

History Internal Assessment

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To what extent did Indian military aid to Britain help defeat the Japanese in the Burma Campaign?

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To what extent did Indian military aid to Britain help defeat the Japanese in the Burma Campaign?

1 Plan of investigation

This investigation will assess the significance of India's contribution to the Burma Campaign. The investigation will connect India's military support with Japanese defeat, and will study the effects of Indian participation in the 1942 Burma Campaign. In short, the investigation will try and answer the question as to how vital Indian aid was to Burma during the 2nd World War.

The investigation will assess only India's *military* aid and not other forms of financial, industrial or raw-material contribution. This investigation will also not discuss other factors (such as British leadership, or flawed Japanese planning) that may have contributed to the downfall of Japan after the Burmese Campaign.

Most of the evidence is in the form of oral history and summary of events. Evidence is also provided in the form of primary documents which show India's military stationing of troops during the campaign and documents that explain an increase in military expenditure and production. Reasons will be formulated as to why the Indian Army decided to support the British, and what provided them with the motivation. A variety of book and Internet sources, different and contradictory in opinions and points of view will be used, and their resourcefulness will be evaluated with reference to *origin, purpose, value and limitation*, thus providing corroborating evidence to reasonably assess the extent and validity of the question.

2 Summary of evidence

2.1 The Situation in North-Eastern India

It was to pose a massive strategic threat to the British empire if the Japanese gained control in the Burmese region. The British forces had already undergone a crushing defeat in South-East Asia; they had realized well-in-advance that the Japanese Army was approaching Burma with full momentum. The British couldn't therefore afford to lose another battle in Burma. The British, without the slightest hesitation, saw the importance of using the resources of their colonies to fight the war. As a result, a large portion of the Indian National Army (INA) was deployed to fight the Japanese in Burma in the famous Burma Campaign. The British thus pledged Indian independence for support in the war against the approaching Japanese.

2.2 The British Forces

Command over Burma had been primarily exercised through the British War Office. Command in the Indian region had been weak throughout. The British military had faced unexpected defeat in the South-Eastern region of Asia. Most of the British forces were relocated to Australia to prevent further expansion of the Japanese empire. Very small British forces were therefore available in the Indo-Burma region. The British generals realized the difficulty and complexity involved in pulling back their armies back from Australia for deployment in Burma. There was thus a void that resulted in Burma, making the area highly susceptible to Japanese invasion.

2.3 The Indian Outlook

For the Indians, independence and political sovereignty was their primary goal. The defence of Burma was key to the defence of India. If Burma was to be compromised, the Indian border would be at a serious threat.

Certain local populations welcomed the Japanese as a means of ousting the British. The Japanese

were regarded as “saviours” for some. However, this quickly proved to be only a short-term interest as the majority of the Indians wanted to be completely free and sovereign. The British had already committed themselves to a process, that would, in time, grant independence to India. Hence, the Indian army encouraged the British by providing them with arms, resources, materials and soldiers. Their outlook was “the sooner the war gets over, the faster we get our independence.”

2.4 The Japanese Forces

A Japanese invasion of India was key to achieving a diplomatic position, whereby the Japanese could strike a deal with the United States by virtue of possessing a large mainland empire. The Japanese, although involved in several war campaigns in South-East Asia, assessed the situation in and around Burma before launching a full-scale attack. By the end of 1941, the Japanese 15th Army had completed its preparation for invasion.

“There were two reasons for the Japanese invasion of Burma. Firstly, the Japanese knew it would serve them well if they cut overland access to China from Burma via the famed Burma Road. Along this road, a steady stream of military aid was being transported from Rangoon, over the mountains of the ‘Hump’ and into Nationalist China, but if this supply route was closed, the Japanese could deprive Chiang Kai Shek’s Kuomintang (Nationalist Chinese) armies of their life-blood, permitting the Japanese to conquer all China.”¹

The Japanese outlook was therefore very much different from that of the Indians, or even the British for that matter. They were hoping for an easy run-over, and under-estimated the power of the aid that could be provided by Britain’s vast colonies.

