

The Other Side of the Hill: Western Interpretations of the Japanese Experience in the Malayan Campaign and Conquest of Singapore, 1941-42

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No serious military historian would now produce a campaign history that did not try to address both sides of 'the story.' Limitations posed by languages and sources, as well as the chosen theme, the intended readership, and the personal interests and abilities of the author all shape every campaign history. But any account that treats 'the enemy' as an entirely anonymous 'other,' with no real interest in his plans, preparations and performance, is of little use. If the essence of war is battle, and the essence of battle is the clash of at least two unpredictable contending wills, subjecting one to comprehensive analysis, but relying on uncritical clichés or stereotypes to explain the other, produces neither explanation nor understanding. Allied accounts published during the Pacific War, seeking to explain to the general public why Fortress Singapore fell to the Imperial Japanese Army, did not really rise above this bar. But this is surely not surprising, taking into account wartime pressures relating to morale, intelligence and military security, and propaganda—and is easy enough to excuse, given that such accounts had so little access to the enemy. The very large literature devoted to the Malayan Campaign and the fall of Singapore after the war is, however, another matter.

Winston Churchill himself characterized the fall of Singapore, wrongly, as the worst military disaster in the long history of the British Empire.<sup>1</sup> Mistaken or not, this view still shapes efforts by Western scholars to understand and explain Allied defeat in Malaya and Singapore. The consequences still drive this dialogue. The fall of Singapore supposedly started the clock ticking on the end of the British Empire in Asia, accelerated the British withdrawal from India, changed British-Australian relations permanently and not for the better on all levels, subjected Asian colonial populations to suffering and privation the memories of which still influence international relations in Asia, and exposed large numbers of Allied prisoners of war to hardships so extreme

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<sup>1</sup> W.S. Churchill, *The Second World War: The Hinge of Fate*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1950, p.80.

they arguably are only now fading out of sight as a factor in shaping Western perceptions of Japan. The basic question, posed from the broadest Allied point of view, has thus always been easy to identify: how and why did all this happen? How did the British Empire lose Singapore?

More than two dozen serious studies of the Malayan Campaign and the defence and fall of Singapore have been published, in the UK, Australia, the USA, India and Singapore, since the end of the Pacific War. That adds up to more than one every three years, more intense and persistent scrutiny than any other Second World War Allied campaign of comparable size and length. The consequences do much to explain this. More difficult to understand, and explain, is the question of how this Allied literature, ranging from the 1950s into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so frequently fails to bring to life the Japanese dimension, in this navel gazing story of defeat and disaster. The first and fair point to note is of course the obvious and related problems of language skills and access to sources. Many Western authors, myself included, did not read Japanese. Few, particularly before the 1970s, had access to Japanese or translated sources of any real substance. We all know how many Japanese prewar and wartime official records were destroyed by Allied bombing raids on Tokyo in 1945. We also know that most Japanese units which served in Malaya and Singapore later experienced high casualties elsewhere, reducing the number of witnesses to history from whom oral accounts could be drawn. Add all this to the deliberate destruction of official records by Allied forces in Singapore in 1942, and we end up with a stark result: the Malayan Campaign is one of the most important events of the Second World War about which we will always face the most extensive gaps in primary sources. Scholars wanting to work on the topic have to accept the need to rely much more heavily on sources produced after the fact, both Allied and Japanese, than they find comfortable.<sup>2</sup> This provided those scholars too lazy, or narrow in vision, to pay due critical attention to the Japanese experience of the campaign with something of an alibi. But it also compromised efforts by more substantial scholars to unpack the campaign systematically and with due diligence.

Bearing these concerns in mind, this seminar paper will present some

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<sup>2</sup> See my discussion of sources in Brian P. Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore 1940-1942*, Stroud, Tempus, 2005, Appendix One. See also Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack, *Did Singapore Have to Fall? Churchill and the Impregnable Fortress*, London, Routledge, 2003.

reflections on how Western scholarship on the Malayan campaign, and the defence and fall of Singapore, has understood, interpreted, and explained the Japanese experience of those events. It will examine three themes, consider how Western scholarship dealt with them, and suggest why Western views unfolded the way they did. The first theme is the question of why Imperial Japan invaded Malaya and Singapore in the first place. This paper will argue that Western scholarship still has not mastered this problem because many scholars still do not grasp just how Imperial Japan made national decisions, ie. how the central direction of war actually worked in Toyo. There has, however, been some progress in what I call the ‘third wave’ of serious scholarship. The second theme is the question of how the Japanese armed forces defeated the Allies in Malaya and conquered Singapore. The paper will argue that after some false starts Western scholars mastered this second theme because they came to understand the need to contextualize, and thus redefine, this question. Here too, the third wave has reorganized the discussion. The final theme is the question of what impact the fall of Singapore had on the rest of the Pacific War, and indeed on the overall Second World War. And here the paper will conclude that the strongest Western scholars never really misunderstood this question because they unpacked it literally—but it will also consider why so many accounts still struggle to do this.

