

Japanese Occupation of Singapore: Oral Sources

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"Haigun no shō hei o Katarazu"
"Defeated generals should not talk of battle" (Marder ix)

In early 1941, Singapore was a modern metropolis with a population of 650,000 people. Singapura or "City of the Lion" ranked as one of the leading ports of call in the world—a commercial centre *par excellence*. The greater part of the world's rubber and immense quantities of tin were shipped from its shores, as well as Manila hemp, Burma teak, Thailand rice, and Sarawak oil stored for a short time in Singapore's busy warehouses before going to the world markets. Singapore, together with Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, and the Panama Canal, all controlled by Anglo-American interests, were geopolitical linchpins of the four great gateways of the world.

Singapore played a similar role militarily. With a new airport formally opened in 1937 and the largest naval base in the world, capable of accommodating the entire British Fleet, completed in 1938, Singapore was the centre-piece for the Imperial defence of the British Empire in Asia. With Europe at war since 1939, south-east Asia with its French, Dutch, and American colonies had to be defended against any hostile action. The most likely candidate appeared to be the Japanese who had invaded China in the 1930s, and were now poised to extend their slogan of "Asia for the Asiatics" southward. However, according to the American Vice-Consul in Singapore, H. Gordon Minnigerode, Singapore was prepared for any threat:

Whatever may be the outcome of the present situation in the Far East, no effort has been spared by those responsible for the safety of the great Singapore fortress to make it impregnable. Singapore is ready!" (686)

Beneath the surface of military and economic might, Singapore was a multi-cultural colony with a diversity of languages and religions—all of which lived in an, at times, uneasy relationship with each other and with British colonial power. Historically, Singapore was an entrepôt, a clearing house of labour and talent, goods and capital for peninsular south-east Asia. Immigrants came from the Middle East (Moslem and Jew), India and China to labour, accumulate capital, and perhaps start their own retail enterprises, or to gain employment with the colonial administration and/or the European

capitalist enterprises. Among its population of over half a million, 80 per cent were Chinese and they lived mostly in the city. In the rural areas lived the Malays, some 75,000, who also populated the neighbouring Malaya and the nearby Dutch colony of what is now Indonesia. The vast majority of Malays were Moslem and worked as clerks, gardeners, and chauffeurs. The Indian population totalled 60,000 and included Hindus, Sikhs, and Moslems. Most of the European population of 14,000 (excluding troops) were British and were either in business or the civil service. Finally, there was a substantial number of Eurasians (8,000), products of Asian and European marriages, who were, for the most part, in the civil service at a junior level.

In a colonial setting like Singapore, there were some clearly understood guidelines as to social acceptability across ethnic lines. As Dr. Oehlers, a Eurasian remembers:

We have this in-born feeling, this feeling was inculcated to us—that the white man was lord, you know, and you were second class—. We were back to the days when we were not permitted to enter Tanglin Club [a European-only club] even though we might have been invited by somebody. Not admitted, not permitted to step foot in the Swimming Club.(2)

Again, from Ronald Milne of English and Chinese parentage:

... colour played a very big part in Singapore, whether you were either white or brown or black ... [even] the Eurasians, they sort of try to classify class by colour—the fair Eurasians, the not-so-fair and the dark Eurasians.(96)

Each group tended to live in its own area, the Indian population in “Little India” or the Malays in the kampongs outside the city core, each divided by mutually understood boundaries of propriety and prejudice. B.H. Melwani certainly noticed these divisions upon his arrival in Singapore in 1941:

There was very little of inter-mixing between the races in Singapore. Although we were Chinese and Indians staying perhaps side by side, but they are a secluded community. Business also, we had very little with the Chinese. But normally, everyday life, we were surrounded by Indian Community—our social everything was Indian, our food was Indian, games, everything were all Indian. If I’m not mistaken, even among the Chinese, the Hokkiens were on their own. It’s only after the war that they began intermingling. Before that they were all closed community.(6)

Naturally, the colonial government sought its own loyalties and found them to a limited extent among the Eurasian population and the “Baba/Nonyo” or Peranakan population, these being Chinese who had arrived in Malaya in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, married locally and who identified strongly with the British colonial administration. Lee Kip Lin, from a Peranakan family, observed:

... the Baba families ... had very little contact with the Chinese community in those days—. I think partly due to ... the indoctrination they received from the British or rather the English education from the English schools. (5)

