

# The fall of singapore 1942



The fall of Singapore 1942 was the most devastating defeat for the British in World War 2. It had its effects on the British rule in the Commonwealth Countries of South East Asia including the Indian Subcontinent and Australia. The fall of Singapore resulted in loss of man power as hundreds and thousands of soldiers from India and Burma and Australia were taken in as POW (Prisoners of war ) and this made the fortress of Singapore which was once thought to be impregnable look weak. This gave an opportunity for the Indians to capitalize on the British weakness and Hence with the help of Subhash Chandra Bose and the Japanese , India looked to gain independence in the process.

The investigations made are both primary and secondary where we get insights of the different perspectives of the fall of Singapore for example the British and also by the Japanese. The scope of this essay is how the fall of Singapore was the influencing factor in starting the INA which later became the Azad hind Fauj , that had the soul purpose to end the Imperialist British rule and bring Swaraj to India.

## **Significance of Singapore**

The British had begun building a naval base at Singapore in 1923, partly in response to Japan's increasing naval power. A costly and unpopular project, construction of the base proceeded slowly until the early 1930s when Japan began moving into Manchuria and northern China. A major component of the base was completed in March 1938, when the King George VI Graving Dock was opened; more than 300 meters in length, it was the largest dry dock in the world at the time. The base, completed in 1941 and defended by artillery, searchlights, and the newly built nearby Tengah Airfield, caused

Singapore to be ballyhooed in the press as the “ Gibraltar of the East.” The floating dock, 275 meters long, was the third largest in the world and could hold 60, 000 workers. The base also contained dry docks, giant cranes, machine shops; and underground storage for water, fuel, and ammunition. A self-contained town on the base was built to house 12, 000 Asian workers, with cinemas, hospitals, churches, and seventeen soccer fields. Above-ground tanks held enough fuel for the entire British navy for six months. The only thing the giant naval fortress lacked was ships.

The Singapore naval base was built and supplied to sustain a siege long enough to enable Britain’s European-based fleet to reach the area. By 1940, however, it was clear that the British fleet and armed forces were fully committed in Europe and the Middle East and could not be spared to deal with a potential threat in Asia. In the first half of 1941, most Singaporeans were unaffected by the war on the other side of the world, as they had been in World War I. The main pressure on the Straits Settlements was the need to produce more rubber and tin for the Allied war effort. Both the colonial government and British military command were for the most part convinced of Singapore’s impregnability.

Even by late autumn 1941, most Singaporeans and their leaders remained confident that their island fortress could withstand an attack, which they assumed would come from the south and from the sea. Heavy fifteen-inch guns defended the port and the city, and machine-gun bunkers lined the southern coast. The only local defense forces were the four battalions of Straits Settlements Volunteer Corps and a small civil defense organization with units trained as air raid wardens, fire fighters, medical personnel, and

debris removers. Singapore's Asians were not, by and large, recruited into these organizations, mainly because the colonial government doubted their loyalty and capability. The government also went to great lengths to maintain public calm by making highly optimistic pronouncements and heavily censoring the Singapore newspapers for negative or alarming news. Journalists' reports to the outside world were also carefully censored, and, in late 1941, reports to the British cabinet from colonial officials were still unrealistically optimistic. If Singaporeans were uneasy, they were reassured by the arrival at the naval base of the battleship Prince of Wales, the battle and four destroyers cruiser Repulse, on December 2. The fast and modern Prince of Wales was the pride of the British navy, and the Repulse was a veteran cruiser. Their accompanying aircraft carrier had run aground en route, however, leaving the warships without benefit of air cover.

### **The Indian National Army**

The idea of the INA was first conceived in Malaya by Mohan Singh, an Indian officer of the British Indian Army when he decided not to join the retreating British army and instead went to the Japanese for help. The Japanese had till then only encouraged civilian Indians to form anti-British organizations, but had no conception of forming a military wing consisting of Indians.

Indian prisoners of war were handed over by the Japanese to Mohan Singh who then tried to recruit them into an Indian National Army. The fall of Singapore was crucial, for these brought 45, 000 Indian POWs into Mohan Singh's sphere of influence. By the end of 1942, forty thousand men expressed their willingness to join the INA. It was repeatedly made clear at various meetings of leaders of the Indian community and of Indian Army

officers that the INA would go into action only on the invitation of the Indian National Congress and the people of India.

The outbreak of the Quit India Movement gave a fillip to the INA as well anti-British demonstrations were organized in Malaya. On 1 September 1942, the first division of the INA was formed with 16, 300 men. The Japanese were by now more amenable to the idea of an armed Indian wing because they were contemplating an Indian invasion. But, by December 1942, serious differences emerged between the Indian army officers led by Mohan Singh and the Japanese over the role that the INA was to play. Mohan Singh and Niranjan Singh Gill, the senior-most Indian officer to join the INA, were arrested. The Japanese, it turned out, wanted only a token force of 2, 000 men, while Mohan Singh wanted to raise an Indian National Army of 20, 000.