The best place to start is the year 1957. By prior agreement, the volumes of official history produced by both the United Kingdom and Australia were published that same year. The British account was the first in what became a five volume sub-series of the Cabinet Office sponsored multi-theme multi-volume *History of the Second World War United Kingdom Military Series*. Major-General Stanley Woodburn Kirby wrote all five volumes of *The War Against Japan*. Kirby’s volume one, revealingly titled *The Loss of Singapore*, devoted 19 of 27 chapters, plus 24 of 27 appendices, to events surrounding, or directly related to, the outbreak of war and the Malayan campaign and fall of Singapore.<sup>3</sup> Of those sections, only one chapter was addressed to ‘The Japanese Strategic Plans,’ but 11 appendices dealt with Japanese related matters. One Appendix, Number Two, even discussed ‘The System of Government in Tokyo during the Years Preceding the Outbreak of War.’ Kirby was a career officer who, before the war, served a tour of duty in Malaya, and during the war

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<sup>3</sup> S.W. Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, Vol. 1, *The Loss of Singapore* (History of the Second World War, United Kingdom, Military Series), London, HMSO, 1957.

served under Field Marshal Wavell. The Australian account, in a single volume titled *The Japanese Thrust*, written by Lionel Wigmore, a professional journalist, was part of the multi-volume series *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 1—Army*.<sup>4</sup> Wigmore's first 17 chapters, out of a total of 25, addressed the outbreak of war and the Malayan campaign and fall of Singapore. Chapter One directly considered 'The Japanese Dilemma.' These separate national volumes amounted to an orchestrated collusion to present a coordinated narrative that drew similar conclusions, accepted by both government editorial oversight bodies. There was an element of practicality. This was a combined British and Australian story, and each team of official historians relied on the other for access to national records, and help with conducting interviews, and follow up correspondence, with material witnesses in each country. But there was also a shared common interest in presenting a politically palatable version of the story.

The fall of Singapore remained a bitterly controversial event in both countries, due especially to the suffering of prisoners of war and interned civilians, as well as the humiliation, and consequences, of rapid defeat. This added another item to the list of frictions that complicated British-Australian national relationships. But both countries continued to need each other, in so many ways; and neither wished to expose the full depth of the bitterness with which both pointed fingers, and made accusations, at all levels, in 1942. To prevent further rancour, many of the official records that did survive remained closed, in both London and Canberra, beyond the initial 30 year period for release of records to the archives, adopted in both countries as official policy by the 1970s. These two volumes stood out as apparently authoritative, because their privileged access to surviving records enabled them to present the account in such fine detail. The result was that they set a template for Western interpretations of the Malayan Campaign and fall of Singapore in general, and the Japanese role in both in particular. That template dominated two generations of scholarship and still influences a third.<sup>5</sup> The question 'why did Imperial Japan attack the British Empire in Malaya and Singapore' was a cornerstone of that template.

Kirby presented the crux of his answer in Appendix 2. By the second half of the

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<sup>4</sup> Lionel Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust* (Vol. IV, Series One: Army, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945*), Canberra, AWM, 1957.

<sup>5</sup> Farrell, *Defence and Fall*, Epilogue; Brian P. Farrell and Sandy Hunter (eds.), *Sixty Years On: The Fall of Singapore Revisited*, Singapore, Eastern Universities Press, 2002, Introduction.

1930s both the Emperor and the elected civilian government no longer controlled the actions of the Army and Navy, whose high commands appointed their own service ministers, and whose general staffs made and executed grand strategy. This mattered because during that decade the decision makers of Imperial Japan adopted a national policy to use military force to reorganize Asia, in order to establish Japanese hegemony and make Japan self-sufficient, and thus secure. This was in reaction to Western efforts to contain Japanese ambitions in China, and to the impact of the Great Depression on the Japanese economy and domestic politics. Many of these themes remain familiar explanations in recent scholarship. But the important contribution Kirby made was to suggest that the Army and Navy produced agreed national grand strategy formulated by building a consensus on the strategic priorities and needs of the empire as a whole. National policy may have been driven by the military, itself driven by more aggressive imperial ambitions expressed by younger officers, and all this may have been the product of deliberately constructed imperial militarism—but it was national policy, coordinated by a systematic process of defining ends and identifying means. Wigmore presented a very similar interpretation. Both stressed the importance of the escalating war in China, the impact American-led measures of economic pressure in response had on Japanese calculations, and the importance of the war in Europe, from spring 1940 onwards. Japan made a national policy decision, driven by the armed forces, to exploit that war, and face those pressures, by using force to drive the Western Powers out of Southeast Asia in a blitz attack, before they could regroup and reinforce. Having done this, Japan would harness the resources of Southeast Asia to finish off its war in China, and build its new Asia. Because the British position in Singapore was the only fully developed naval and air hub to which the Allies could send in reinforcements strong enough to upset this plan, it had to be overrun.