In addition to the clash of colour and class in any colony, there was also the current political situation in East Asia. Conflict between Japanese and Chinese troops in China had intensified with the outbreak of hostilities in 1937 between the two countries, and the small population of Japanese in Singapore bore the brunt of Chinese hostility:

And Japanese boys were being stoned in those early days in 1937 when the war broke out ... and some shops selling Japanese goods were tarred with black oil, black tar. (Chin 7)

Given cultural and political animosity, it was not difficult to accept the British military and civilian mindset that permeated the society and was preparing the population for the possibility of a war with Japan. Victor Krusemann remembered basic training with the Singapore Volunteer Force in 1940 and what he was told:

... your enemy would be little yellow men who have got very bad eyesight—yellow men with very bad eyesight. They don’t make good pilots because they cannot see at night. Who they were, we could only guess. But no mention was made of what nationality they were. (1)

In December, 1941, bombs fell on this centre of linguistic and cultural diversity when one of the newer imperial powers, Japan, sought to expand their fiat into south-east Asia and become a major power on the Pacific Rim. Yeoh Seang Aun was a student at the medical college in Singapore when the sirens erupted unexpectedly:

We were suddenly awakened by the wail of air-raid sirens. Previously, as we knew in Singapore, there had been frequent air-raid practices. And when one heard this air-raid sirens wailing in

the early morning of December 8th, one was a little bit uncertain; it was not announced in the papers that there was an air-raid practice or anything like that. The searchlights had been switched on and you could see them scanning the sky. And in the midst of this, we could hear a drone of planes and I remember well seeing that there was a plane which was caught in the beam of light. And then we suddenly heard the swish as if bombs were dropping. We got very frightened. (14)

On the morning of December 7, 1941, the American Naval Base at Pearl Harbour was attacked by Japanese aircraft and most of the American Pacific fleet was destroyed or severely disabled within a couple of hours. This was the first in a series of catastrophic events that would result in the conquest of the whole of south-east Asia by the Japanese Military Forces by June of 1942. This "Day of Infamy", however, had already begun some two hours before the Japanese bombs had rained on the American base. Japanese forces landed on the northeastern coast of Malaya and began a lightning-like advance that would affect the whole of south-east Asia and place this vast territory and its valuable resources under direct Japanese military control until August, 1945.

The cornerstone to Japanese success was the conquest of the island of Singapore, situated at the tip of the Malayan Peninsula. With the fall of Singapore and its successful occupation by the Japanese, a south-east Asian capital for Japan's "Greater East Co-Prosperity Sphere" would become a reality. Singapore would be known henceforth as "Syonan-to" or "Light of the South".

On February 15, 1942, after a six-week siege, Singapore surrendered to Lieutenant-General Yamashita Tomoyuki and what Churchill called "the hinge of Fate" slammed shut on the population of Singapore for the next forty-two months.

With the Japanese in control, the captured British troops and their allies filed away to Changi prison and resident Europeans were imprisoned. There they were to remain for the rest of the war with the exception of those who were taken to complete the Burma-Siam railroad—the "Death Railroad" as it became known. Those of the indigenous population who were suspected of collaboration did not get off as easily. The "mopping up" operation that went on into March and April included the rounding up of all Chinese males between fifteen and sixty-five years of age. Several thousand who were suspected of helping the British or of sending financial assistance to China simply disappeared. Estimates of deaths were anywhere from twenty thousand to fifty thousand. This "sook ching" operation was certainly sufficient to intimidate the remainder of the population into accepting Japanese control and maintaining a passive neutrality to the new

colonial administration. This neutrality meant non-cooperation to some, while to others it led to an acquiescence to the “new order.” There were also many who collaborated in some fashion simply to survive and feed their families, while a few worked for the Kempeitai (Secret Police) as informers or were recruited as “Heiho”—para-military troops. Many within the Indian population were seized by the enthusiasm, always present, of freeing India from British colonialism. Led by the nationalist, Subhas Chandra Bose, and aided by the Japanese, the Indian Nationalist Army was formed to fight for India’s freedom. Malays were considered by the Japanese as “owners-of-the-soil” and Malay nationalist movements in Java and Malaya were given considerable encouragement.

By 1943, several thousand Singaporeans were emigrating to the mainland as widespread hunger and poverty struck Singapore. Some went on their own while others, especially the Eurasian and Christian Chinese, were “voluntarily” resettled by the Japanese administration.

