

Your Country Needs You (And Also your Resources)  
Britain and her Colonies During and Shortly After WW2

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**Focus**

The modern world was forged in the crucible of the Second World War. Even today, citizens and world leaders alike are forced to deal with the aftermath of a conflict that claimed 60-80 million lives and changed the course of history. Indeed, historians have written tens of thousands of books and scholarly articles covering the war, with topics ranging from the tactics and equipment of the involved nations to the strategic decisions of their leaders. More often than not, however, these books are written from the perspective of the major combatants involved in the fighting. As a result, the popular image of the conflict is that of a white man's war, fought between armies composed largely of white soldiers. Even when scholars tell the wartime stories of black and colored soldiers, inevitably the focus is overwhelmingly on American units such as the famed Tuskegee Airmen. As a result, the experiences of African and other colonial soldiers, particularly in regards to British and French forces, are ignored or otherwise neglected.

With that in mind, I wish to illuminate and detail the stories of these colonial troops from their own perspectives. Whether they were French Tiralleurs or British Gurkhas, I want to know how these soldiers fought, lived and died during the largest conflict in human history. I also want to know how much the prevailing, racist attitudes of the early 20th century influenced the usage and lives of these troops, in particular what happened to them postwar and why their stories remained mostly untold.

**Composition of Capstone**

As alluded to above, this capstone will be written from the colonial perspectives of the British and French armies during the Second World War. More specifically, it will focus on two particular colonial units and their participation in two distinct theaters of war: France's African

soldiers during the Mediterranean and European campaigns, and the British Gurkha and Indian regiments during the China Burma India (CBI) campaign. I will detail key battles where these colonial troops played a significant role and their experiences encountering both the enemy and the patronizing, racist attitudes of their allies. Two central themes that I wish to pursue while creating this capstone are ‘remembrance’ and ‘collective memory’; namely why we, as a society, are only just now recognizing the contributions by these former colonial subjects to eventual victory.

### **Personal Stake and Sources**

I grew up developing an abiding love of history, especially about World War II. Upon entering high school, I also developed a strong commitment to anti-colonial ideologies. By putting these two topics together, I will be able to learn more about an overlooked aspect of a period of history while also using the framework of my personal belief system. To that end, this capstone project will utilize a variety of primary and secondary sources, with an emphasis on there being a 60/40 balance between them in favor of the former. Secondary sources will predominantly be composed of pieces written from a post-colonial and or historical perspective, curated from online databases such as Jstor. For primary sources, I will attempt to utilize databases from the United Kingdom and France, as those nations and their former colonies will be the primary focus of my research. For example, I expect to be using the collections of the British Imperial War Museums during production of this Capstone project.

### **Next Steps**

I have divided the workload of this capstone project into three distinct phases, each named after terms used in filmmaking. As of this writing, preproduction of this project has begun in the form of gathering secondary sources on my chosen topic. Upon turning in this proposal,

phase 2 of preproduction will commence as I move to gathering primary sources, most assuredly using the foreign databases as detailed earlier in this proposal. Upon the gathering of sufficient sources, an activity that should take about a week, actual production of the paper will begin. I expect this phase to take up the bulk of the workload.

Upon finishing the write up of the project and if there is enough time, funds and work hours left, there will be a post production segment to prepare it for presentation at CSUMB's capstone festival in the form of me dressing up as an colonial soldier in the employ of the British. However, this phase of the project is heavily dependent on the rate of work I am able to devote to the main Capstone effort and may very well be omitted entirely based on a combination of Professor approval and time and effort.

### **Challenges**

As this capstone project entails the French colonial experience during World War Two, a significant language barrier will more than likely be present as I am not sufficiently fluent in French. Should I be unable to find English translations of primary or secondary sources, then it is more than likely that the subject of my research will shift from covering both the British and French colonial experiences to only covering the former.

### **Chronology of Progress**

- Week of March 13, 2023: Phase 1 of Preproduction is completed, finalized capstone proposal is submitted, phase 2 of Preproduction begins
- Week of March 20, 2023: Production of capstone project begins as final primary sources are identified and recovered
- Week of March 27, 2023: completion of capstone project should reach ~30-50% by this week

- Week of April 4, 2023: Capstone should be 3/4ths completed by this time
- Week of April 11, 2023: Capstone Project draft is finished and turned in. If there is time, postproduction begins
- Week of April 18, 2023: Draft revisions begin
- Week of April 24, 2023: Final revisions are added, postproduction is completed by this date if there is time left
- Week of May 1, 2023: Final draft is completed and turned in.