The influence of this broad interpretation proved to be wide and deep. This was partly due to the fact that these official histories themselves drew from what was already the established American answer to the larger question of why Imperial Japan attacked Hawaii and Southeast Asia. Noel Barber's *Sinister Twilight*, the next serious study of the Malayan Campaign, published in 1968, accepted the argument in full.<sup>6</sup> Why not? The evidence seemed convincing: Japanese national policy did change during

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<sup>6</sup> Noel Barber, *Sinister Twilight: The Fall of Singapore*, London, Arrow Books, 1988 (1968).

the 1930s, the armed forces did act beyond civilian government authority, and the war in China, Allied countermeasures, and Axis victories in Europe did prompt Japanese action in 1941. And in any case Barber's most pressing concern—this is also true, to a slightly lesser extent, of the official histories—was to understand why Singapore fell; that seemed to follow as a result of, but did not depend on, why the Japanese attacked in the first place. This assumed that the driver of the story was British defeat, rather than Japanese victory.

The first notable Western study to raise a real question about this interpretation was published in 1969 by Arthur Swinson, who served in both Burma and Malaya during the Second World War and went on to a career as a journalist, playwright, and historian. On the strength of his 1968 work *Four Samurai*, a study of the wartime careers of Homma, Honda, Mutaguchi and Yamashita, Swinson was asked to publish a volume in a new, and extremely popular, history series directed towards the general public: *Ballantine's Illustrated History of World War II*. It is very likely that more people read this book than any other study published in English of the Malayan Campaign and the fall of Singapore. Swinson adopted the Japanese vantage point as his principal approach to unpacking the campaign, working most often from Yamashita's perspective. But despite his careful attention to Japanese experience, drawn from sources I comment on below, Swinson titled his volume *Defeat in Malaya: The Fall of Singapore*.<sup>7</sup> And in his conclusion Swinson focused on the 'tragedy' that overwhelmed the Allied forces and those they defended. Along the way, briefly, he ascribed the Japanese decision to attack in Southeast Asia as a response to Allied pressure over the war in China—aggravating the dilemma caused by the more profound Japanese turn to an imperial agenda of expansion. This conventional explanation described the specific plans to overrun Southeast Asia as the product of strategic bargains worked out by the Army and Navy, within the machinery for the central direction of the war, from the summer of 1940 onwards. Swinson was the first 'unofficial historian' to pay some critical attention to the Japanese dimension of our story, and he presented a more critical evaluation of the actual conquest of Malaya—but even he gravitated towards the Allied focus on their own disaster, and

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<sup>7</sup> Arthur Swinson, *Four Samurai: A Quartet of Japanese Army Commanders in the Second World War*, London, Hutchinson, 1968; *Defeat in Malaya: The Fall of Singapore*, London, Ballantine Books, 1969.

accepted the now standard explanation for why the Japanese attacked in the first place. It was informed by a more sophisticated understanding of internal rivalries within the Imperial Japanese Army, but still rested on the main vision of an organized central direction of the war producing a filtered grand strategy.

In the shadow of Swinson's book, Kirby published his own personal study, *Singapore: The Chain of Disaster*, in 1971.<sup>8</sup> This more hard hitting work presented a more penetrating critical analysis of British grand strategy and the conduct of the defence of Malaya than Kirby was allowed to publish in 1957. That helped cement ongoing public interest in the topic. So did the fact that the great majority of the British and Australian prisoners of war and civilian internees who endured captivity under Japanese control were victims of the Malayan campaign and surrender of Singapore—and by the end of the 1960s they were a vocal political constituency, critical of the postwar Cold War driven rapprochement with Japan. But Kirby still had nothing new to say about why Japan attacked in the first place.

