

SINGAPORE: TASK INSTRUCTIONS

The key question: Why was the fall of Singapore such a shock?

Your task

Your task is to discover why the fall of Singapore was considered such a shock when there had been earlier defeats.

Click on the starter source for more details then open the source box.

Use this table to record your comments.

Download a PDF of this whole investigation.

WHY WAS THE FALL OF SINGAPORE SUCH A SHOCK?

On February 15th 1942 Lieutenant General Percival surrendered Singapore to the Japanese commander General Yamashita. This event sent shockwaves through the British Empire.

Your task

You must discover why the fall of Singapore was considered such a shock when there had been earlier defeats. Why was the loss of Singapore especially humiliating? Study the sources and the notes to help you understand this reaction.

Use this [table](#) to record your comments.

INDIAN TROOPS ARRIVING IN SINGAPORE NOVEMBER 1941

Catalogue ref: FE 218

Courtesy of [Imperial War Museum](http://www.imperialwar.com)



ASIA 1939–1945: SINGAPORE

What is this source?

The photograph shows Indian troops arriving to help with the defence of Singapore in late 1941. By February 1942 all the men shown here would have been killed or captured by Japanese forces.

This is an official photograph taken by army photographers. It comes from the archive collection at the Imperial War Museum. The Ministry of Information and the Armed Services took thousands of photographs to serve as a permanent record of the conflict and for use by news journalists, in advertising and as propaganda.

What's the background to this source?

WW2 broke out in Europe in 1939. In the Far East war broke out on December 7th 1941 when Japanese forces destroyed the US fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. However, it was very clear before December 1941 that Japan was a threat to the British Empire in the Far East. Japan had established good relations with Nazi Germany and become part of the Axis Pact. Throughout the 1930s Japan had built up an empire in the Far East. It invaded Manchuria in 1931, China in 1937 (including Korea) and French Indochina (modern day Vietnam) in 1940. This brought the Japanese to the borders of Malaya. Malaya was part of the British Empire. At the southern tip of Malaya was the island and naval base of Singapore, the most important base in the British Empire outside Britain itself.

Britain made a great show of reinforcing the defences of the island. As well as the measures in these photographs Prime Minister Churchill sent a naval squadron including the brand new battleship Prince of Wales to Singapore. In reality, however, much of this was bluff. Britain was fighting in North Africa and was also sending arms and equipment to help the USSR fight off Hitler's invasion of Russia that began in June 1941.

It's worth knowing that..

British propaganda had built up Singapore as being a virtually impregnable naval base. If attacked from the sea it was very formidable. However, the Japanese attacked by air and by crossing into the jungle behind Singapore and then advancing by land.

ASIA 1939–1945: SINGAPORE

When Singapore fell in 1942 the story was widely told that the guns (see the photograph in the source box) were pointing the wrong way, out to sea. In fact this is a myth. However, the guns did have too many armour piercing shells (designed to sink ships) and not enough high explosive shells that would have been more effective against the Japanese armies.

How will you use this source?

1. What impression do you get from the faces and body language of the people in the photograph?
2. Would a British audience seeing this image in 1941 be reassured about the strength of Singapore?
3. How do the notes and sources help you to find out why the fall of Singapore was such a shock?

Use this [table](#) to record your comments.

WHY WAS THE FALL OF SINGAPORE SUCH A SHOCK?

Extract from a report on the fall of Singapore 1942

Catalogue ref: WO 208/1529

The general feeling of security evident in Malaya at this time was based on the view, expressed officially by specialists, that Japan was most unlikely to risk hostilities with Britain and the U.S.A. simultaneously. In addition, the rapid increase of the number of aerodromes naturally suggested an increase in the air strength and it was, in fact, officially announced that an attempted Japanese invasion from the sea would be frustrated by air action. This forecast may have been based on the date of arrival of extra aircraft before the Japanese could undertake landings on the East Coast.

Landings in this area were considered impracticable during the prevalence of the N.E. monsoon, i.e., from December to the end of February; when the enemy seized KOTA BAHRU from the sea between the 6th and 10th December and launched at the same time a large scale offensive in the West Coast, our programme of preparation was seriously disorganized.

The local press, by consistently disparaging the quality of the enemy's air force, and otherwise showing a poor opinion of his general efficiency, helped to build up a dangerously complacent attitude and in Malaya ease and complacency flourish without outside assistance.

