

Crisis in the British Empire

By George Padmore

THE two most heterogeneous political aggregations of peoples in the world, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the British Empire, are both at this moment faced with a life and death struggle for existence. Yet what a challenging difference there is in their respective positions in this hour of supreme crisis!

On the one hand, we see the U.S.S.R., a union of free peoples, with a combined population of 200 millions, comprising almost 200 races, of many creeds and colors, forming a monolithic phalanx before the enemy, inspired with an enthusiastic fanaticism which is the admiration of friend and foe alike. These comrades-in-arms, these Russians and Ukrainians and Cossacks, Turkmans and Tajiks, Kabaks and Kalmuks, Bashkirs and Tartars, Buriat-Mongols and other descendants of Jenghis Khan's hordes, know for what they are fighting and love what they know.

Contrast this with the situation in the Far East, where events have most graphically exposed the inherent weakness of imperialism. According to the Singapore correspondent of that venerable organ of British imperialism, *The Times*, "After nearly 120 years of British rule the vast majority of Asiatics were not sufficiently interested in this rule to take any steps to insure its continuance."¹ What a damning indictment of British colonial administration!

Why is it that these Asiatic peoples after enjoying more than a century of British culture, civilization, "trusteeship," and the rest, exhibit such ingratitude for the gifts the British have brought them as to desert their "trustees" and benefactors at the time when they are most in need of their support? The answer to this question is to be found in the economic and social conditions prevailing in these countries.

Malaya

Malaya represented the wealthiest unit in the British empire. With 70 per cent of the world's tin and more than 50 per cent of the world's rubber, it was a veritable El Dorado for predatory capitalism; the dream of the City of

British Imperialism, to save the Empire from the Japanese, must grant freedom to subject peoples; but to do that would be to commit hari-kari. What to do?

London come true. The alien conqueror came into this rich land and dispossessed the natives of their homes. He did not even give the Malaysians the Bible in return for their lands, for they remained Mohammedans. The nabobs, having taken possession of the best areas of the country, turned to India and China, whence they brought indentured labor into Malaya to develop their lands and mines. This they did because foreign coolie labor was even cheaper than the indigenous kind, so that the Malaysians not only lost their lands, but at the same time were deprived even of a means of livelihood. Those people who believe that imperialism is a philanthropic institution creating jobs for the backward races must be able to perceive the denial of their faith in the story of Malaya.

The pukka sahibs were in Malaya to line their pockets. These "birds of passage" were feathering their nests as fast as they possibly could. Even now they hope to return and develop resources at the point where they were forced to leave the Japanese in charge. That is the reason why, while they duly admired at a great distance the scorched earth policy operating in the Soviet Union, they left things in order for Japanese interim control. They look forward to a speedy return and a renewal of the "good old times."

Wages in Malaya averaged twenty-five cents to thirty-seven cents a day for men and sixteen to eighteen cents for women. These were the ruling rates in factories, mines and plantations, and the legal maximum working day was fixed at nine hours. During December, 1940, workers on an estate of the Dunlop rubber company demanded higher wages, and went on strike when they were refused. Three strikers were shot dead and others were wounded when military forces were called in to quell the workers. At Selangor, during May, 1941, seven thousand workers went on strike, and five of them were killed in the clashes which followed with the police.²

¹ Hansard, May 28, 1941.

These labor disturbances were ascribed to "subversive propaganda," questions in Parliament drawing the reply that there were no economic justification for them. Perhaps Members of Parliament would like to work for twenty-five cents to thirty-seven cents a day. At any rate, these were the wages which caused the strikes, and the fact that the trade union law forbade peaceful picketing gave an excuse for the official attacks upon the workers. At the same time extremely handsome profits were being pocketed by the rubber companies.