Kirby's personal publication marked a retrospective end to the first wave of Malayan Campaign scholarship, so that makes it high time to explain that concept. The term refers to postwar scholarship. The first wave involved publications by authors who were either personally involved in the Second World War, or wrote directly in its shadow, and had access to participants and eyewitnesses whose oral history accounts could provide a substantial part of the study eventually published. This first wave worked in a context influenced by societal engagement with the memory of the war on a massive and very personal level, as well as by the Cold War and its pressures, and faced major restrictions on access to surviving primary sources. Memoirs mattered very much during this first wave. Indeed, together with the official histories, they shaped the understanding of a generation and more. Two really stood out. The first was Winston Churchill's massive six volume series *The Second World War*, written, as we now know, with the assistance of a syndicate of research assistants, veters, and aides, and with privileged access to official records. Churchill, publishing from 1948 to 1953, sought to establish a dominating interpretation of the entire Second World War. He succeeded brilliantly, starting with the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Churchill's account continues to shape popular memory to this day, despite

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<sup>8</sup> S.W. Kirby, *Singapore: The Chain of Disaster*, London, Cassell, 1971.

sustained critical analysis from historians since his private papers were opened to research.<sup>9</sup> The war against Japan did not fit well into the wartime story Churchill wanted to tell. That was also the case with the British official history, a problem solved by treating it as its own sub-series, presented as a comprehensive story involving all three armed forces; the studies of the European war were more rigorously sub-divided by service and campaign. This war began badly, resulted in ultimate victory, but left the British Empire compromised in Asia. This did not fit with the postwar agenda at all. Churchill presented the conventional story of Japanese opportunism and response to Allied economic pressure. But his endorsement of it really drove this image home; by not going deeper into the issue of just how the central direction of the war functioned in Tokyo, and the connections between how and why each of the armed forces made the decisions they did, and reached the agreements they did, Churchill made it normal to take this issue as read. The pattern was set: the Japanese armed forces clashed repeatedly over priorities, and acted independently of civilian control, but did reach agreed national strategic decisions and implemented a filtered grand strategy. The second towering memoir can lead us into the second theme: Tsuji Masanobu and the question of how the Japanese actually conquered Malaya and Singapore.

Tsuji's self-serving and sneering memoir was published in English translation in 1960.<sup>10</sup> It immediately became the principal Japanese source for Malayan Campaign studies, particularly for authors unable to read Japanese or interested only in writing popular history. Together with John Deane Potter's 1946 biography of Yamashita, a number of books drew their comments on the Japanese experience from this vantage point.<sup>11</sup> But many missed a crucial point Tsuji made. Tsuji told his readers that Japanese intelligence gathering prior to the campaign began only very late in the day, which came as such a shock to most Allied veterans of the campaign

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<sup>9</sup> For Churchill as an architect of history and memory, see Raymond Callahan, 'Churchill and Singapore, in Farrell and Hunter (eds.), *Sixty Years On: David Reynolds, In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War*, New York, Basic Books, 2007; Cat Wilson, *Churchill on the Far East in in the Second World War: Hiding the History of the 'Special Relationship*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Masanobu Tsuji, *Singapore: The Japanese Version*, Sydney, Ure Smith, 1960.

<sup>11</sup> John Deane Potter, *The Life and Death of a Japanese General*, New York, Signet Books, 1962. Barber, *Sinister Twilight*, T. Hall, *The Fall of Singapore*, Sydney, Methuen Australia, 1983, and James Leasor, *Singapore: The Battle that Changed the World*, Garden City, Doubleday, 1968, are all examples of earlier studies that mined Tsuji for most of their analysis of Japanese strategy and decisions.



that few ever accepted this. He argued that it was pretty successful, which helped the 25<sup>th</sup> Army seize and hold the initiative. Tsuji dismissed the defending forces, especially the Indian units, as for the most part inept; but he also gave the command staff of his own army, himself in particular, great credit for boldly attacking in a timely manner, over and over again. By thus holding the initiative the Japanese prevented the defenders from ever digging in or regrouping. Two cardinal decisions were made: to advance immediately, rather than pause in Thailand to consolidate, and to keep advancing after crossing the Perak River, rather than pause to consolidate. This, plus superior fighting power and mobility, brought victory. Most Western studies took all this on board. But not all noticed a crucial caveat: this ‘driving charge’ strategy forced the 25<sup>th</sup> Army to run very serious risks with its supply lines. Only the repeated windfall of being able to seize booty of all kinds, left behind by a defending army retreating in disarray, sneeringly referred to by Tsuji as ‘Churchill supplies,’ kept the advance going. Tsuji managed at one and the same time to give the Japanese credit for winning the campaign while dismissing the defenders as inept.<sup>12</sup>