Though there were some specialists who distrusted this attitude, it is no exaggeration to say that from the Governor downwards, among civil servants and soldiers alike, there was a general belief that, at the best, there would probably be no war with Japan; at the worst, that they would make no move until February 1942.

What is this source?

This is an extract from an official British government report on the fall of Singapore in February 1942.

There were many reports from different officers in different services that were sent to the government. This report was published some time after the fall and probably tried to make use of the other reports.

ASIA 1939–1945: SINGAPORE

What's the background to this source?

WW2 broke out in Europe in 1939. In the Far East war broke out on December 7th 1941 when Japanese forces destroyed the US fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Japan had already built up forces in Indochina and Thailand and surprised the British forces by attacking Malaya (part of the British Empire) in December 1941. Although the Allied forces outnumbered the Japanese, they were less experienced and less well equipped. The British also did not expect to attack Singapore by advancing 600 miles through difficult territory in Malaya. By February 1942 the Japanese were attacking the heavily fortified naval base of Singapore and it surrendered on February 15th 1942.

The defenders outnumbered the attackers at Singapore. However, the Japanese were better trained and equipped. They were especially strong in terms of aircraft. Defenders were constantly attacked from the air. One of the deciding factors in the surrender was the heavy civilian casualties suffered from bombing by aircraft. A related factor was that Singapore's anti-aircraft defences ran out of ammunition.

It's worth knowing that...

Soon after the fall of Singapore the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill asked the Australian Prime Minister to support him in opposing calls for a full public enquiry into the disaster at Singapore.

Many of the reports submitted by British officers after Singapore heavily criticised the Australian troops. However, most reports claimed that the real problem was very poor leadership by the British army and naval forces.

How will you use this source?

1. What conclusions, on the part of the British, turned out to be wrong?
2. Does the report suggest that the commanders were to blame for these errors in judgement?
3. Does the report criticise anyone else?
4. How do the notes and sources help you to find out why the fall of Singapore was such a shock?

Use this [table](#) to record your comments.

WHY WAS THE FALL OF SINGAPORE SUCH A SHOCK?

Extract from a report by an officer who escaped the fall of Singapore 1942

Catalogue ref: WO 106/2579B

Extract a

A few General Remarks Bearing on the Campaign.

Civil incompetence.

Administration broke down. No plan for, or system of evacuation of the population had been arranged (this in spite of lessons from other theatres.) This enabled the Japs to mingle with the local population and made the job of fifth columnists a sinecure. The Police, in almost all cases, disappeared.

Intelligence.

Poor. Underestimated Jap strength and intentions before the war - overestimated it during the war.

Staff Work.

Must have left much to be desired when one considers the number of changes made during the short campaign. Were there too many cooks? War House, C-in-C Far East, G.O.C. in C, Corps, divs etc. Sometimes orders came direct from div; bde uninformed. Conflicting orders; often late and sometimes none. Were H.Qs too far back and were they usually out of the picture or out of date?

Information.

