

Singapore: a colony or our nation?

A commentary on the independence of our country.

What makes a country a home?

Is it having sufficient resources? The autonomy to demand justice? Or the vision of equality for all? Well, sadly, Singapore checks none of those boxes. After the Japanese Occupation, the British left us dying, only this time, at the hands of hunger instead of torture. In order to finally be free of oppression, we *must* attain independence.

Before the Japanese Occupation, the British were on our soil for 123¹ years. They claimed that they would protect us and foolishly, we believed their lies founded on white superiority.

General Percival² had been adamant in his false beliefs that the Japanese would attack from the North-East of Singapore, even when they had clearly been advancing from the North-West. As a result of his weakening forces, dwindling resources and Japan's superior military ability, we watched



A Sook Ching screening centre in 1942³, photo taken by Tham Sien Yen

as our 'impregnable fortress' was taken over; within eight days.

When the Japanese Occupation began, deep-seated hatred towards the British intensified. Not only were they unable to protect their 'Gibraltar of the East', but they had been defeated by the very Asians whom they had underestimated. As Mr Soon Kim Seng⁴, a storekeeper at the Japanese Food Control department, put it:

"It was a pitiful sight to see the British and Australian soldiers cleaning up the roads. We never thought that a 'white man'; would

¹ Zaccheus, M. (2019, December 25). Look back 2019: Bicentennial relooks SINGAPORE history, with an eye on the future. Retrieved February 20, 2021, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/heritage-bicentennial-relooks-spore-history-with-an-eye-on-the-future>

² Ho, S. (2013, July 18). Battle of Singapore. Retrieved February 20, 2021, from https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2013-07-19_113523.html

³ Home - archives online. (n.d.). Retrieved February 22, 2021, from <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline>

⁴ Singapore: The making of a Nation-state 1300-1975. (2015). In *Singapore: The making of a nation-state 1300-1975* (p. 28). Singapore: Curriculum Planning & Development Division, Ministry of Education.

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someday be a road sweeper. So the Japanese Occupation changed our impression of the 'white man's' superiority."

The cruel treatment of prisoners of war and civilians by the Japanese taught us to keep our mouths shut and our ears pricked, as hundreds died in the initial bombings and executions.

150-200 died in the Alexandra Hospital⁵ massacre on the first day of the Occupation. Thousands more died in the Sook Ching massacre. Uncountable dead, murdered at the hands of the Japanese. For three years, we learnt how to live with nothing but fear to satisfy our hunger and uncertainty to quench our thirst.

When the Japanese surrendered, we were handed over from one form of oppression to another. Back to the colonial ways we went, when the British made false promises that they could not keep.

Have we seen any improvement? Well, children are starving on the streets because fields were bombed and destroyed roads were never repaired. The black market persists, draining the locals' meagre salaries. As the 1947 census showed, our population has surpassed 900 000⁶, yet we

⁵ Alexandra hospital massacre. (2014, April 03). Retrieved February 20, 2021, from https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2014-04-07_090735.html#:~:text=The%20British%20Hospital%20Inow,k4kd%20on%2014%20february%201947

⁶ Singapore's first Post-war census. (2014, June 15). Retrieved February 20, 2021, from https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2014-06-16_150036.html

don't have enough homes. Family members were killed in the bloody Sook Ching Massacre and Japanese Occupation. Have the British made good on their promises of a better life? The answer would have to be no.

You can see the discontent with the government as soon as you step out into the streets. People are joining trade unions and organising strikes to get the British to recognise their needs. In our own school, Chung Cheng High, many of us are discontent with the fact that the British government does not give us opportunities for higher study here⁷, yet when we go back to China to study, they deny us the right to return to our home for fear that we will turn 'communist'. What kind of government is so afraid of its people that it forces them to halt their education?

Look around, and you will realise that 'decolonization'⁸, a word first coined in the 1930s, has begun. In 1945⁹, Indonesia achieved independence from the Dutch. Tired of being controlled, they took action. The Indonesian National Revolution gave Indonesians what they had wanted and what we must now strive towards: independence.

⁷ Singapore: The making of a Nation-state 1300-1975. (2015). In *Singapore: The making of a nation-state 1300-1975* (p. 78). Singapore: Curriculum Planning & Development Division, Ministry of Education.

