

Ronald McCrum

The Men Who Lost Singapore, 1938–1942. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2017, xvi + 268 pp. ISBN 9789814722391, price: SGD 36.00 (paperback).

Britain's loss of its Southeast Asian colonies during World War Two (WWII), especially the fall of Malaya and Singapore, is a relatively well-studied topic. While existing scholarship has covered the military failure in great detail, researchers have not paid equal attention to the disorganization of the colonial administration, which played a no less important role in the years leading up to the defeat. Based on his meticulous research in British archives, Ronald McCrum has filled the gap by scrutinizing the 'irresponsible and incompetent' behaviors of the civilian authorities. He argues that by pursuing different priorities, the colonial government failed to take necessary measures to counter the growing threat of the Japanese. Besides the fact that the British civilian administration was in disarray within itself, their poor relationship with the military also greatly hindered joint efforts to augment the defense against the imminent invasion, which ultimately led to astonishing casualties when the war broke out.

Despite the escalating wars in the European and Asian theaters, the colonial officials considered Malaya as an isolated and thus relatively peaceful backwater in the Far East. For a long time, British officials in Singapore did not believe—or did not want to believe—that Japan would advance towards the southern colony. Even when intelligence indicated that the invasion had become a serious probability, the civilian administration insisted that Malaya should prioritize the production of tin and rubber. Similarly, the military forces had been only focusing on protecting the naval base of Singapore from sea-borne attacks. It was not until much later that they realized the necessity to fight the invading enemy from the north and the fact that they lacked the critical manpower and weapons to set up an effective defense to hold the whole of Malaya.

Chapter Two to Five discuss the civilian administration's inadequate preparation for the war. While regarding the industrial productivity as the 'absolute priority,' the officials did not see the urgency to devise emergency plans, as they deemed such 'alarmist actions' would undermine the morale of the local population. Nor did the authority send out cautious warnings or build shelters to prepare the populace for air strikes when the war was on the verge of breaking out. Due to the fragmented administrative system, government departments in Malaya were so divided among each other that they typically only answered to their corresponding authorities in London. To make the matter even worse,

Governor Shenton Thomas left Singapore for home leave in 1940, which left the civil administration in total disorder.

Chapter Six to Eight illustrate the irreversible chaos after the campaign started. The ill-equipped and poorly organized British forces suffered one defeat after another under the fierce attack of the Japanese army. Public services such as hospitals and the fire department could barely function in the crisis. Without a reasonable plan, the government implemented a racially discriminatory policy, yet only managed to evacuate a small number of Europeans from Penang. Due to the poor communication during the invasion, people in Singapore lacked reliable information about the progress of the war in the upcountry. The situation further deteriorated, as the government attempted to hold an extremely tight grip on the dissemination of messages. Consequently, the administration gradually lost its credibility in the eyes of the public. The British forces capitulated after exactly 70 days of futile resistance—a period even shorter than the 100 days that the Japanese anticipated.

The Men Who Lost Singapore is a useful reference for readers interested in the history of WWII in Southeast Asia and those trying to gain a better understanding of the British Empire at its final stage. Though its impact on the course of the war was relatively minor, McCrum argues that the fall of Singapore had far deeper and long term political consequences for British power. As the military defeat brought unprecedented humiliation, the British lost their prestige in the eyes of the Asian population. 'The relationship between the colonial power and the Malayan people were never to be the same' (p. 218).

This book almost entirely relies on British sources, which is understandable considering the theme of McCrum's research is the mismanagement of the administration. Nevertheless, in my view the work would have been stronger if the author had included other voices inside the plural society, so that the narrative would have come across less as the story of a handful of irresponsible British officials, as though they were solely to blame for the loss of Singapore. By presenting people's contrasting views and reactions towards the incompetent colonial regime, McCrum might have elucidated his main point much clearer that 'the impoverished and debilitated British imperial power was no longer in a position to meet the widespread demands, particularly military demands, of his far-flung empire' (p. 221).

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