they had to protect it with a permanent garrison against the natives and foreign naval intruders. For this reason, and even in defiance of his home government, Portugal's Governor of India, Affonso d'Albuquerque, began to occupy Malacca permanently in 1511 under direct Portuguese rule.<sup>10</sup> This came to be called a "colony", and as "colonialists" the Portuguese managed to hold on to Malaya for 130 years.

When the Portuguese empire ran out of steam, and Holland got the upper hand in Europe, the Dutch dispelled the Portuguese from Malacca in 1641. Dutch colonial Malaya then waxed against the ascendancy of the Bugis in the eighteenth century, with the Dutch taking every little advantage

of the constant strife between rajas and sultans, from Iskandar II to Engku Muda.<sup>11</sup> Keeping their eyes on the tin mines, the Dutch made the best of everything, civilizing and exploiting Malaya as an extension of their already substantial empire of the Dutch East Indies.

Britain's opportunity to colonize Malaya came in 1815, owing to the pressure caused by the Napoleonic wars. To forestall the French, Holland temporarily ceded her interests in Malaya to Britain in an uneasy alliance. Having installed themselves in Penang already in 1786, the British quickly removed the Dutch from the colonial scene for good.<sup>12</sup> By the time Raffles formally took possession of Singapore island in 1819, Malaya was already experiencing a thorough third brand of European colonization: made in Britain. Over the next 130 years, the British developed a modern extractive economy. Much with the help of alien immigration imported mainly from China and India, eighty percent of whom were Tamils from the southern part of India.

The defining pattern of economic growth were the trading stations at Penang and Singapore which Great Britain operated as free ports to capitalize on the entrepot trade passing through the Straits of Malacca. The ports soon became prosperous financial centres, owing their riches to trade and mining. Tin, coal, bauxite, and manganese were the dominant products. Until rubber enjoyed an explosive growth and became the principle agricultural export in the 1930s. Malaya then enjoyed a favourable balance of trade and the territory prospered. But maintaining this prosperity depended on continued access to overseas markets.<sup>13</sup>

### III. Colonizing the Colonizers: Japan Occupies Malaya 1941-45

This was no longer possible in late 1941. When war came to Malaya, it was again swift and thorough. The sudden change was well earned on the Japanese side. In only 70 days and 208 battles the new colonial masters had managed to storm the British colonial citadel overland through the backdoor, skillfully skirting Singapore's super guns pointing out to sea. This time colonial change was even more radical.

The Japanese added something new to WW II: for the first time in colonial history an Asian power began to colonize the colonizers. First they put the white colonialists in prison; (except for the handful of neutrals, such as the Swiss and the Danes who enjoyed freedom throughout the occupation.)<sup>14</sup> Then they dealt harshly with the Overseas Chinese in mass purges. Partly in retribution to their support of Chungking China, partly to set an example and keep them in line for the rest of the occupation. The Malays were allowed to exist, but only as underlings, a subject people. If the British Colonial Office had administered Malaya as a more or less autonomous entity,<sup>15</sup> Japan now merged Malaya with Sumatra and treated it as a part of Japan. Malaya did not even fall under the authority of Japan's Greater East Asia Ministry (which in 1943 had eclipsed the Japanese Foreign Ministry), but was treated as an "integral territory" of Japan.<sup>16</sup> If independence had never been an option for Malaya under the Portuguese, Dutch or British, freedom remained as

elusive under the Japanese.

All the while, Japan had its own ideas of freedom for Malaya. It envisioned a united Asia and urged people to think of themselves as Asian. The new Asian identity was based on a shared opposition to the West, participation in a common political framework under the Japanese Emperor, involvement in Japanese culture, and the use of the Japanese language as a lingua franca. 'Asia is one' is not a mere slogan but a living reality. The unity of Asia, with Japan as the pivot is bound by a faith which transcends by far any private interests and feelings, and should be the foundation of the forthcoming new world order.<sup>17</sup>

In reality, none of the three main races that made up Malaya flourished. Japan dissipated a supreme chance to win over a conquered people by fair treatment.<sup>18</sup> Its harsh assault on the Chinese community stunned people and left a legacy of hatred, giving support to anti-Japanese activity. Indians were used as vanguard troops to weaken the European colonial system by liberating India and enjoyed an uneasy relationship with the Japanese.<sup>19</sup> The Malays were the most persona grata people, filling positions and jobs left behind by the Europeans. But they never acquired any real power nor political privileges, and were manipulated by their Japanese masters.