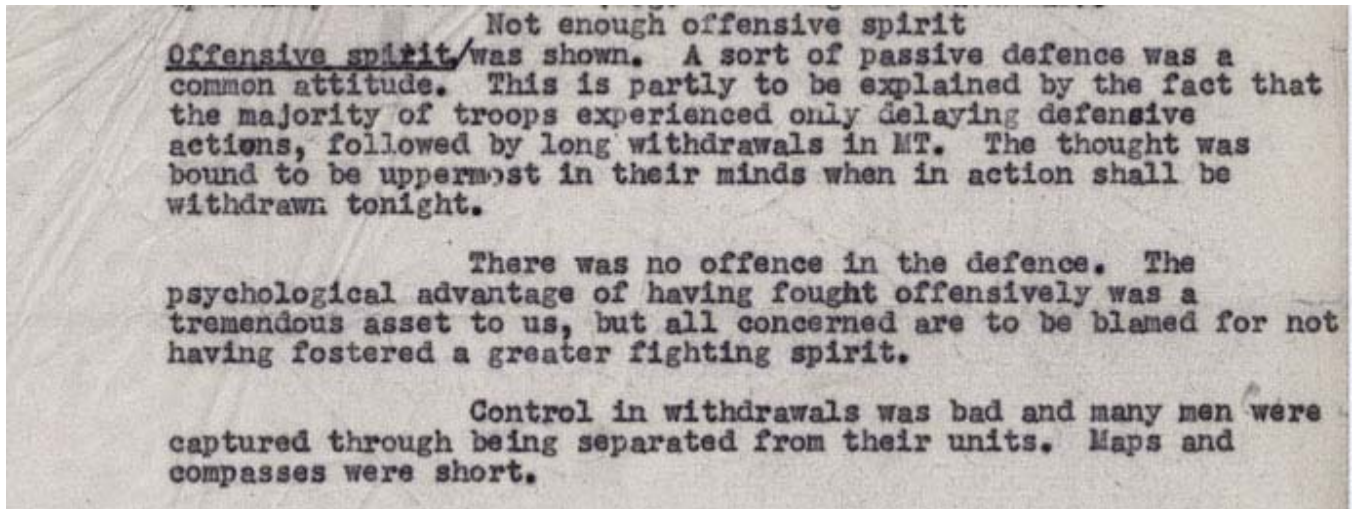
The lack of it was deplorable. We got little or none and rarely even knew what was happening in other formations in Malaya.

Promised air parity in January! Continual vague talk of counter-offensive which never happened, presumably because the Japs retained the initiative and we continued to conform to his movements.

Defence of Singapore.

Why were beach defences not prepared? They may have been in some parts; there certainly was not as much as a strand of wire or a trench on the North East. There were some R.A. positions.

Extract b



What is this source?

This source is an extract from a report by a British officer who was in Singapore as it fell in February 1942.

There were many reports from different officers in different services that were sent to the government.

What's the background to this source?

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The defenders outnumbered the attackers at Singapore. However, the Japanese were better trained and equipped. They were especially strong in terms of aircraft. Defenders were constantly attacked from the air. One of the deciding factors in the surrender was the heavy civilian casualties suffered from bombing by aircraft. A related factor was that Singapore's anti-aircraft defences ran out of ammunition.

ASIA 1939–1945: SINGAPORE

It's worth knowing that...

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill admitted to US President Roosevelt in a telegram that the fall of Singapore had been a total disaster.

Debate still rages today about whether British forces could have held out in Singapore. The British Commander General Wavell said he was very disappointed with his performance. However, one of the crucial factors was Japanese superiority in aircraft. Many of the aircraft that Britain planned to send to Malaya and Singapore ended up going to Russia in 1941.

How will you use this source?

1. The officer lists six problem areas. Which do you think did most harm to the defence of Singapore?
2. Some officers were accused of trying to shift the blame away from themselves after Singapore. Do you get the impression that this officer is trustworthy or not?
3. In what ways does this source support or contradict any other sources in this investigation?
4. How do the notes and sources help you to find out why the fall of Singapore was such a shock?

Use this [table](#) to record your comments.

WHY WAS THE FALL OF SINGAPORE SUCH A SHOCK?

Extracts from a report on the health of prisoners at Changi prisoner of war camp in Singapore July 1942

Catalogue ref: CAB 106/42

| SICK. | | | | | |
|-------------------|---------------------|------------------|------------------------|----------|--|
| No. excused work. | No. with diarrhoea. | No. with dengue. | No. with skin disease. | Remarks. | |
| 81 | 16 | 16 | 45 | | |

| CLOTHING. | | | | | |
|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|----------|
| No. with no boots. | No. with bad boots. | No. with unserviceable shirts. | No. with unserviceable shorts. | No. with no hats. | Remarks. |
| 70 | 451 | 25 | 59 | 198 | |

Subject:- Medical Supplies. AM/2.

To:- Officer Commanding,
Imperial Japanese Army
Guard over Prisoners of War.

On the 30th. June I informed you that the Medical Officer in charge of this Camp required medical supplies. On the 3rd. July I informed you that these supplies could not be obtained from Changi Hospital but were to be supplied by the Japanese Army Medical Service in accordance with Imperial Japanese Army Order No. 259 dated 30th. June. This morning we were given by your Medical Officer one small bottle of iodine, one tin of aspirin tablets, two small bottles of disinfectant and three packages of bandages. These supplies are totally inadequate for this Camp. At the moment the Doctor has no medicine with which to treat cases of diarrhoea or dysentery and these medicines are urgently required.