By early 1945, it was becoming obvious that the fall of the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” was a question of time. The population of Singapore realized with food shortages, lack of material, and increased allied bombing raids that the British and Americans were at the island’s doorstep. When news of the dropping of the Atomic Bomb and the subsequent Japanese surrender spread unofficially throughout the island, there was a diplomatic silence on the part of the Singaporeans given the large number of Japanese troops present. By early September, 1945, the British forces arrived to a jubilant welcome and the formal surrender to Lord Louis Mountbatten of the South East Asian Command took place.

Sometime between Emperor Hirohito’s order to cease fighting and the British arrival in Singapore in early September, 1945, the Japanese Military Administration carried out a systematic destruction of the administrative records of the occupation. The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) records in Washington and the War Office records in Great Britain are slight on the internal situation in Singapore; thus the documentary record is not abundant. With a censored and government controlled newspaper, and the real danger of keeping letters, diaries, and other documents, an account of the forty-two months that Singapore was under Japanese hegemony must be found elsewhere.

The Japanese invasion, conquest and subsequent occupation of Singapore provides an interesting contrast in terms of primary and secondary research sources. The dramatic invasion and conquest of Singapore, and to a somewhat lesser extent Malaya, has prompted a deluge of material over the decades. Academic and popular histories have been written, novels and short stories published, and television and radio programs produced about what was considered the greatest military defeat of the British army ever and certainly the greatest victory of a non-European power—Japan—since

this self-same power had defeated the Russians some thirty-five years previously during the Russo-Japanese war. In an analysis of an extensive bibliography of the Malayan military campaign and the Japanese period published in 1988 it was observed that over 1200 published items have been listed, all publications by academics, journalists, and eyewitnesses of the events between 1941 and 1945.(Corfield, *passim*) The vast majority have been published by authors of European or North American origins, and these accounts tend to concentrate, perhaps not surprisingly, on three major areas of interest. Over 60 per cent of these published items deal almost exclusively with the Japanese invasion and the battle for Singapore. Another 35 per cent dealt with prisoner-of-war accounts, universally European, and with the resistance movements during the occupation. This 35 per cent also includes some work done on the British Military Administration of the area after 1945. Very little, relatively speaking, has been written in English, Chinese, Japanese, or Malay on the three years and six months of the Japanese occupation from the perspective of the Singapore citizenry. In addition, due to the conditions of the occupation, little primary source material has survived in any language. Somewhat ironically, the further back in time the event occurred, the more original historical material comes to light. Due to the efforts of the National Museum and Oral History Department of Singapore, the media coverage of the period and, of course, the inevitable World War II commemorations, several new publications have appeared. These have been both historical and fictional (sometimes both), but do serve to fill in large gaps in the information available. What is clear, however, is that these new sources are virtually all memoirs or memories—the latter drawn from the extensive oral history collection of the Singapore Oral History Department. In a virtual lacuna of documentation contemporaneous with the event, remembrances either spoken or written are, of course, prime documentation.

Well over two hundred interviews have been collected by the staff of the Oral History Department. In addition, other projects on ethnic communities in Singapore and biographies of early entrepreneurs have, of necessity, included briefer accounts of the occupation period. Since it was established fifteen years ago, the Singapore Oral History Department has carried out continuous collecting of its projects. The *Singapore Under the Japanese* collection can easily satisfy the research needs of many historians. The very existence of this collection, which has already drawn a number of researchers to it, provides some interesting methodological possibilities and problems. It is easily accessible and many tapes have been systematically transcribed. In addition, many have been translated, a boon to the researcher of a multi-lingual nation. Finally, few interviews have been closed to the researcher and many of those that are closed can be opened by consulting a member of the informant's family. Almost all of the interviews have been done by

trained staff members of the Department or contract workers. This has meant a carefully administered questionnaire approach with a commonality of methodology. It has also meant a "state approach" to history, which has led to opposition and non-cooperation among some politicians and academics. This problem pervades all oral history collections done by the Department such as those examining ethnic communities, or interviews with former politicians in opposition to the governing party. This is a problem not uncommon to many state-sponsored histories in many parts of the world.

With regard to the specific collection on the Japanese occupation, the first item of note is that the majority of interviews on this period has been done with males as informants. (The interviewers tended to be both males and females). Accounts of the military campaign and military matters, as well as employment outside of the home, dominated their views. There was a scarcity of female accounts, but those collected provided considerable insight into everyday life at home and perhaps in a market stall.