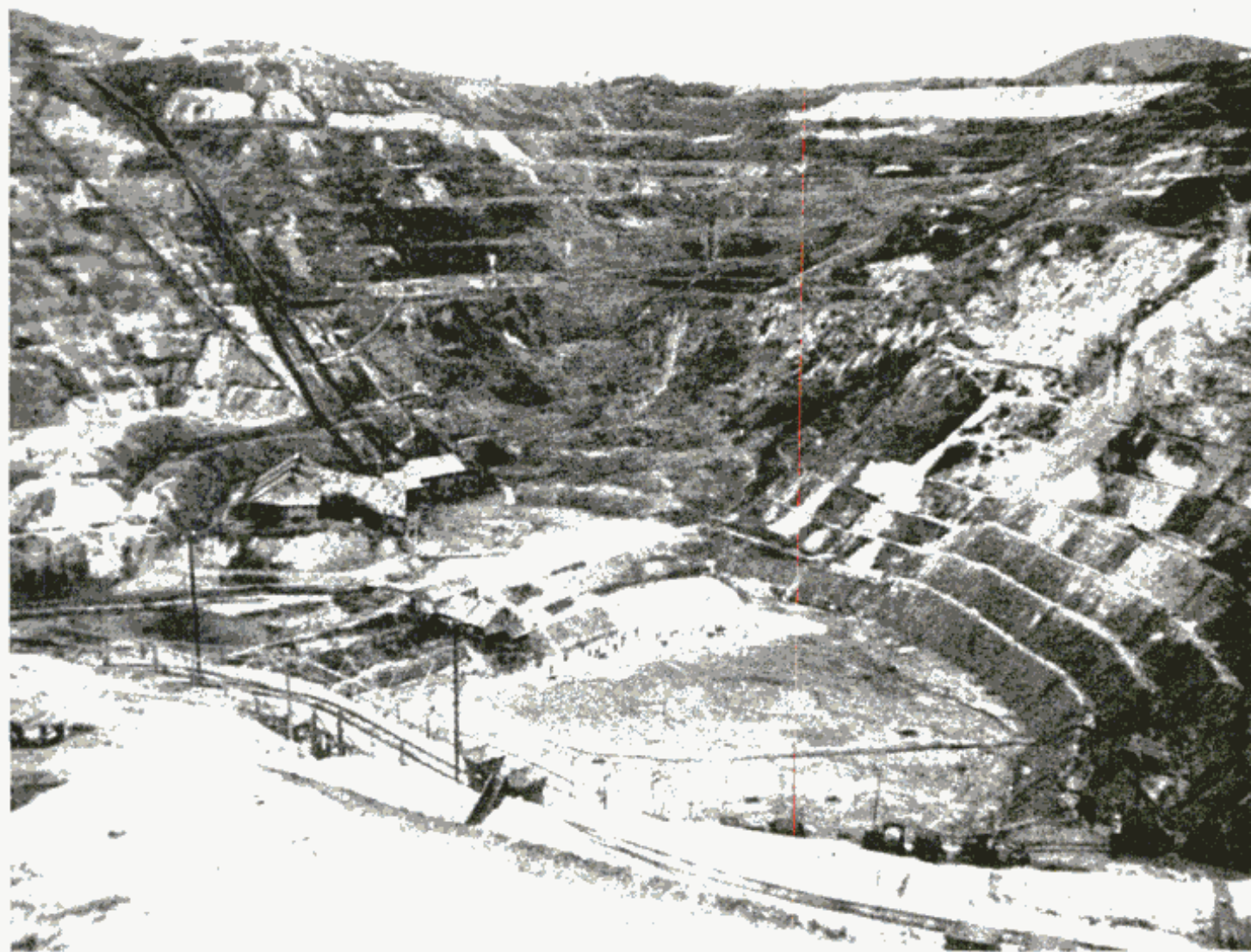
Not even the semblance of political democracy was enjoyed by the indigenous people. "The Societies Ordinance makes political organizations illegal, and prior to 1940 also made trade unions illegal. Now, as the result of tremendous labor unrest, trade unions are legalized under the Trade Union Enactment in the Straits Settlements, but this enactment seeks merely to bring the unions under the control of the Governor, and it makes all trade union activities—strikes, political activities, etc.—illegal. The Official Secrets Enactment and the Sedition Ordinance give the Governor tremendously wide and vague powers. Under these ordinances persons can be convicted not only for actions but for 'seditious tendencies' and 'purposes detrimental to the interests of the British Empire.'

"The freedom of the press, of publication, of the importation of books, of the showing of films, of meetings, etc., are all severely restricted. In all the Malay States freedom of conscience is infringed by the power of the sultans to compel attendance at the mosques and to declare 'false doctrines' illegal. Everywhere police services are highly developed, particularly political police. Judges are usually colonial service officials. Deportation without trial is very frequent."³

One of the moral justifications of imperialism, used particularly by the British, is that European occupation of backward territories will abolish slavery and other kindred practices incompatible with modern standards of conduct. Child slavery, however, flourished in Hong-kong and the Malay States. Known as *Mui Tsai*, it fed on the grinding poverty of the people, who were only too glad to receive a few dollars in exchange for the children they could not afford to feed and clothe. The girls, from the very

³ Lady Simon: *Slavery*—see pp. 96-114.

