

WHY WAS THE FALL OF SINGAPORE SUCH A SHOCK?

Extract from a report on the fall of Singapore 1942

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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.