This binary still shapes campaign studies. What best explains the course and outcome of the Malayan Campaign? Was it the case of the Japanese winning? Or the Allies losing? If some combination, what, how and why? Studies that overlapped between the first and second waves of scholarship helped advance that discussion. The second wave may be defined as studies written after the passage of sufficient time that the Second World War no longer dominated present day politics and culture, by authors able to consult the official histories as well as surviving veterans—but before enough time passed to make the event too remote for living memory, and to result in the full release of all surviving official records. Three deserve attention: Stanley Falk’s *Seventy Days to Singapore: the Malayan Campaign 1941-1942*, published in 1975, and two 1977 publications: *Singapore 1941-1942* by Louis Allen, and *The Worst Disaster: The Fall of Singapore*, by Raymond Callahan.<sup>13</sup> Allen, a wartime intelligence officer turned journalist, who read Japanese, and Callahan, an American academic who does

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<sup>12</sup> Akashi Yoji, ‘General Yamashita Tomoyuki: Commander of the Twenty-Fifth Army,’ in Farrell and Hunter (eds.), *Sixty Years On*, outlines the ‘driving charge’ strategy for English language readers.

<sup>13</sup> Stanley Falk, *Seventy Days to Singapore: the Malayan Campaign 1941-1942*, London, Robert Hale, 1975; Louis Allen, *Singapore 1941-1942*, London, Frank Cass, 1993 (1977); Raymond Callahan, *The Worst Disaster: The Fall of Singapore*, London, Associated University Presses, 1977.

not, both focused on the question of how and why the British lost Singapore. Allen made use of some privately obtained Japanese personal accounts to add something to the question of why Japan decided to attack Southeast Asia, but, although noticing Tsuji's caveat about logistics, he made no new point about how 25<sup>th</sup> Army overran Malaya. British and Allied failures shaped the story, at all levels. Callahan made a real contribution by bringing British grand strategy decisions in 1940 squarely into the central frame, but also made no new observations about the campaign itself. Both were able to draw on an incomplete but large release of British official records, opened in the archives in 1972. This made a real advance beyond such studies as Barber and Kirby. But it was Falk who broke new ground, in English, regarding the Japanese campaign experience. Falk served as a US Army historian and Japanese language officer during the war, and for two years of postwar occupation. In Japan, he worked closely with surviving Japanese army and navy officers who participated in a program to compile a comprehensive war history of the Japanese experience, to replace the destroyed original records. This 'indirect archive' not only eventually led to the massive series of volumes on wartime history for which this splendid institute here in Tokyo is responsible as custodian, but also generated, in translation, Japanese records that were memory after the fact but provided far more depth and detail than anything else available—certainly in English. Kirby and Wigmore used but did not cite any of these sources. Falk did. Drawing from records produced by the Allied Translator and Interpreter Section, now held in the National Archives and Records Administration of the USA, and from the *Japanese Monograph Series* published by the Chief of Military History, US Army, and now available online, Falk presented a far more substantial analysis of the Japanese march through Malaya and into Singapore than English readers had yet seen.<sup>14</sup> Weaving this into a largely chronological narrative, Falk established the interpretation of the 'driving charge,' clarified the Japanese use of armour in Malaya, and, comparing Japanese risks with logistics to British conduct of the defence, he presented a persuasive and nuanced conclusion: the real question was not why Singapore fell, but why it fell as rapidly and as easily as it did. The answer to that came from Japanese boldness making its own luck.

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<sup>14</sup> The *Japanese Monograph Series* may be consulted at <http://ibiblio.org/hyperwar/Japan/Monos/>