## **The Battle for Singapore**

### **Defences in Singapore**

The British had built a Naval Base in northern Singapore. In addition, the British built underground bunkers in secret places all over the island. These bunkers were used as stores or air-raid shelters for defence purposes.

The defence plans for Singapore were designed to prevent an attack from the sea. The big guns that were placed in Singapore were to be used for firing at big ships. These guns could also be turned landwards to fire at enemies on land. However, they were not equipped with the right ammunition to shoot at such enemies.

The British did not think that Singapore could be attacked from the land because the jungles of Johor were difficult territory for enemy soldiers to

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move in. Thus little was done to defend northern Singapore. The naval base, underground bunkers, big guns and the natural protection of the Johor jungles led the British to believe that Singapore was as strong as a fortress.

## **The Situation Worsened for Singapore**

The Japanese soldiers, however, were well-trained in jungle warfare, and so the jungles of Malaya were not a problem to them. While the Japanese were invading Malaya, they also dropped bombs on Singapore. The British fighter planes were outnumbered by the Japanese "Zero" fighters. Soon, the British moved their planes from the airfields in Singapore to Sumatra. The airfields in Singapore were abandoned before the Japanese soldiers landed on the island. The British air defence failed to protect Singapore. In addition, the Singapore Naval Base was destroyed by the British themselves to prevent the Japanese from making use of it. The air and sea defences of the British had thus been crippled. By 31 January 1942, the Japanese were already in Johor Bahru - the doorstep of Singapore. Only a damaged Causeway separated Johor Bahru from Singapore.

### The Japanese Headquarters

The Japanese Commander, General Yamashita, set up his headquarters at the Sultan of Johor's palace. The choice was a clever one because the palace had a five-storey high tower. From this tower, General Yamashita could see every key target in northern Singapore. Although the tower was an easy target for the British, Yamashita was confident that the British would not fire at the home of their old friend, Sultan Ibrahim. He was right.

### The Fake Attack

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To mislead the British, the Japanese in Johor made intense bombings at Changi. To make it even more convincing, the Japanese attacked Pulau Ubin on 7 February 1942. Thinking that the Japanese intended to invade Singapore from the northeast, the British moved precious stocks of defence supplies like petrol and explosives from the northwest to the northeast. This was exactly what the Japanese had wanted the British to do.

### Landings from the Northwest

Since the narrowest point of the Johor Strait was at the northwest of Singapore, it was easy for the Japanese to cross the Strait there. But the British had not stationed a large number of troops there. The Japanese found it easy to send divisions of soldiers across from Johor to Singapore in rubber boats and on rafts. Some of their tanks were also floated across the Johor Strait. The Allied soldiers, who had too large an area to defend, opened fire at the Japanese but could not stop them.

### The British Blunder

The Japanese quickly repaired the Causeway so that both men and equipment could move easily into Singapore. To prepare for the worst, the British Commander, General A. E. Percival, made plans for the British soldiers to withdraw to protect the town centre if the situation called for it. When Percival issued the secret plans in the midst of the battle, they were interpreted as a command to withdraw immediately. Thus, many of the British soldiers on the western part of the island withdrew even before the Japanese soldiers moved into the area. When the mistake was discovered,

orders were given to counter-attack, but these were carried out half-heartedly. By then, the Japanese had gained control of Bukit Timah.

#### The Battle of Bukit Timah

On 11 February, the Japanese reached the Bukit Timah area. It was an important place as the British had stocked up food and ammunition as well as vehicle and machine parts there. The north-eastern slope of the hill faced a reservoir, which was vital source of water supply. It was here that the fiercest fighting took place. Armed only with swords, grenades, rifles and guns that they used for hunting birds and animals, the Chinese Volunteers fought bravely, side by side with the Allied soldiers. Many on both sides were killed. The Japanese later took revenge on the Chinese by killing all the Chinese men, women and children found in the village.

#### The Battle of Pasir Panjang

By 13 February 1942, the Japanese had already reached Pasir Panjang Ridge (Kent Ridge Park). It was close to the Alexandra area where the main ammunition stores and British military hospital were located.

There, some men of the Malay Regiment, led by Lieutenant (Lt.) Adnan bin Saidi fought bravely. Many of the Japanese soldiers were killed or wounded. The next day, some Japanese soldiers tried to disguise themselves as Indian soldiers in the British army. It was Lt. Adnan who was sharp enough to notice that those familiar turbaned figures were marching in fours instead of the usual threes in the British army. He ordered his soldiers to open fire, killing several of them. This caused the rest of the Japanese to flee down the hill.