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What is this source?

This source comes from a report by the commanding officer of the British POWs (prisoners of war) in the Changi Prison Camp in 1942.

The extract is one of a series of exchanges between the officer and the commander of the camp

What's the background to this source?

In February 1942 Singapore fell to the Japanese army. Around 80000 troops defending Singapore surrendered. Around 30000 had already surrendered in Malaya in December 1941 to February 1942. Some of these prisoners were held in Singapore at camps like Changi. Thousands more were shipped out to Singapore to work on a railway for the Japanese forces, as well as other projects.

The death rates in Japanese prison camps were extremely high. Estimates vary from around 30% to 37%. The main causes of death were disease, inadequate food and brutal treatment by Japanese captors.

It's worth knowing that...

As well as the approximately 130000 prisoners taken in Singapore there were thousands of other civilians used in labour camps by the Japanese.

The issue of whether Japan accepted its guilt for the treatment of prisoners is still controversial today. Many British former POWs still believe they should get compensation and an apology from Japan.

How will you use this source?

1. What health problems are listed in this source?
2. What does this source tell you about conditions for the POWs?
3. What does the source suggest about the attitude of the Japanese commander?
4. How do the notes and sources help you to find out why the fall of Singapore was such a shock?

Use this [table](#) to record your comments.

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/>

WHY WAS THE FALL OF SINGAPORE SUCH A SHOCK?

Australian nurses serving on a hospital ship waiting to land at Singapore October 1941

Catalogue ref: FE 49

Courtesy of [Imperial War Museum](#)



<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/>

What is this source?

This photograph shows service women from the British Empire arriving in Singapore in October 1941. They are official photographs taken by army photographers.

This is an official photograph taken by army photographers. It comes from the archive collection at the Imperial War Museum. The Ministry of Information and the Armed Services took thousands of photographs to serve as a permanent record of the conflict and for use by news journalists, in advertising and as propaganda.

What's the background to this source?

WW2 broke out in Europe in 1939. In the Far East war broke out on December 7th 1941 when Japanese forces destroyed the US fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. However, it was very clear before December 1941 that Japan was a threat to the British Empire in the Far East. Japan had established good relations with Nazi Germany and become part of the Axis Pact. Throughout the 1930s Japan had built up an empire in the Far East. It invaded Manchuria in Northern China in 1931 and advanced further into the country in 1937. By 1940 it had flooded French Indochina (today Vietnam) with troops. This brought the Japanese to the borders of Malaya. Malaya was part of the British Empire. At the southern tip of Malaya was the island and naval base of Singapore, the most important base in the British Empire outside Britain itself.

Britain made a great show of reinforcing the defences of the island. As well as the measures in these photographs Prime Minister Churchill sent a naval squadron including the brand new battleship Prince of Wales to Singapore. In reality, however, much of this was bluff. Britain was fighting in North Africa and was also sending arms and equipment to help the USSR fight off Hitler's invasion of Russia that began in June 1941.

It's worth knowing that...

British propaganda had built up Singapore as being a virtually impregnable naval base. If attacked from the sea it was very formidable. However, the Japanese attacked by air and by crossing into the jungle behind Singapore and then advancing by land.

ASIA 1939–1945: SINGAPORE

When Singapore fell in 1942 the story was widely told that the guns (see the photograph in the source box) were pointing the wrong way, out to sea. In fact this is a myth. However, the guns did have too many armour piercing shells (designed to sink ships) and not enough high explosive shells that would have been more effective against the Japanese armies.

How will you use this source?

1. What impression do you get from the faces and body language of the people in the photograph?
2. Would a British audience seeing this image in 1941 be reassured about the strength of Singapore?
3. How do the notes and sources help you to find out why the fall of Singapore was such a shock?