By reframing the second theme, by focusing English readers attention on how, more than why, Singapore was lost, Falk changed our understanding of the campaign and of how the Japanese won their victory. And he did this without being able to read important records still retained by London and Canberra. They were finally released in 1995. That enabled a third wave of scholarship to emerge: studies written by authors born after the war, unable for the most part to interview veterans, but able to consult not only all surviving Allied official records but also the large and detailed collection of Japanese postmortem records. That enabled this wave to make important advances on both the first two themes in front of us. My own chapters in the 1999 publication *Between Two Oceans: A Military History of Singapore*, were the first academic study to draw on all the belatedly released Allied records. In that study the only advances I made on our considerations were to elaborate on Falk's thesis of the 'driving charge' and consider more critically Yamashita's loosely worded claim he bluffed Percival into surrendering just in time, before his own position became compromised. Emphasizing the wider strategic context, plus the unravelling of Malaya Command, I dismissed this for the nonsense it was.<sup>15</sup> Alan Warren's 2002 study *Singapore 1942: Britain's Greatest Defeat*, narrated the campaign. Warren explained how the Japanese detected and exploited Allied weaknesses in command and battle fighting at all levels, singling out, again, the bold command decision to drive ahead relentlessly. That same year, a major conference we hosted at my own university produced a book I co-edited, *Sixty Years On: The Fall of Singapore Revisited*, with an important chapter that enriched our understanding of both Yamashita and the 'driving charge' strategy. Akashi Yoji, dean of Japanese historians of the Southeast Asian theatre of war, argued that prewar faction fighting inside the IJA was crucial to understanding Yamashita and his conduct of the campaign, and illustrated how the 'driving charge' was a premeditated calculated risk, rather than the clever inspiration Tsuji claimed it was. Ishizu Tomoyuki underlined this conclusion, and the importance of the windfall of captured supplies, in a very able presentation on Tsuji and his role in the campaign.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Malcolm H. Murfett, Brian P. Farrell, John N. Miksic, Chiang Ming Shun, *Between Two Oceans: A Military History of Singapore from First Settlement to Final British Withdrawal*, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1999; a considerably amended second edition was published as *Between Two Oceans: A Military History of Singapore from 1275 to 1971*, Singapore, Marshall Cavendish, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Alan Warren, *Singapore 1942: Britain's Greatest Defeat*, London, Talisman, 2002. See also notes 5 and 12.

That same conference produced a landmark English language study of the Japanese Malayan Campaign experience which had to be published posthumously, in 2004, because Henry Frei tragically died weeks after presenting a paper that highlighted the gathering. Frei's *Guns of February: Ordinary Soldiers' Views of the Malayan Campaign and the Fall of Singapore 1941-42*, drew primarily on oral history, emanating from interviews Frei conducted with surviving 25<sup>th</sup> Army veterans.<sup>17</sup> Frei shed invaluable light, for non-Japanese readers, on the nature of the army which conquered Malaya, and on its campaign. Frei turned caricatures of a martinet army with robot soldiers into a fully rounded portrait of an army manned by soldiers whose views ranged from hyper-belligerent patriotism to deep reluctance to serve. Frei spent many words evaluating the brutal conduct of the IJA towards the army it defeated and the civilians it occupied, but the bulk of his study focused on how Japanese combat units overran Malaya and Singapore. His careful research fleshed out our understanding of 25<sup>th</sup> Army as a carefully constructed task force, superbly led at all levels, dominated by potent light infantry, which brilliantly adjusted its battle tactics to the terrain in which it fought, and the enemy it faced. It remains an indispensable book, from a Western scholar who deeply understood Japan and its military history.

Reinforced by all these invaluable and accessible contributions to scholarship regarding Japan and the Malayan Campaign, my own 2005 monograph, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore 1940-1942*, set out to present the first scholarly study of the campaign that could incorporate all surviving official and quasi-official records, including the translated Japanese material, into a comprehensive analysis that would embed the campaign squarely into a multi-layered wider context: the collapse of the Washington System between the wars, the reorienting of grand strategy by both Japanese and British Empires, and the outbreak of major wars that escalated into total and, for the British Empire, global war. My book aimed to connect Prime Minister to private, and to focus especially on the connections between grand strategy, strategy, and the conduct of battle, with sustained attention to 'both sides.' It is for others to decide how well I accomplished this mission. But I can perhaps claim to have done several things. First, by devoting careful critical attention to the Japanese conduct of

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<sup>17</sup> Henry Frei, *Guns of February: Ordinary Soldiers' Views of the Malayan Campaign and the Fall of Singapore 1941-42*, Singapore, NUS Press, 2004.

the campaign, I cemented, in context, the point that the issue was ‘how long would this take and how much would this cost.’ I also established the argument that Percival was fatally compromised by being forced to fight a major battle in northern Malaya in order to carry out unchanged orders to hold a now useless naval base in Singapore, and that this contradiction, which I traced back to the politics of imperial defence, was the cardinal fact that shaped the Malayan Campaign—but that it did so because the Japanese did exactly what the situation called for by advancing so boldly and relentlessly, preventing the Allies from ever regrouping. I was the first serious student to argue that the Japanese were able to exploit their ‘driving charge’ so effectively partly because their command, control, and fighting power were so impressive—but even more because Malaya Command was compelled to fight the kind of set piece positional defensive battle that simply would not work in the terrain of northern and central Malaya. Boldness brought its own reward. But perhaps my real contribution was to underline how heavily contingent the Malayan Campaign was, when placed in the wider context of the global war. After the fall of France Malaya was there for the taking. It was that stark. But while the British certainly mishandled the connections between grand strategy and how to defend in Malaya, this paled in comparison to the folly of grand strategy decisions made in Tokyo. The sheer audacity of the Japanese offensive against the Western Powers helped explain why those powers struggled, before December 1941, to believe it would really happen.