### **Abstract**

No conflict has shaped the modern world more thoroughly than the Second World War. However, the retelling of this era, whether through mass media or more scholarly works such as books and journal articles, is one seen through a white, Eurocentric lens. This is strange; as the name implies, the Second World War was a truly global conflict, involving not only the major world powers at the time, but also their subjects. Great Britain was no exception; far from the popular image of it standing alone in the face of Nazi tyranny, the island nation drew vast amounts of men and materiel from her colonies throughout the world. Even the British Army began to rely on soldiers not native to her shores as the war progressed, with Africans, Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, and Indians serving in battlefields from Dunkirk to the Rhine. In spite of their service and being on the winning side, however, the stories of these colonial troops, particularly those from the Indian subcontinent, went untold for years. Indeed, it is only recently, with the breakup of the British Empire in the late 20th century and growing post-colonial awareness in today's century, that the triumphs and tribulations of these colonial soldiers are being told.

### **Introduction**

The popular image of the United Kingdom's involvement in the Second World War was that of a nation under siege, holding the line against the Nazis until the United States and the Soviet Union entered the war. This view, despite holding a kernel of truth in the early war period, discounts the efforts and contributions of Britain's colonies and dominions. In spite of the massive human and financial cost of the First World War and growing anti-colonial sentiment, the British Empire still held sway over a quarter of the world's landmasses and the populations and resources therein. Following the fall of France in 1940, Britain would increasingly rely on her colonies for not only raw materials to fuel war production, but also on their native sons to push back fascist aggression. Notably, Britain's Indian Army saw action in some of the war's most vital and dangerous campaigns, ranging from the deserts of North Africa to the jungles of Burma. Their efforts and contributions to eventual allied victory, however, were seldom recognized by the cultural history of the general public; it is only recently that the stories of Britain's colonial units, alongside the economic and material contributions of the colonies themselves, are being told and scrutinized seriously.

### **Britain at the Start of The War**

As an island nation, Great Britain has traditionally relied on her vaunted navy to protect her interests, which accounted for a large share of defense spending throughout the 20th century. As a result, Britain's army was small relative to her continental counterparts, fit only for policing her overseas empire. In fact, Britain's general strategy to safeguard her empire was to delegate the bulk of security duties to local indigenous forces so that, essentially, the empire protected itself. This made the British Army at the beginning of both world wars akin to a bantamweight

boxer; in India alone, there was only 50,000 British soldiers tasked to defend and protect a population of 250 million Indians, a ratio of 1 to 5,000.<sup>1</sup>

This was further compounded later in the century by the fact that, despite counting among the victors of the First World War, Great Britain was saddled with an immense war debt and a devastated populace. Combined with the financial catastrophe that was the Great Depression, British defense spending was slashed throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s. The threat of a resurgent Germany under Adolf Hitler and of Imperial Japan eyeing their colonial possessions in Asia, however, forced Britain to arduously and painfully mobilize its populace and industry for war. Indeed, the infamous Munich Agreement of 1938 was as much an attempt to give Britain more time to rearm herself as it was to avoid war altogether.

At the start of the Second World War, The British Army numbered around 890,000 combatants; by the Spring of 1940 they, alongside the French Army, faced 4,000,000 combatants of the German Wehrmacht<sup>2</sup>. Many believed that the Second World War would be a repeat of the first, with an expected German thrust into French territory from Belgium being checked by a Franco-British counter attack. Unfortunately, Germany's lightning fast advance through the Ardennes and subsequent encirclement of the Allied forces forced the British to evacuate their entire army from Dunkirk or face annihilation. France's capitulation followed shortly after, leaving Britain, for the time being, to fight Nazi Germany on its own. It's fortunate, then, that after surviving the twin hardships of the Battle of Britain and the Blitz, Great Britain was able to

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<sup>1</sup> Stone, David R. "Britain's Exit from Palestine, Malaya, and Kenya." *War in The Modern World*. Lecture presented at the The Great Courses Signature Collection, May 11, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Müller, Rolf-Dieter, and Janice W. Ancker. *Hitler's Wehrmacht, 1935-1945 / Rolf-Dieter Müller ; Translated by Janice W. Ancker*. Translated by Janice W. Ancker. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2016.



stand alongside not only the vast industrial might of the United States and the manpower colossus of the Soviet Union, but her Empire as well.