¹ This sentence was suppressed by *The Times*, but was printed in the *Manchester Guardian* of February 18, 1942. It appears that *The Times* correspondent also writes for the *Guardian*. Incidentally, this shows the kind of censorship which goes on in editorial offices.



A tin mine in Malaya

Acme

youngest age (even under 3 years), were as a rule sold into domestic slavery, and very often passed over into brothels. Boys were bought to work in factories and for other kinds of labor.

When he was Secretary of State for Colonies in 1922, Mr. Winston Churchill told Parliament that he desired "to make it clear that both the Governor (of Hongkong, the distributing centre) and I are determined to effect the abolition of the system at the earliest practicable date, and I have indicated to the Governor that I expect the change to be carried out within a year.¹

This expectation was too optimistic, for Lady Simon, writing in 1929, told that the system still flourished in Hongkong, and on May 29, 1941, Mr. Creech Jones asked the Under-Secretary of State for Colonies "whether steps are being taken by legislative action in the Straits Settlements to prohibit the traffic

in boys, who are sold for employment in factories and industries outside the territories, for domestic service and for training in circuses and theatres? Replying to this question, Labour's representative, Mr. George Hall, Colonial Under-Secretary, completely evaded it and talked some drivel about there being a traffic of some extent in boys from China ports to Malaya since the extension of hostilities in the Sino-Japanese conflict.

The Secretary of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society, which for some time had concerned itself with this question of *Mui Tsai*, addressed a communication to the Colonial Office on June 17, 1941, in which attention was invited "to the statement in the report of the Governor of the Straits Settlements on the *Mui Tsai* System for the second half of 1939 (Ref. S.C.A. 1003 1939), that there is no legislation in the Straits Settlements to prevent the traffic in boys. The fact is recorded without

comment, without any suggestion of its being a hitherto undiscovered omission in the law of the colony, and without any indication of any intention to remedy the law."²

According to Mr. Hall's reply to Mr. Creech Jones of the 29th May, 1941, the Governor of the Straits Settlements had decided to take steps to prevent the traffic, but unfortunately for the victims, history did not wait upon the leisurely reforms of pro-consuls. Those people who failed to support Abyssinia against Italian aggression on the ground that slavery still reigned in that country, would doubtless have done better to have looked for the evils within the British Empire. Over a hundred years Britain had been in Malaya, and it had failed to eradicate the evil which had been one of its avowed reasons for taking over imperial rule. Now the Japanese have taken the situation in their hands, and it

¹ Hansard, May 29, 1941.

² Anti-Slavery Reporter, October, 1941.

is too much to hope that these perpetrators of horrible outrages in Hongkong will play the role of social reformers in Malaya.

Hongkong

The world was shocked at the revelation of Japanese bestiality in Hongkong, but we must not be under the delusion that this former bastion of British imperialism on the China coast was something of which the British people might be proud.

"On the executive side the Hongkong government is a bureaucratic departmentalism," wrote a correspondent from the colony in May, 1939. "On the legislative side it is an autocracy. In theory the presence of elected and representative members on the Legislative and Executive Councils upholds the principles of democracy. In practice the Chinese members neither know nor care what are the interests of the Chinese community whom they are supposed to represent. They have one aim—to get honors and prestige for themselves—so they vote with the Governor. The European members, when they do oppose, can be outvoted by the heads of departments and the Governor. Not long ago the Chinese Seamen's Union was, quite illegally, closed down, but there was no protest from the Chinese members on the Council."

The statistics for 1936 show in whose interest the colony is ruled. Of annual revenue of approximately \$28,000,000, \$4,281,000 was presented to the Imperial Government for defense, \$2,287,000 went in pensions to retired civil servants, \$12,218,000 was paid in Government salaries, and only \$182,000 could be found for charitable services.¹

We hope that when the Japanese have been driven out, this territory will revert to its rightful owners, the Chinese, and become an integral part of the Chinese Republic.

Singapore

At the Singapore headquarters of the British administration, the Governor, the representative of the imperial power, combined in his person the office of High Commissioner, with control over the sultans of the Federated and Unfederated States, who governed the native subjects in these territories. The system of indirect rule was the only contact between the imperial trustees and their native wards. Unfortunately the wards did not recognize any benefits from their trustees.