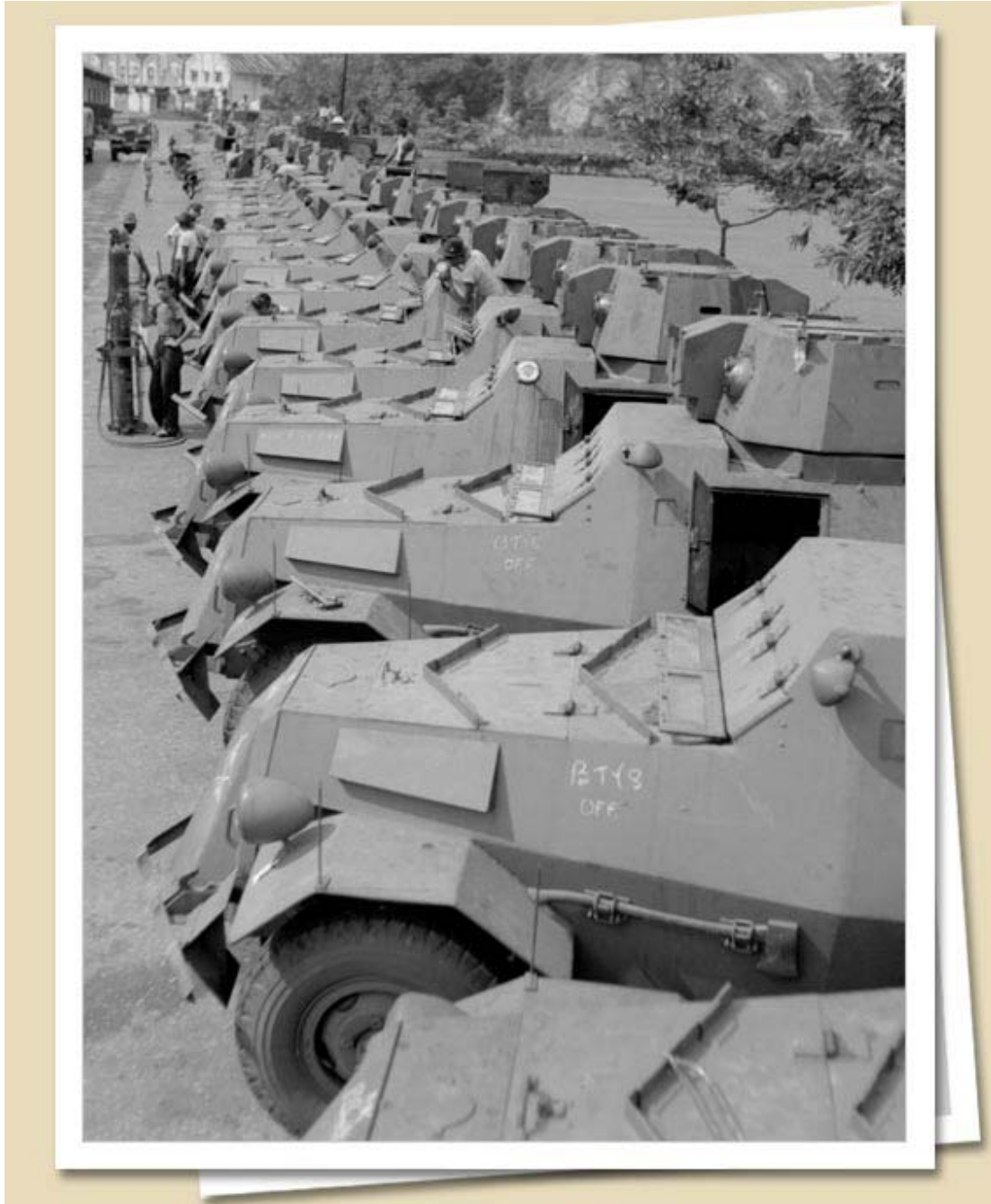
Use this [table](#) to record your comments.

WHY WAS THE FALL OF SINGAPORE SUCH A SHOCK?

Armoured cars waiting to be issued to troops in Singapore December 1941

Catalogue ref: FE 481

Courtesy of [Imperial War Museum](http://www.imperialwar.com)



ASIA 1939–1945: SINGAPORE

What is this source?

This photograph shows some armoured cars waiting to be issued to troops in Singapore in December 1941. By February 1942, Japanese forces would have captured most of this equipment.

This is an official photograph taken by army photographers. It comes from the archive collection at the Imperial War Museum. The Ministry of Information and the Armed Services took thousands of photographs to serve as a permanent record of the conflict and for use by news journalists, in advertising and as propaganda.

What's the background to this source?

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How will you use this source?