### **Feeding, Arming and Supplying Tommy**

While protected from enemy invasion by the ‘Moat defensive’ of the British Channel, Britain’s survival and eventual victory in the war was dependent on constant importing of raw materials and resources to supply her war factories and munition plants, to say nothing of completed war materiel such as bullets, bombs, tanks, aircraft and ships. Much has been written about the literal mountains of equipment and supplies the United States fed to Great Britain and the rest of the Allies through the Lend-Lease Act, but it is also important to note that Great Britain’s overseas colonies and dominions did their part in keeping the mother country supplied, particularly in regards to raw resources. Over the course of the war, territories such as Ceylon (modern day Sri Lanka), Nigeria and Trinidad and Tobago supplied Great Britain with vital resources such as rubber, manganese steel and oil,<sup>3</sup> while war factories in Canada churned out tanks and aircraft almost as fast as their American counterparts. This vital lifeline of raw resources and war materiel was in constant danger of being lanced off by the Germans and Japanese, both in the Atlantic and Mediterranean and in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Nevertheless, just enough of these supplies reached Britain’s shores to keep her in the war.

It is important to note, however, that Great Britain’s colonies did not supply such war materiel out of sheer patriotic fervor alone. As war production began to reach its high water mark and the need for resources became ever more voracious, ever more colonial elites began taking drastic measures to meet resource and manufacturing quotas. As a result, much of the labor

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<sup>3</sup> Imperial War Museums. “Why Britain Didn’t Stand Alone against Nazi Germany.” YouTube. Imperial War Museums, July 21, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w49y3NCXEKU&list=PLsxUz20mSw0gK7LPJTlzuPFNW-eGogMpL&index=32&t=64s>.

harvesting the natural resources to keep Britain in the war were either underpaid or flat out in arrears. To compound matters, corners were cut in areas like worker's safety and the import and export of foodstuffs for the sake of maximizing output bound for the mother country. These measures were tragically exemplified in the Bengal famine of 1943, a largely unknown period of Indian history where, thanks to a combination of rising food prices and astonishingly short-sighted colonial management, as many as 4 million Indians died from malnutrition and related illnesses.<sup>4</sup> Despite these appalling numbers and conditions on the ground, the British Government chose to instead impose a strict censorship and media blackout of the Bengal famine for fear of diverting vital resources away from the war effort.

The British Empire's colonial holdings were also an important source of manpower. Just as Britain declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939, so did her colonies and dominions. As a result, men from across the empire enlisted to do their part and fight against Hitler and his Nazi toadies. While some of them were undoubtedly conscripted and served with a sense of cynical detachment of fighting for their colonial overlords and others enlisted out of a love for adventure and money, there were cases of colonial subjects volunteering out of a genuine sense of wanting to do their part for King and Country. The story of Billy Strachan from the island of Jamaica is emblematic of this; after enlisting, he sold his motorbike and saxophone to pay for the long transatlantic voyage to England, serving as an Air Gunner in the Royal Air Force's Bomber Command. After completing his requisite 30-missions long tour of duty, Strachan went on to learn how to fly the iconic Avro Lancaster strategic bomber, a role he served with distinction until the end of the war in Europe.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Pike, John. "Bengal Famine of 1943." Global Security, November 20, 2011. <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/india/famine-bengal-1943.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Imperial War Museums. "Why Britain Didn't Stand Alone against Nazi Germany." YouTube. Imperial War Museums, July 21, 2021.



**Figure 1.1: Photo of Billy Strachan, center<sup>6</sup>**

## **Great Britain and India**

One of the main contributors of manpower came from the proverbial Jewel in the Crown of the British Empire, the British Raj or, to use their modern names, the nations of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. However, India's contributions to the war effort came with serious reservations. Having lost 50,000 of her native sons among the 947,000 British and commonwealth dead during the First World War<sup>7</sup> and with pro-independence voices growing louder and louder, India's colonial establishment was reluctant to join the rest of Britain's colonies and dominions in declaring war against the Axis. As a result, India not so much joined the war as it was dragged into it kicking and screaming, with the British Cabinet declaring war on their behalf without so much as a consultation. Not surprisingly, opposition to the war in India was widespread, coalescing around the Indian National Congress and its leader, the revered Mahatma Gandhi. This came to a head in April 1942 when, at Gandhi's insistence, a "Quit India"

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<sup>6</sup> Imperial War Museums. "Why Britain Didn't Stand Alone against Nazi Germany." YouTube. Imperial War Museums, July 21, 2021.