2.5 The Burma Campaign (1941-1945)

This was the most important campaign in which Allied forces defeated the Japanese in Burma.

¹http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/war/wwtwo/burma_campaign_02.shtml. Retrieved 5 May 2004.

A land attack on Burma was thought to be a remote idea. But throughout 1940-41, Japanese threat grew. It was however thought that the Japan lacked the necessary resources, since she was involved in Malay and the Philippines. Burma thus continued to take a low priority for reinforcements and equipment. This lack of seriousness demanded an unconditional contribution from India in the next few years during the campaign. Throughout Central Burma were some units of the Burma Frontier Force and the Burma Rifles. 16th Indian Infantry Brigade arrived early in December and was placed in reserve around Mandalay.

3 Evaluation of sources

Elliott, J. G. *A Roll of Honour: The Story of the Indian Army 1939-1945*. London: Cassell, 1965.

This book is an excellent summation of the Indian Army and its activities throughout the Second World War from 1939, up until 1945. A substantial part of the book covers the Burma Campaign and the heavy involvement of the Indian army in the campaign. *A Roll of Honour* was written with the primary purpose of elucidating the contributions and successes of the Indian Army in a variety of wars. The authors thus take a supportive stance in favour of the Indian Army. However, the authors aren't of Indian nationality, which prevents upright bias in the authors' opinions. On the contrary, the authors have had a direct relationship with the Indian Army, which makes their outlook more convincing and legitimate, but limits the scope of the book in being used as a source of evidence. But since their motive is one of sustenance of Indian morale, this automatically puts the book under the light of a biased look. The British point-of-view was totalled disregarded, and only a bird's eye view of the Japanese outlook was provided. An advantage to this book was the absence of an element of exaggeration, and the content presented were absolute matters-of-fact. Not very many analytical thoughts or conclusions were presented, which made it difficult to make judgements and assessments, and the authors, in their attempt to avoid bias, have taken the stance of a stranger. A limitation of the book, and one that was encountered by the authors themselves, was that "primary research into [the] military history [of a country] is a task outside the powers

of the individual writer . . .”² The authors have thus relied almost exclusively on official histories, and on those written for divisions and histories – all of which are primary documents.

Lunt, James. *A Hell of a Licking: The Retreat from Burma 1941-42*. London: William Collins, 1986.

This book was more valuable as a historical resource because it was recently written. The book focuses purely on the Burma Campaign, and thus offers much stronger evidence in support of the event. This book also takes a more analytical approach, which is one the greatest strengths of this source. The author has consulted several important persons, directly involved in the Burma Campaign, which makes the source all-the-more reliable. The author’s bibliography is additionally enriched with Japanese sources.³ The book uses the author’s own experiences as raw-material, which puts a tinge of doubt on his recollection of the event. The “whats” may therefore not be accurate, but the overall analysis and the author’s evaluation of the importance of the event certainly is. The author is highly selective in his view-points, and this made it a painless task to answer the question: “What would have happened otherwise?” Contemplating the effects resulting from the absence of an event in History is as important as the occurrence of the event itself.

4 Analysis

“During the Second World War, India supported the British, but at the same time Gandhi, Nehru, and the Congress party stepped up a “quit India” campaign. To retain Indian support in the war effort and to counter Japanese anti-Western propaganda, the British pledged independence.”⁴

The Burma Campaign undoubtedly was very successful in repelling the Japanese Army. The Army in Burma continued to come under India for administration, reinforcements and supplies. When the Japanese had attacked Burma for the first time, capturing Victoria Point, it was decided that

²Ibid. Foreword.

³Such as the English translation of the War Records of the 215th Infantry Regiment, Imperial Japanese Army.