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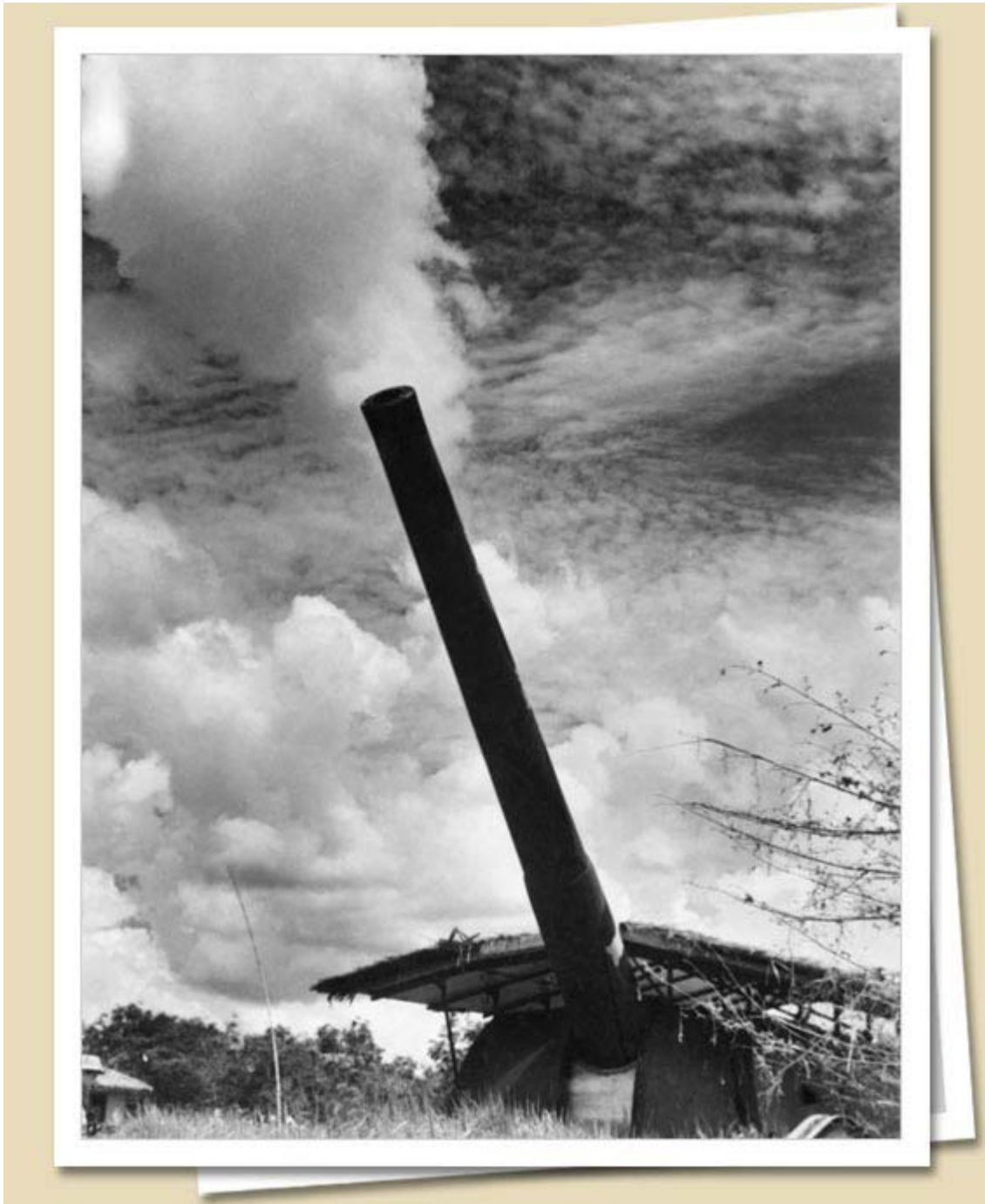
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WHY WAS THE FALL OF SINGAPORE SUCH A SHOCK?

Photograph of naval defence guns at Singapore being tested, December 1941

Catalogue ref: K 757

Courtesy of [Imperial War Museum](http://www.imperialwar.com)



<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/>

What is this source?

This is a photograph of naval defence guns at Singapore being tested in December 1941. By February 1942, Japanese forces would have captured most of this equipment.

