

WHY WAS THE FALL OF SINGAPORE SUCH A SHOCK?

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

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



<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.