Economically, Malaya went from riches to rags. Before the war, the plantations and mines had offered work for all and businesses flourished as Malaya's exports were greater than its imports. Japan intended to continue this lucky economic situation and sought to make the Malayan peninsula "the economic and communication axis for the entire Southern area" able to unite the industrialized northeastern Asia as an area which could supply it with raw materials and provide it with a market for manufactured goods.<sup>20</sup>

In 1943 Japan introduced economic reforms that moved the country towards centralized economic planning. Japan had given itself two years to bring the foe to the negotiation table. When it was unable to do so, Malaya faced an intractable economic situation: unemployment, a flourishing black market, and dwindling basic consumer goods. By 1944 food shortages and inflation were out of control, and by the end of the year the Allies were sending bombers over Malaya, so that throughout the first half of 1945 the Japanese were preoccupied with preparing for an invasion. By the end of the occupation, Japanese currency had lost most of its value and the 5.5 million people were fighting a grim struggle for survival.<sup>21</sup>

#### IV Britain's Departure From Asia

The invention of a new bomb dropped far away over Japan allowed the British to return to Japan's unbroken western front in Malaya.

But decolonizing Malaya from Asian colonization only to re-colonize Malaya back into the

European colonial fold met with resistance. The multicultural population remembered only too well how Britain had failed to protect Malaya from the Japanese. The British colonial administration lost support in postwar Malaya. And so in history books, Britain's departure from Malaya is recorded in a series of retreats, captured in various policy changes of a gradually declining hegemon that relinquishes power in an orderly fashion.

Britain in 1945 was very much bent on retaining its old profitable colony. To restore control over Malaya it formed a Union.<sup>22</sup> But soon Britain had to give in to Malayan states pressure to replace the Union with a Federation of Malaya states.<sup>23</sup> A number of official statements thereafter announce England's gradual departure from Asia until she finds herself completely "East of Suez" by 1956, the last bugle-call that retired Britain back to Europe. Independence of Malaya followed quickly in 1958 as British influence weakened further by the so-called Emergency which lasted from 1948 to 1960. From 1963 to 65 an independence movement severed Singapore, where Britain still had influence, from Malaya, after which Britain was gone from the region for good.

This is the rough packaging of Britain's official departure from Asia. But there is another side to Britain's departure as England exited the revolving door of colonialism in Malaya. The real and sudden end of the British empire in Asia can be seen much earlier in two or three flashbacks picked at random from unofficial history. They reflect more accurately Britain's dramatic loss of Malaya than the policy changes recorded in the official history books that show how splendidly Great Britain relinquished its Malayan empire step by step. The crucial moments when Britain lost its Malayan colony for good were much more radical.

Britain's sudden loss of colonialist status is evident, for example, in a violent exchange between Arai Mitsuo, an otherwise mild mannered Japanese soldier, and the British Major in charge of Gilman Hospital in Singapore on the eve of its fall. The advancing Japanese troops had just entered the building, when the Major inquired about the Japanese army's business on his neutral premises. An argument ensued between the indignant major and the Japanese army translator. Standing on his right side, Sergeant Arai became increasingly impatient with the fumbling polite translator. How could the hospital director be so haughty when he was the loser? Did not the arrogant major realize that Britain had lost Malaya? Unable to control his hand, Arai slapped the major flat in the face. The major fell down, got up, came to his senses and cooperated.<sup>24</sup> The slap contains symbolism. In it lay the instantaneous fall of Britain. It was the moment of truth. Great Britain never recovered her former glory. The scene of this slap from the obscure diary of a soldier corroborates more powerfully Britain's fall as a colonial power than the official record of elegant withdrawal policies spread over the years from 1946 to 1958.

Another scene is symbolic not only of Britain's end but that of empire. It involves V. G. Bowden, Australia's representative in Singapore. The Australian diplomat in his Majesty's Service had been ordered by Canberra to "stick to your post" lest Australia be deprived of information, and

it would be bad on morale to just escape:25

If worst comes you are to insist on receiving full diplomatic immunities, privileges and courtesies. Status given you by Commonwealth Government and accepted by United Kingdom Government is diplomatic with designation of Official Representative.