The Legislative Council of Singapore, the crown colony area, was composed of 13 officials, heads of the various civil departments and 11 members handpicked

by the Governor. Only two members were elected, and they represented the European Chambers of Commerce of Singapore and Penang. The Singapore natives, like those on the mainland, had no voice in their own affairs. Surely it is not really surprising that when the crisis came the Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas, was unable to mobilize the common people—Malayans, Chinese, Indian—to withstand the Japanese onslaught. How could a people whose existence had been entirely ignored, presumably because they were considered unfit to participate in the government of the country, suddenly resuscitate themselves, as it were, and assume responsibility in defense of the system which had until then failed to recognize their existence?

These colonial people, exploited, oppressed, victims of color bar practices and theocracy, subjected to the racial arrogance of the British *Herrenvolk*, recognized only the enemy already entrenched in their land. For while colonial intellectuals and socialists have no illusions regarding Japanese imperialism which, despite its demagogic appeal of "Asia for the Asiatics," is most predatory and brutal, it cannot be expected that illiterate native masses should be able to make this differentiation. They have a feeling of *omni ignatum pro magnifico*: the untried master is the best. The word "Britain" to the native colonial peoples, like the word "Russian" to the former subject peoples of Czarism, is synonymous with "oppressor."

"The British had no roots in the people," asserted *The Times* correspondent. But why, we pose, did they have no roots in the people after a hundred years? Because an imperialist power can have no roots in a subject people, except the roots of bayonets. The very nature of imperialism is a negation of fraternal relations between peoples. Its only relationship with the subject people can be that of the rider to the horse: the one on the back of the other. And he who carries the White Man's Burden has to have a strong back.

Tired of carrying this burden, the colonial population of Singapore displayed no enthusiasm when the Japanese attacked the island fortress. "With the exception of certain sections of the Chinese community—some inspired by Free China's struggle for survival, others by Soviet precept and example—the bulk of the Asiatic population remained spectators from start to finish. Their inclination caused acute difficulties in the field of labor. . . . There was no native labor at the docks. Soldiers had to be taken from military duties to load and unload ships."²

Being civilized, the people of Britain

may argue and debate the political character of the war: Whether it is an inter-imperialist conflict; whether it is a struggle between Fascism and Democracy, or just Good against Evil. To the backward "savages" of Malaya it was simply a fight between two bands of marauders who were overrunning their country; a fight in which they were not concerned except as the prize. Their attitude was "a plague on both camps."

And when all is said and done, what example did the Europeans set for them? While the fate of an empire was being decided on the Malaya peninsula, the pukka sahibs in Singapore were having a good time, declared Lady Brooke-Popham, wife of the Commander-in-Chief, on her return to England. "The majority of civilians," she asserted, "were immersed in a long round of tennis and dancing. I tried to wake them up, but it was hopeless. . . . They were too busy with their social engagements."

In a semi-official book, *The British Colonial Empire*, published about the time of the fall of Singapore, the author assured us that "The wealth of Malaya . . . is laid on secure foundations, and its future, under British administration and protection is equally secure. . . . Malaya is today a contented and peaceful country, and one of the most successful examples of British colonial administration."³ How these official apologists misled the British people, and how history has given them the lie!

But taking everything as a whole, the pukka sahibs have no legitimate reason for complaint. For over a century they have been living on the fat of the land. Three British mining companies, Tronoh Mines, Southern Tronoh Mines and Sungei Besi Mines published profits this year of phenomenal size.

"Tronoh, with a capital of £300,000, made a net profit after taxation, etc., of £169,196, and paid a dividend of 55 per cent, the profits being well over half of the capital. Southern Tronoh, with a capital of £200,000, made profits on the same basis of £69,762 and paid 30 per cent. Sungei Besi, with a capital of only £144,000, made no less than £95,731 and paid 58½ per cent dividend, the profits being two-thirds of the capital. The colossal profits from these and similar undertakings will now be flowing into Japanese coffers instead of back to London. Those are the stakes for which Britain fights!"⁴

These vultures will not even pay taxes to provide for the defense of their properties. A war time bill introducing income

¹ *The British Colonial Empire*, p. 125. By W. E. Simmet, a former Editor of *Crown Colonist*, official organ of the Crown Agents for the Colonies.

² Don Batemen, in *The New Leader*, January 31, 1942.

³ *The Times*, February 18, 1942.