Nevertheless, there is little on the treatment of women during or after the conquest, especially in matters like physical abuse and rape, which certainly occurred when the Japanese conquered Nanking, China, in 1937. Despite the recent publicity of the forced use of Korean and Filipino women as prostitutes by the Japanese, there is little in these accounts of this matter. But who will speak voluntarily of the forbidden?

There was certainly a role for children in the "new order." Many children became the sole breadwinners in the home, as they quickly picked up the Japanese language and were viewed with considerable tolerance by the Japanese forces. They, usually boys, could thus circulate in the city without causing too much suspicion. This is an excellent source for children's history, but again, as with the whole collection, this will have a male bias.

A second difficulty is with regard to the various economic strata of Singaporean society at the time. The bulk of the interviews have tended to favour the successful and middle or upper class members of society. It is difficult to find an account by fishermen, labourers, or trishaw/rickshaw pullers, many of whom may not have survived the rigours of war to recount their stories. As an aside, there were, of course, oral history interviews done of life during the Japanese occupation during World War II. These were the interrogation sessions with escapees from Singapore and documented in Washington by the OSS. They provide an interesting comparison with the more recent interviews.

Finally, the ethnic orientation of those interviewed is for the most part Chinese. Not surprisingly, a disproportionate number of Eurasians responded to the publicity to be interviewed, as also did a number from the Indian community. The Malay community is not well represented, but

special efforts are being made since the occupation project ended to address that omission. Again, in ethnic matters the fluid nature of loyalties and relationships must be acknowledged. The Chinese, for example, include a number of dialect groups (Hakka, Hokkien, and Teochew). In addition, the Christian Chinese community had strong British sympathies, as did the Peranakan communities of both Singapore and Malaya noted earlier. With this in mind, a straightforward compartmentalization by ethnic groups would be a mistake.

However, just as the colonial period carried its own categorization of ethnic groups in Singapore, so did Syonan-to. The Europeans, unless German or from a neutral power, were placed in prison camps. Some Eurasians, especially those who "looked European" were also imprisoned. The Indian population was encouraged to join the war against Britain by participating in the Indian Independence Movement and the National Army. The response was mixed. The Malays, perceived as indigenous to Singapore, were provided with civil service positions and para-military ranks that they had not enjoyed before. However, given the experiences of war, there was no overall ethnic plan nor, despite more recent pronouncements by contemporary Japanese leaders, any *planned* move towards political independence. It wasn't until 1943 and after, when the war started going badly for Japan, that independence was promised, and provided to Filipino and Indonesian leaders before the war ended. Obviously, some comparative work on the Japanese occupation among all south-east Asian states affected by the war would be very useful in the near future to fully understand the impact on the population.

As can be surmised from the Singapore interviews, a number of factors affected the rise of nationalism after the war and also affected ethnic relations as well. The differing policies adopted by the Japanese administration towards the population have been noted. Also, the devastating effect of the "sook ching," the differing roles of various ethnic groups in the civil and military service, the economic dislocation of the war, and the early defeat of the Imperial British army by a Japanese army half its size all had their impact.

Often in Singapore is stated the widespread perception that Singapore's wartime experience gave rise to a surge of nationalism and a desire for independence when the British returned in 1945. Lee Kuan Yew, former Prime Minister, has expressed this viewpoint a number of times. In addition, various museums and monuments have emphasized the defeat of the Japanese more than the departure of the British in the context of nationalism. In December of 1991, *The Straits Times*, Singapore's largest daily, began a ten-part series of articles, "The War Years," to mark the 50th anniversary of World War II. Much of it was based on the Oral History Department's collection. Plainly, the war years had and continue to have

their impact in building nationalism and the interviews that have been collected also continue to make a contribution.

The Singapore Oral History Department's collection of materials on the Japanese occupation during the Second World War is meticulously collected, scrupulously organized, and immediately accessible to users. They provide one of the more comprehensive collections of one former colony's view (or views) of the war. Since the collection is ongoing and being continued the omissions noted above can be corrected through time, one hopes, before key informants are lost. World War II is a watershed for many former colonies of the European Imperial powers, a time of changing ethnic interaction, nascent nationalism, and anti-colonialism. It is also a time of lost or destroyed documentation. Oral sources will provide a valuable overview of life in occupied Singapore, an island that was a prison without walls for the majority of the population for forty-two months.

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