The Australian Commonwealth Government planned to barter him in a future swap of Japanese officials retained in Australia.<sup>26</sup>

Three days later, however, Bowden cabled from a handset connected at harbour's edge to the cable where the line entered the water:

Our work completed.... Except as a fortress and battle field, Singapore has ceased to function....<sup>27</sup> We will telegraph from another place at present unknown.<sup>28</sup>

Bowden managed to escape with a group of senior military officers on the motor launch Mary Rose heading for Palembang on Sumatra. His ship was unfortunately intercepted in the Banka Straits off Singapore. In Japanese custody on Banka Island, Bowden remonstrated with a Japanese guard about some article being taken from him.<sup>29</sup> The elderly, white haired man was then marched to a hall where hundreds of other captives were held. Bowden objected to his rough treatment. Did they not know who he was? He insisted on interviewing a Japanese officer to make known his diplomatic status. Another dispute ensued. He was punched and threatened with a bayonet, and the guard tried to remove his gold wrist watch. He was then marched outside the hut and made to dig his own grave into which he was shot.<sup>30</sup> The horrendous scene reflects the real end of white man in Southeast Asia. Not only British glory, but empire glory was buried forever with Australian Commonwealth diplomat Bowden. The end of white supremacy in Malaya may have been registered with the British pull-out in 1957.<sup>31</sup> The real end was evident in 1942.

Another, more visible end to the splendour of British colonialism, a finale offered to more viewers and one that did more permanent damage, were the British and Australian work parties that after the fall of Singapore had to clear the streets of debris and build the Japanese temples. In earlier ages, when colonialism changed hands, the Dutch had not used the Portuguese, nor the British the Dutch in any such way. But the Japanese guards made it a point to have the white work gangs sweep the avenues and lanes of the former colonial citadel in full view of the Malays and Chinese in Singapore. The British might return. But they would not be able to turn the clock back. Something had snapped. Great Britain would never again recapture its former colonial grandeur.

## Conclusion

Churchill has called the surrender of Singapore Britain's worst military defeat in history.<sup>32</sup> By the same token, the conquest of Malaya was also Japan's greatest victory in her military history. In

that victory, however, lay from the beginning also folly and ultimate defeat. The Japanese leadership knew well that Japan lacked the resources to take on the entire colonial world in Asia. Only with luck and the gambling factor of a successful German axis partner could there be any hope to bring the foe to the negotiation table. And it would have to happen within two years at the very longest. It did of course not work that way. By taking on Europe and America, Japan not only managed to liberate Asia from Western colonialism, but in the end Japan, involuntarily, liberated Asia also from its own harsh brand of colonialism by bringing herself down in foreseeable eventual defeat. While the creaking end of European and Asian colonialism allowed Malaya to be ruled again by the Malayan people after a 450-year old colonial interlude, the Japanese occupation taught Malaya a number of lessons: imperialism was not a European monopoly; Asian powers could be as imperialist; above all, freedom from colonial control was possible.<sup>33</sup>

The sudden change from British to Japanese masters and the impact of virulent Japanese nationalism and pan-Asianism had served as a crammer course for nationalist feelings and burgeoning Malayan thoughts about political questions. Local men had been put in senior positions by the Japanese. Such elevation had fostered local professional pride. It instilled a new self-confidence in the Malayan population. In the end, the Malays emerged from the Occupation with a heightened sense of unity, and with patriotic sentiments and an attitude that would not accept another colonial period.<sup>34</sup> The door had stopped revolving.

## NOTES

- 1 Jan Ruff-O'Herne, 50 Years of Silence, Singapore: Toppan Co., p. 33. Noel Barber, Sinister Twilight, London: Arrow Books, 1968, pp. 21-23.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Interviews with Mrs Tsung Mei and Lo Gyo Tai, 11 August 1991, Iloilo, Malaysia.
- 4 Ong Chit Chung, Operation Matador: Britain's War Plans against the Japanese 1918-1941, Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997.
- 5 Gordon Bennett, Why Singapore Fell, Sydney: Angus & Robertson Ltd., 1944, p. 12.
- 6 Onishi Satoru, Hiroku: Shonan Kakyo shukusei jiken (Secret Record: The Shonanto Purge Incident), Tokyo: Kameoka Shuppan, 1977), pp. 12-13.
- 7 Masanobu Tsuji, Singapore 1941-1942: The Japanese Version of the Malayan Campaign of World War II (Singapore: Oxford U. P.), pp. 5-8, 25.
- 8 Onishi, op. cit., p. 28.
- 9 Miyake Genjiro, Video production by Eizo Bunka Kyokai, Shinryaku-Maree hanto: Oshierarenakatta senso (Aggression on the Malayan Peninsula: The war they did not teach us about), Tokyo: May 1992, 110 mins).
- 10 George B. Sansom, The Western World and Japan: A Study in the Interaction of European and Asiatic Cultures, Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1977, pp. 65-66; J. H. Parry, Europe and a Wider World, 1415-1715, London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1949, pp. 40-43; Charles R., Boxer, The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, New York: Knopf, 1969.
- 11 D. G. E. Hall, A History of South-East Asia, London: Macmillan, 1991, pp. 368-379.