But, the Japanese were soon able to surround the hill. The Malays were heavily outnumbered. Fierce hand-to-hand bayonet fighting took place. Many soldiers on both sides were killed. Lt. Adnan was also hit by the enemy's fire. In spite of his wounds, he kept on fighting. He was later captured by the Japanese and stabbed to death.

#### The Massacre at Alexandra Hospital

The Japanese then marched into Alexandra Hospital (then a British military hospital). There the Japanese killed the doctors, hospital staff, patients and even a British corporal who was lying on the operating table.

#### Decision at Fort Canning

15 February was Chinese New Year's day. A meeting was held in the underground bunker of Fort Canning. Percival wanted to discuss ways to counter-attack but his commanders were against the idea. There were too many problems. The soldiers were tired. The prospect of street fighting meant more would be killed. Their supplies of food and water were running out. To prevent further bloodshed, they decided to surrender.

#### The Bluff That Worked

The British surrendered to the Japanese at the Ford Motor Factory in Bukit Timah. It was a cheerless New Year's day for the Chinese. Unknown to Percival, Yamashita had also used up most of his ammunition. Whatever weapons he had were those which the British had left behind in their hasty retreat. Yamashita's soldiers were outnumbered by more than three to one.

## **Japanese Invasion Advantages**

### **BRITISH MISTAKE I:**

The British expected the Japanese to enter Singapore by sea. They stationed big guns near the sea to shoot the enemies' ships. The British also did not put up a strong defense in northern Singapore. They felt that the jungles of Johor were too thick for the Japanese to cut through. However, the Japanese did the exact opposite.

### **CLEVER MOVE BY THE JAPANESE I:**

General Yamashita set up his headquarters at the Sultan's palace in Johor. The palace had a tall tower to give the Japanese a good view of northern Singapore.

### **BRITISH MISTAKE II:**

The outdated British warplanes were of no match for the Japanese modern "Zero" fighters. To prevent the Japanese from using the Singapore Naval Base, the British destroyed the area themselves. Hence, the British were crippled both by air and sea. They were left with no strong defense to fight the Japanese.

### **CLEVER MOVE BY THE JAPANESE II:**

To mislead the British, the Japanese deliberately bombed Changi and Pulau Ubin heavily. Their aim was to lure the British into shifting their defense supplies like petrol and explosives to the northeast of Singapore. In this way, the northwest would be weak in defense and the Japanese could invade from that direction easily.

## **Role of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose**

On 15 February 1942, Singapore fell to the Japanese army advancing southward from the Malayan peninsula. Two days later, in an impressive ceremony held at Farrar Park in the heart of the town, [British] Indian troops were handed over to the Japanese as prisoners-of-war by their commanding officer, Colonel Hunt.

Major Fujiwara took them over on behalf of the victorious Japanese, and then announced that he was handing them over to Captain Mohan Singh of the Indian contingents, who should be obeyed by them as their Supreme Commander. Mohan Singh then spoke to the Indian POWs, expressing his intention of raising an Indian national army out of them to fight for India's freedom. He held a preliminary discussion with some prominent Indians in Malay and Burma in a meeting in Singapore on 9 and 10 March, which was attended by Rashbehari Bose, a veteran Indian revolutionary exile living in Japan for the last quarter of a century. Bose then called a conference in Tokyo, which was held 28-30 March. The delegates representing several East and Southeast Asian countries present at the conference decided to form the Indian Independence League to organize an Indian independence movement in East Asia. Bose was recognized as head of the organization. The conference further resolved that " military action against the British in India will be taken only by the INA and under Indian command, together with such military, naval and air cooperation and assistance as may be requested from the Japanese by the Council of Action" and further, " after the liberation of India, the framing of the future constitution of India will be left entirely to the representatives of the people of India." 20

<http://library.flawlesslogic.com/bose4.jpg>

On 15 June 1942, a conference opened in Bangkok with over a hundred delegates of the IIL [Indian Independence League] attending from all over Asia. By the close of the nine-day conference a resolution was unanimously adopted setting forth the policies of the independence movement in East Asia. The IIL was proclaimed the organization to work for India's freedom; the Indian National Army was declared the military arm of the movement with Mohan Singh as the Commander-in-chief and Rashbehari Bose was elected president of the Council of Action. It was further decided that Singapore would be the headquarters of the IIL. Netaji had stated in a message to the conference that his personal experience had convinced him that Japan, Italy and Germany were sworn enemies of British imperialism; yet, independence could come only through the efforts of Indians themselves. India's freedom would mean the rout of British imperialism. The Indian National Army was officially inaugurated in September 1942.