⁴Palmer, R.R. and Colton, Joel. *A History of the Modern World*. 8th ed. p. 921 New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985.

reinforcements would enter Burma no matter what. It was already an accepted decision that the Japanese would not be allowed to take over Burma. The only source for the vast majority of reinforcements that could enter Burma within a short period of time was India, where a rapid expansion of the army was underway. The Indian Army, which was then largely officered by Britons, was sent to Burma to just provide a much-required hand to the Burmese. The Britons did not decide to send Indian reinforcements to provide an extra hand in case of emergencies; it was clear that the Burmese army was weak, inefficient and poorly trained.

“The chief instrument of the defeat of Japan was the Indian Army.”⁵

There has been extensive evidence to suggest movement of the Indian Army to and from Burma, and placement of Indian reinforcements within the lines of Burma.⁶ The evidence provided in this online journal unmistakably suggests that there *was* indeed considerable military aid offered to the Burmese. Qualitatively speaking however, the question still remains as to *how* vital this aid was. This can perhaps be answered by a measure of the timeliness of the aid provided.

“In January 1942, General Hutton, who was the GOC Burma Army Command prepared an assessment of the situation in Burma, and planned that the defence of northern Tenasserim would center around Moulmein and was the responsibility of 17th Indian Infantry Division.”⁷

There is thus firm evidence that General Hutton had issued an order, and that responsibility for Northern Tenasserim (in Burma) lay in the hands of the 17th Indian Infantry Division, which comprised of trained divisional troops and experienced Infantry Brigades.

“The 16th Indian Infantry Brigade was a vital reinforcement that reached Burma.”⁸ Without these reinforcements, it would have been a lot easier for the Japanese to dig a hole into Burma and continue with their massive conquest of Asia.

⁵<http://www.rothwell.force9.co.uk/burmaweb/index.htm>. Retrieved 5 May 2004.

⁶Rothwell, Steve. *Reinforcements 41-42*. <http://www.rothwell.force9.co.uk/burmaweb/reinforc.htm>. Retrieved May 25, 2004.

⁷<http://www.rothwell.force9.co.uk/burmaweb/japinvade.htm>. Retrieved 25 May 2004.

⁸<http://www.rothwell.force9.co.uk/burmaweb/16IndBde.htm>. Retrieved 25 May 2004.

There is also strong evidence to suggest that this Indian infantry division was continuously reorganized during the 1942 campaign.⁹ The 17th Indian Infantry Division was raised as a War Office Reserve Division in Ahmednagar in the spring of 1941, exclusively for deployment in the Burma Campaign. Surely, such a *trained* and *well-prepared* army division offered an additional layer of essential reinforcements and insulation to the *weak* and *untrained* Burmese military personnel. The contribution is much more cardinal and of paramount importance than is visible from the surface.

5 Conclusion

The Burma campaign had no decisive effect on the Second World War as a whole, but it did a great deal to restore respect for British arms following the humiliations of Hong Kong, Malaya and Singapore – with a ton of aid from the Indians that is.

Although the defeat of the Japanese was inevitable, India's military support to Britain made the defeat be carried out easily, effectively and with astronomical momentum. Confidence levels were boosted, and this had a lasting effect against the worn out Japanese soldiers. The Indian divisions were highly trained but had joined the war only recently, and this fresh involvement in the Burma Campaign made it possible for the Indians to fight relentlessly. All pieces of evidence affirm the fact that the contribution of the various Indian divisions, namely the 17th Infantry Division, had an enormous impact and helped provide the flustered Burmese army with the adequate support needed to defeat such a powerful Imperialist country as Japan. This, coupled with the timely reinforcements that appeared at Burma from India, provided critical support to the Burmese army, the absence of which would have crippled the army and would have allowed for Japan an easy occupation of Burma.

When looking at the big picture, Indian support was crucial to execute Churchill's "proper application of overwhelming force."¹⁰ and to strategically engineer the downfall of the Axis Powers.

⁹<http://www.rothwell.force9.co.uk/burmaweb/17indian42.htm>. Retrieved 25 May 2004

¹⁰Churchill, Winston. *Memoirs of the Second World War*. Mariner Books, 1991.

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