⁸ Mary Frances O'Dowd Mary Frances O'Dowd is a Friend of The Conversation. Independent Scholar, & Robyn Heckenberg Dean Learning and Teaching Centre for Aboriginal Studies. (2020, June 24). *Explainer: What is decolonisation?* Retrieved February 20, 2021, from <https://theconversation.com/explainer-what-is-decolonisation-131455#:~:text=Seeking%20independence,Independence%20were%20armed%20and%20bloody>

⁹ Toward independence. (n.d.) Retrieved February 20, 2021, from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Indonesia/Toward-independence>

The Nanyang Chronicles

An Independent Singapore - Free From the Clutches of the British Colonists

It has been *129 years* since the British stepped foot on our land; *129 years* of tolerance, *129 years* of silence. We had never questioned the presence of the British on our island but now it's time we do. Do we want the autocrats who failed us to continue ruling our land? These dictators, the British, have firmly entrenched themselves in our soil. They have caused us so much pain and agony by failing us, thus, they are not fit to be our leaders and we should be set free from their poor strategic planning and ethnocentric arrogance. They failed us when they surrendered to the Japanese on 15th February 1942. The British forces did not have sufficient ammunition, weapons and troops to protect Singapore. Despite that, they played up the impression that we were undefeatable. Hence, Singapore was falsely known as "a fortress that was impregnable" and that no other external forces could take over the British rule. Due to their arrogance, the once superior British underestimated the ability of an Asian country like Japan. The British lost the battle with the Japanese, overwhelmed by the numerous attacks made in various locations of Singapore. The situation in Singapore had become overwhelming for the allied forces to handle. Thus, the British surrendered, marking the start of the Japanese Occupation and our sufferings. Since they've failed us once, will they be reliable rulers and do we want them to continue colonizing us?

When the British abandoned Singapore, the locals were subjected to Japan's oppressive regime for 3 years. The citizens were punished for being anti-Japanese or pro-British and were manipulated to support the Japanese by being condemned to abuse and torture. Even the British Prisoners of War were publically humiliated by the Japanese and made to carry out undignified tasks like fixing and cleaning facilities around Singapore. They'd failed us and were paying for their misdeeds. The incompetence of the British caused us great anguish during World War II. For instance, there was a shortage of goods in Singapore so rationing was practiced and some locals got insufficient commodities. Food was scarce and starvation was rampant and the lucky ones just managed to get some measly tapiocas.

While our neighbouring countries are gradually gaining independence, we are still languishing under the rule of an external force. Indonesia, previously ruled by the Dutch gained independence on 17th August 1945 and Vietnam, colonized by the French, became an independent nation on 2nd September 1945. India and Burma recently gained independence from the British on 15th

August 1947 and 4th January 1948 respectively. India and Burma are good examples for us to follow. Our Indian and Burmese friends have played their part and gotten their freedom! We should have more political involvement in the ruling of our country and fight for our liberty.

If we had a say in the ruling of our country, we would have more control over what is happening now. We would have been able to unite and come up with solutions that would benefit everyone in the nation, together. We need to establish a democratic nation and exercise our rights! Shortage of food is a problem yet to be solved by the British. This has led to malnourishment to otherwise able-bodied people, who are unable to work, resulting in severe reduction in manpower in many sectors. Therefore, some need to drop out of school to join the workforce and to make ends meet. Furthermore, others are deprived of an education as they cannot afford it and there is a lack of proper school infrastructure. While the rich are getting an education, the poor are bereft! This is causing the education gap to increase rapidly. Soon, Singapore will not have a capable workforce who can contribute to the economy and growth and our children will be deprived of living in a developed nation! The British also fail in other areas such as internal security, resulting in riots and unrest in the community. There is little economic growth, allocation of money and in my opinion, most importantly, low morale amongst the people. We, the people of Singapore, need to rise up against our colonial masters so that we can fight for the freedom of our nation!

In conclusion, we need to set Singapore free, from the Japanese, from the British and from any other external power as well as break the shackles of colonisation! If all of us play a part by stepping up and taking responsibility for our nation, this is possible. Being held in captivity by foreign invaders is not going to affect anyone but us, and the future generations of Singapore. Are we going to sit back and suffer the tyranny of external powers ruling us? Let's fight for the freedom of Singapore, *Majulah Singapura!*

Tan Jia Ying
Nanyang Girls' High School
4 May 1948

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