Bose arrived in Singapore on 2 July 1943 on the invitation of revolutionary freedom fighter Rash Bihari Bose. He was appointed President of the Indian Independence League and took on the mantle of Rash Bihari Bose as leader of the Indian Independence League in East Asia. On 21 October 1943, Subhash Chandra Bose proclaimed the formation of the Provisional Government of Free India at the Cathay Cinema Hall. Two days later, he declared war on Britain and the United States. With help from the Japanese, he re-organized and rejuvenated the Azad Hind Fauj (also called the Indian National Army). He lobbied aggressively for funds in Malaya and other parts of Southeast Asia and launched a recruitment drive for the Azad Hind Fauj.

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Tapping into the widespread discontent of Indian army personnel in Malaya, especially over the way British officers had abandoned them during their retreat from Singapore, he was able to draw many British Indian troops to join the Azad Hind Fauj. On 14 April 1944, he led the Azad Hind Fauj on an offensive against the British in India; and crossing the Burmese border, he planted the Indian National tricolour flag at Moirang, Manipur. It was a symbol of claiming Indian soil from the British. However, the offensive failed to take Kohima and Imphal and retreated to Burma. The campaign was considered a failure so Bose left for Singapore via Bangkok on 24 April 1944.

With the fall of Singapore in 1942, about 40,000 Indian soldiers were captured. They were given a choice and 30,000 joined the Indian National Army. Those who refused became POWs and were mostly shipped to New Guinea.

With the previously formed divisions mostly committed overseas in 1942, the army formed another four infantry divisions (23rd, 25th, 28th, 36th) and the 43rd Indian Armoured Division. However events during 1942, and the Japanese conquests meant the 28th division was not formed and the units earmarked for it were used elsewhere. The 36th division uniquely, was created as a British Indian Army formation, but was formed from British brigades that had reached India from the Madagascar campaign and from Britain. The final division formed in 1942 was the 26th Indian Infantry Division, which was hastily formed from the various units in training or stationed near Calcutta

After the perceived poor performance in battles in Malaya and Burma in 1942, it was decided that the existing infantry divisions were over-mechanized. To counter this the 17th and 39th divisions were selected to become light divisions, of only two brigades which would rely more on animal and four-wheel-drive transport.[15]

By December 1942, agreement was reached that India should become the base for offensive operations. Support should be in place for 34 divisions, which would include two British, one West African, one East African and eleven Indian divisions, and what was left of the Burma Army.

## **Aftermath**

Not all the defeated soldiers had to spend the next three years in Japanese prison camps. Of the 60,000 Indians that surrendered, 25,000 chose to go over to the enemy. They became the core of the Indian National Army (INA), which two years later took part in the Japanese invasion of India. In that campaign INA soldiers faced their own countrymen, members of General William Slim's mostly Indian 14th Army, which crushed them and the Japanese army they served, greatly hastening the end of the war. In May 1945 Rangoon was retaken by an Indian division; the same month the ragtag remains of the INA laid down their arms.

Soldiers are sworn to serve their country in peace and war. But to what country did the Indians who surrendered in Singapore owe their loyalty? To Imperial Britain, or to an India that was engaged in a struggle for independence? After the war, arrested members of the Indian National Army were classed as 'white', 'black', or 'grey' according to the perceived

innocence or culpability of their motives. Most were considered grey.

However much wartime publicists, and even some historians, view complex issues in monochromatic terms, little in warfare is really black-and-white.

Indian soldiers had helped Britain conquer India and Indian soldiers helped them retain it. During the First World War nearly a million Indian troops fought for the Empire in Europe and Mesopotamia. Up to this time all higher officers of the Indian army were British; after the war belated efforts were made to 'Indianise' the officer corps. This was in line with Britain's recently announced aim of progressively conceding self-government to India - a grudging response to a nationalist movement that, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, was beginning to mobilize the masses.

## **Conclusion**

The British Raj in India was indeed weakened by the pressures caused by the fall of Singapore in 1942. Due to its involvement in the World War it was in a very bad state and hence it was the correct moment for the INA to start the war of independence. The soldiers from the battles at Kohima and Burma repatriated to India and hence faced charges for treason against the British rule. Although it may seem irrelevant, but this was the linchpin that started the Indian Independence Movement. The Indian National Army fought alongside the Japanese in the conquests of Burma and Indonesia and South East Asia. However, it failed to make any impact on a large scale as it lost the support of the Japanese after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. It failed to bring complete swaraj to India and along with the death of Subhash Chandra Bose it lost all its force.

## **Bibliography**