- 12 David E. Steinberg, ed., In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989, pp. 140-42. Joginder Singh Jessy, History of South-East Asia (1824- 1965), Lunas: Penerbitan Darulaman, 1985, pp. 162-67.
- 13 Paul H. Kratoska, The Japanese Occupation of Malaya 1941-1945, London: Hurst & Co., 1998, pp. 19-20, 24.
- 14 See Hans Schweizer-Iten, One Hundred Years of the Swiss Club And the Swiss Community of Singapore 1871-1971, Singapore: Swiss Club, 1980, pp. 178-85, 215-16.
- 15 Kratoska, op. cit., p. 23 it was responsible for its own finances and governed by laws which conformed to general colonial practice but were passed as specifically Malaya legislation.
- 16 Kratoska, op. cit., 53
- 17 Syonan Shimbun, 15 December 1942.
- 18 Chin Kee Onn, Malaya Upside Down, Kuala Lumpur: Federal Publication, 1976, p. 99.
- 19 Indian residents were encouraged to join the Indian Independence League and 16,000 British surrendered Indian troops were enrolled in a newly formed Indian National Army. Many who did not join were killed. Kratoska, op. cit., p.
- 20 Ibid., pp. 4-5.
- 21 Ibid., pp. 4, 222.
- 22 Jessy, op. cit., 451-56,
- 23 Jessy, op. cit., 457-64,
- 24 Arai Mitsuo, Shingaporu senki (Singapore War Diary; Tokyo: Tosho Shuppan Sha, 1984), pp. 185-86 & interview, 10 October 1993, Kokura.
- 25 Department of External Affairs to Mr V. G. Bowden, Official Representative in Singapore, Cablegram 82, Canberra 10 February 1942, Secret & most immediate, No. 323, in Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937-49, January-June 1942: Vol. 5 [hereafter DAFP] Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1975, p. 503.
- 26 Department of External Affairs to Mr V. G. Bowden, Official Representative in Singapore, Cablegram 87, Canberra 11 February 1942, Secret & most immediate, No. 326, in DAFP, p. 514.
- 27 Mr V. G. Bowden, Official Representative in Singapore to Department of External Affairs, Cablegram 143, Canberra 12 February 1942, Secret, No. 331, in DAFP, p. 518.
- 28 Mr V. G. Bowden, Official Representative in Singapore to Department of External Affairs, Cablegram 143, Canberra 14 February 1942, 11 a.m., No. 333, in DAFP, p. 520.
- 29 DAFP, pp. 520-21.
- 30 Lionel Wigmore, The Japanese Thrust, Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1957, pp. 385-86.
- 31 Richard Gough, The Escape From Singapore, Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1988, pp. 70, 93, 187. Documents on Australian Foreign Policy, 1937-1949, Canberra: Diplomatic Representatives - Australian (Including High Commissioner and Official Representatives): Official Representative - Singapore - BOWDEN, V. G. - Presumption of Death, Doc No. IC45/64/1/1/1.
- 32 Churchill, Sir Winston S., History of World War II: The Hinge of Fate, London: Cassell, 1951.
- 33 Wang Gungwu, "The Japanese Occupation and Post-War Malaya, 1941-1948", in Wang Gungwu, ed., History of the Malaysian States, Singapore: Lembaga Gerakan Pelajaran Dewasa, 1965.
- 34 H. T. Silcock and Ungku Aziz, "Nationalism in Malaya", L. W. Holland, Asian Nationalism and the West, New York: Macmillan, 1953, pp. 289-98.