⁴ Article on *China under the Union Jack*, in *Empire*, May, 1939.

tax for the first time was passed in February, 1941. Incomes under £576 were exempt. Two per cent was payable on incomes up to £720, increasing to a maximum of 8 per cent on incomes over £3,400. The export tax on rubber was 2½ per cent. The introduction of this income tax nearly caused a revolution among the "patriots." Assuredly, Sir Shenton Thomas could have had no easy time with these "whisky drinking rubber planters and tin miners."

It was the natives of Malaya who paid for the upkeep of Singapore. Out of the taxes squeezed from the peasants the sultans contributed over £20,000,000 towards imperial defense between the last and present wars.² And when the enemy struck the natives were left defenseless.

Burma

Even before the war in the Pacific broke out, the Burmese people made their attitude to Britain plainly known through U Saw, at the time Prime Minister of the colony. His claim for Dominion status for the 17 million natives of Burma was categorically rejected by Mr. Churchill and his understudy Mr. Amery, Secretary for India and Burma. "Burma," declared U Saw, "was brought into the war by an edict of the Governor. The elected representatives of the people were not consulted. . . . If Burmese people were convinced that they were fighting for their own freedom as well as for that of the rest of the world, then there can be no question about it—Burma's war effort would be increased fourfold." He made it quite obvious that "There is a small section of Burmese opinion which believes that to aid Britain win the war means to aid Britain to keep us in subjection. . . . There is another section, which, while it cherishes no love for the Japanese, feels that if it is Burma's destiny to remain a subject nation, then it might prefer to be governed by a nation that is of the same blood and of the same religion." U Saw is now held somewhere as a potential enemy of Britain's imperial interests.

U Saw himself did not enjoy any mass backing in Burma. He was a reactionary nationalist, the son of a feudal landowner whom the British officials made use of to combat the growing labor and Socialist movement headed by Dr. Ba Maw, the former Prime Minister. U Saw was then made Prime Minister. Now his masters have accused him of treachery to them and of making contact with the Japanese. As in Malaya, so in Burma, the British authorities are completely isolated from the native masses. With the progressive leaders in jail and U Saw under arrest, their last link has been severed.

As a result of this isolation, when the Japanese invaded Burma, instead of

meeting a hostile population, they were joined by "Free Burmans." Leland Stowe, an American correspondent, describing the activities of the "Free Burmans" declared that their fifth column operations were worse than any that occurred in Norway. "Treachery was discovered among officials of all classes. Burmese guides led the Japanese through the jungle." The correspondent observed "that the most sinister feature of the campaign was the appearance of a Burmese corps comprising fully equipped troops wearing blue uniforms and officered by Japanese." "The complete failure to mobilize native man power to assist in the defense of Malaya, Burma and India is a great loss to Britain," observes a Chungking newspaper. "We hope the British will arm the Burmese masses," it adds.

What a pious hope! Whitehall has refused to free the anti-fascist Burmese leaders, among them U Ba Pe, the Elder Statesman, who represented the Moderates at the Round Table Conference in London in 1929.

When questioned about this recently in the House of Commons, Mr. Amery replied that these progressive leaders were detained "in the interests of 'order and security.'" What mockery! "Order and security" against whom? The Japanese are already in occupation of Rangoon. And where the Mikado's legions pass there is neither "order" nor "security."

It seems that no disaster, however

catastrophic, can arouse the Rip Van Winkles of Whitehall. Truly, those whom the gods seek to destroy they first make mad.

India

As we write¹ the Japanese, aided by "Free Burmans," are advancing towards India. There is little need to dilate upon the problem of this "jewel in the Crown of the British Raj." The causes of the present deadlock are too well known. India has for some time been the running sore in the imperial body politic. Only a major operation can now save the situation. Sir Stafford Cripps has been given the task of performing it. It is to be hoped that he will be as successful at "political surgery" as he has proved himself to be in other fields.

Jawaharlal Nehru, who voices India's aspirations, has made the issue quite clear. Addressing a meeting at Delhi on February 10, 1942, he said: "My talks with General Chiang Ka-Shek have given rise to much speculation. Some people think there might be changes in Congress policy towards the war. It is absurd to suggest that he has come to India to interfere in Indian affairs. The old world is crumbling and cannot revive. Our lot may possibly become worse in the new world, as the path of revolution is a path of turmoil, as shown in China. China has had to pay a heavy cost and India will have to pay the same price. Slogans will not create revolution for us."

¹ Daily Telegraph, March 21, 1942.

² March 19, 1942.



² See J. Gunther; *Inside Asia*.