Our final theme, the importance and impact of the Malayan Campaign and the fall of Singapore on the rest of the war, globally and in Asia, was never mishandled by the strongest Western scholars. From Kirby onwards, they all saw and made the point: for the British this was a painful military setback that, together with the loss of Burma, relegated them to the second rank, and put them completely on the defensive, in the ongoing war against Japan. The British regained their colonies only because the Americans destroyed the Japanese armed forces and economy, not, other than Burma, due to their own effort. But for the Allies as a whole this was a secondary campaign, one that prolonged the war, but nothing more.<sup>18</sup> The confusion came in more popular histories, when the military impact of the campaign was entangled with its political consequences, during and especially after the war. Churchill played a major role in this.

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<sup>18</sup> See my discussion in Brian P. Farrell, *The Basis and Making of British Grand Strategy 1940-1943: Was There a Plan?* Lewiston NY, Edwin Mellen, 1998.

It is simply nonsense to claim that the loss of Singapore was the worst disaster in British military history. In no way was this true other than the sheer numbers of prisoners of war lost to the enemy. The Allies went on to win the war and reoccupy their territories. British defeat in the New World in 1781 was far more consequential, surely. The loss of Singapore was a deeply humiliating defeat, yes. This was partly because so much exaggerated boasting about Fortress Singapore before the war made the result look humiliating. It was also because a European Great Power was humbled by an Asian one, in front of its Asian colonial subjects. But political humiliation does not automatically translate into military disaster. The sustained critical analysis of the global and Pacific War by serious scholars provided clear rebuttal to this more popular perception. But scholarship cannot dispel catchy popular perceptions, especially not when publishers opportunistically write it into the titles of otherwise serious books. So it persists, from first through third wave of scholarship.

The marginalization of the Malayan Campaign in the wider Japanese study of the war in Asia is so well known to Japanese readers that I do not presume to comment on it here, other than to make one point. The most frequent comment made by Western studies about the impact of the campaign on the Japanese, for the rest of the war, comes in two parts. First, there is the suggestion that such an easy victory helped inflate the Japanese military high command's sense of the power of their armed forces beyond a safe level, and reduced their evaluation of Allied fighting power to a dangerously low level. This contributed to such consequential decisions as the attacks towards Port Moresby and in the Solomon Islands, leading to an overstretch quickly punished by the Americans. Second, it made Japanese ground force commanders too contemptuous of their enemies, with consequences. Sloppy planning and careless assumptions led to campaigns in Burma in 1944 and 1945 in which Japanese forces still expected their enemies to flee in disarray, leave supplies lying around, and retreat every time their flank was turned. By assuming the British in particular would learn nothing from Malaya, and change nothing, the IJA dug its own grave in Burma, from Imphal and Kohima all the way to Rangoon.

The most important point on which there has been the least improvement in Western scholarship about the Malayan Campaign and the fall of Singapore remains the first, in chronological and consequential order: why did Imperial Japan attack in

the first place? The need to place the attack on Malaya in wider regional context has always been grasped. The problem comes with interpreting how Japanese military authorities formulated grand strategy, and through it shaped imperial war policy. Kirby and Wigmore had access to a large archive of Japanese postmortem sources. Swinson, in 1969, drew from volumes published in Tokyo by the Historical Research Group on The History of the Pacific War. Falk brought us to the ATIS and *Japanese Monograph Series* records. And over the decades ever more sophisticated studies of the causes and origins of the Pacific War became available, including such bridging studies as those published by Akira Iriye.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, by the 1970s Western scholars such as Richard Storry were framing the right questions: why did Imperial Japan become militarist, why did the IJA become brutal, and how did this militarism affect the way Japan made decisions?<sup>20</sup> But despite the fact Western scholars grasped the theme of *gekokujo*, understood the post-1931 weakness of civilian government in Japan, engaged the issue of men on the spot stampeding government and empire into wars in China, and even, over time, realized how late the IJA and IJN began planning their offensive in Southeast Asia, a really crucial point still lay mired in shades of grey.