This is an official photograph taken by army photographers. It comes from the archive collection at the Imperial War Museum. The Ministry of Information and the Armed Services took thousands of photographs to serve as a permanent record of the conflict and for use by news journalists, in advertising and as propaganda.

What's the background to this source?

WW2 broke out in Europe in 1939. In the Far East war broke out on December 7th 1941 when Japanese forces destroyed the US fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. However, it was very clear before December 1941 that Japan was a threat to the British Empire in the Far East. Japan had established good relations with Nazi Germany and become part of the Axis Pact. Throughout the 1930s Japan had built up an empire in the Far East. It invaded Manchuria in Northern China in 1931 and advanced further into the country in 1937. By 1940 it had flooded French Indochina (today Vietnam) with troops. This brought the Japanese to the borders of Malaya. Malaya was part of the British Empire. At the southern tip of Malaya was the island and naval base of Singapore, the most important base in the British Empire outside Britain itself.

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WHY WAS THE FALL OF SINGAPORE SUCH A SHOCK?

Film clip from a British newsreel called News from Singapore, January 1942

ITN Ref: BP150142131416

Courtesy of [ITN/Source](#), London.

"Planes! We must have more planes."

The cry that was heard above the din of battle in Norway, France, Crete and Britain comes now from Malaya.

Early in December just prior to the first Japanese raid, a consignment of Beaufort aircraft arrived at Singapore, fresh from Commonwealth factories and so soon to go into action.

North of Singapore in the Malay Peninsula Australian troops help to make every inch of the way to the fortress island a deathtrap for the yellow plague infecting the strait settlement.

In a jungle waterway, patrol boat on the lookout for Japs. Patrols like this may suddenly come across hundreds of them scurrying about the undergrowth and scaling trees like so many monkeys.

Mind you, a digger is no amateur at climbing trees, especially when it's a coconut palm.

ASIA 1939–1945: SINGAPORE**What is this source?**

This source is an extract from a British newsreel broadcast on January 15th 1942.

The government would have closely controlled the newsreels of this period.

What's the background to this source?

WW2 broke out in Europe in 1939. In the Far East war broke out on December 7th 1941 when Japanese forces destroyed the US fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. However, it was very clear before December 1941 that Japan was a threat to the British Empire in the Far East. Japan had established good relations with Nazi Germany and become part of the Axis Pact. Throughout the 1930s Japan had built up an empire in the Far East. It invaded Manchuria in 1931, China in 1937 (including Korea) and French Indochina (modern day Vietnam) in 1940. This brought the Japanese to the borders of Malaya. Malaya was part of the British Empire. At the southern tip of Malaya was the island and naval base of Singapore, the most important base in the British Empire outside Britain itself.

At the time this clip was shown, Japanese forces were advancing through Malaya. Although the Allied forces outnumbered the Japanese, they were less experienced and less well equipped. By the end of January, Allied forces had been driven from Malaya and retreated to Singapore. They suffered heavy casualties and about 50000 troops were captured.

It's worth knowing that...

This clip features troops from different parts of the British Empire. When it was attacked Singapore had around 85000 troops defending it. The Japanese force was around 30000.

By far the largest contingent of troops was Indian. There were also British, Australian and Malayan troops.

How will you use this source?

1. Would you describe the tone of the newsreel as: cheerful, depressing, realistic, optimistic, or severe?

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/>

ASIA 1939–1945: SINGAPORE

2. Do you get the impression the defences of the island were strong in early 1942?
3. Do you get the impression the Allies respected and feared the Japanese?
4. How do the notes and sources help you to find out why the fall of Singapore was such a shock?

Use this [table](#) to record your comments.

ASIA 1939–1945: SINGAPORE

You must discover why the fall of Singapore was considered such a shock when there had been earlier defeats. Why was the loss of Singapore especially humiliating? Study the sources and the notes to help you understand the reaction to this defeat.

Use this table to help record your comments.

| Singapore statements | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| People at home in Britain and the rest of the Empire were aware that Singapore might fall | | | | | |
| There were enough troops at Singapore | | | | | |
| The troops were well trained and equipped | | | | | |
| The Japanese were seen as formidable opponents | | | | | |
| If the forces had known what would happen to them after they surrendered they would probably have fought on | | | | | |