Western scholarship established an image of a chronically bickering inner circle of senior officers, officials, and politicians struggling, in Tokyo, to pull together truly coordinated and truly national war policy and grand strategy. The bitter rivalries between and within the armed forces were seen and unpacked. What was not seen was that the end result did not, ever, rest on an *effectively* coordinated *national* consensus evaluation of ends and means and how to match them, resting on sharply focused strategic priorities and addressed by realistic military plans. Allied grand strategy became to use brute force to destroy Imperial Japan as a state, no matter how much it cost or how long it took. Resources were so organized and campaigns coordinated. Japanese grand strategy was to wait for the USA to grow tired of being defeated by the IJN and IJA in battles in the Pacific, and turn its back on Asia. But that required both to take on an invulnerable superpower while most of the IJA was completely pinned down in China. Japanese war policy emerged from the unplanned, disorganized, and opaque vision of dominating China in order to build a new Asia. No clear ends were

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<sup>19</sup> Akira Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, London, Longman, 1987.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Storry, *Japan and the Decline of the West in Asia 1894-1943*, London, Longman, 1979.

spelt out, no coordinated means identified. The imperial turn instead provoked the Army and the Navy to engage in the argument that became the real root of the Malayan Campaign: the argument over how to share and allocate the resources of the Empire.

When full scale war developed in China in 1937, this not only committed Japan to an imperial war of conquest, it also cemented the Army's position as the dominant institution of the state. The China war was the Army's war, and to feed that war the Army demanded a huge share of the Empire's resources, from human to machine to raw material. Noting the direction of events, the Navy had already developed its own agenda. This appeared to be based on evaluating external strategic priorities, but in fact rested on grave concern that the Navy could be elbowed aside by the Army, and left without enough resources to sustain itself at the size it regarded as necessary. The only serious enemies the Navy could fight were the Americans and the British. The only card the Navy could play to prevent the Army from gobbling up all the money and the production capacity was to establish, as a national policy, the need to be able to fight the Americans and the British. The only really important strategic benefit Japan could obtain from such a fight would be to dominate resource rich Southeast Asia. To protect its own budget and allocations, the Navy insisted on writing the British Empire into Japanese national contingency planning, as a probable enemy, from 1936 onwards.<sup>21</sup>

This dynamic, the struggle to secure a sufficient share of men, money and machines, settled in to dominate the process by which the Japanese government and its armed forces established a national war policy, and formulated a grand strategy to achieve it. When the Army refused to relent in China, this put Japan on a collision course with the USA. The German victories in Europe opened up the window of opportunity in Asia. The really decisive move came when the Japanese central direction of war decided to attack the Western Powers in Southeast Asia, rather than join the German attack on the Soviet Union. This was an Army decision, influenced by

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<sup>21</sup> Important English language studies that have significantly improved our understanding of these problems include I. Gow, Y. Hirama and J. Chapman (eds.), *The History of Anglo-Japanese Relations 1600-2000, Vol. III: The Military Dimension*, London, Macmillan, 2003, and Tohmatsu Haruo and H.P. Willmott, *A Gathering Darkness: The Coming of War to the Far East and the Pacific, 1921-1942*, New York, Rowman and Littlefield, 2004.



the bloody defeats at Soviet hands in 1939. The decision to overrun Malaya and Singapore was made by the Army, which directed the campaign. The Navy contribution was to insist that the USA could not be left undisturbed, in the hope it would not intervene. If the Army insisted on fighting the Western Powers, the Navy insisted on doing so according to its own strategy. Because the two armed forces could not ever identify a truly compromise grand strategy based on the threats Japan faced and the ambitions it pursued, because neither would give way to the other, and both insisted they must each have everything they need, Japanese grand strategy turned out to be the decision to do everything—an ambition far beyond the means available.<sup>22</sup>

The reason Western scholarship on the Malayan Campaign still struggles to grasp this deepest root of grand strategy—the narrow refusal of both armed forces to think national strategy rather than single service strategy, resulting in unreal compromise non-decisions—is that it remains mired on the lesser point that the civilian government could not control the armed forces, who argued constantly about grand strategy. There is still the impression there was a singular Japanese national war policy, as well as singular Japanese national grand strategy, and that both at least rested on strategic analysis, even if produced by fractious argument. This is a mirror image, especially of American decision making at the time. The idea that the Malayan Campaign stemmed ultimately from the IJN conclusion it would rather start a new war than be elbowed aside from the national supply by the Army still confounds Western campaign scholars. This more penetrating understanding has for some time been settling into wider English language or translated studies of Imperial Japan and its wars, especially studies of the armed forces and the Emperor. But campaign studies lag behind. Forthcoming work such as Yamamoto Fumihito's studies of both the interwar Japanese reactions to the British Singapore Strategy and the Japanese conduct of the Malayan Campaign will help close this gap, and are to be anticipated. He certainly educated me.

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<sup>22</sup> The most recent English language study of importance on Japanese strategic decision making in 1941 is Eri Hotta, *Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy*, New York, Vintage Books, 2014.