<sup>7</sup>Tarak Barkawi, "Culture and Combat in the Colonies: The Indian Army in the Second World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 2 (2006): pp. 325-355, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009406062071>, 329.

campaign was announced with a clear message to British authorities: either they leave the country entirely or face widespread civil disobedience, bringing the war effort in the country to an absolute standstill.

Naturally, the British responded quickly and decisively. Almost immediately after the announcement of the Quit India Movement, British authorities moved to arrest and imprison over 100,000 people, including almost the entire leadership of the Indian National Congress and Gandhi himself.<sup>8</sup> In spite of this tragic series of events, the blowback Britain suffered as a result of the crackdown on the Quit India Movement was immense; under pressure from their American allies, Gandhi and the rest of the Indian National Congress were released from prison just two years into their sentence. Moreover, the crackdown united India against British rule and convinced the government at Whitehall that, sooner or later, Britain must leave the subcontinent, subsequently setting the timer for eventual independence. On a more sobering note, the Quit India Movement unintendedly led to its painful partition into the modern states of India and Pakistan. While the predominately Hindi Indian National Congress more or less opposed the Second World War, the Muslim League under Muhammad Ali Jinnah, which as the name implied was comprised of the country's Muslim minority, openly supported it. As a result of their support, the postwar British government were willing to listen to Jinnah's calls for a separate, Muslim country during negotiations for their exit from India.

### **Fighting against the Axis**

Nevertheless, the Indian Army were able to mobilize over two and a half million men to serve alongside the British Army<sup>9</sup>, fighting alongside their erstwhile colonizers in every major

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<sup>8</sup> 1. The Open University, ed., "1942 Quit India Movement," Making Britain, accessed May 8, 2023, <https://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/1942-quit-india-movement>.

<sup>9</sup> Imperial War Museums. "Why Britain Didn't Stand Alone against Nazi Germany." YouTube. Imperial War Museums, July 21, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w49y3NCXEKU&list=PLsxUz20mSw0gK7LPJTlzuPFNW-eGogMpL&index=32&t=64s>.

theater of the war. Despite the failure of the Quit India Movement and nearly a century of systemic racism and prejudice against them, Indian soldiers proved to be just as tenacious and hardfighting as their British counterparts. In particular, they played a key role in the 1st Battle Of El Alamein in July 1942, with Indian soldiers, as part of the vaunted British 8th Army, first checking the advance of Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps and then driving them from the field with a concerted counter-attack.<sup>10</sup>

As testament to the bravery of regular Indian soldiers, thirty of them received Great Britain's highest award for bravery, the Victoria Cross.<sup>11</sup> The story of one of these recipients, Lance Havildar<sup>12</sup> Parkesh Singh of the 8th Punjab Regiment, reads like something out of an action movie. A Bren Gun Carrier driver during the Burma Campaign, Singh and his platoon were attacked by Japanese soldiers near Donbaik on 6 January 1943. Their platoon leader wounded and out of commission, Singh took command of the troop and, noticing two other Bren Gun Carriers stuck in a defilade and subject to withering enemy fire, drove across the battlefield to rescue them, manning the carrier's eponymous Bren machine gun on his own when its designated gunner was also wounded. Through sheer boldness and naked desperation, Singh forced the Japanese to withdraw from their positions singlehandedly, saving not only himself and his platoon, but also the surviving crew of the 2 knocked out Bren Gun Carriers. This act of selfless bravery, alongside him towing a disabled Bren Gun Carrier and its wounded crew to safety, again under enemy fire, on 19 January 1943, earned him the Victoria Cross.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 1. "A Brief History of the Eighth Army and the Desert War," Imperial War Museums, 2023, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/a-brief-history-of-the-eighth-army-and-the-desert-war>.

<sup>11</sup> Stewart, Iain. "Indian Army Victoria Cross Holders." Victoria Cross. Iain Stewart, September 12, 2022. <http://www.victoriacross.org.uk/ccww2ina.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> A rank synonymous with that of Sergeant in a typical Western army

<sup>13</sup> Ahmad, Maj Rifat Nadeem, and Ahmed, Maj Gen Rafiuddin. (2006). *Unfaded Glory: The 8th Punjab Regiment 1798-1956*. Abbottabad: The Baloch Regimental Centre. pp. 312-13.

*War Office 13th May 1943*

The KING has been graciously pleased to approve the award of the VICTORIA CROSS to —

No 14696 Havildar Parkash Singh 8th Punjab Regiment Indian Army

On the 6th January 1943 at Donbaik Mayo Peninsula Burma when two Carriers had been put out of action Havildar Parkash Singh drove forward in his own Carrier and rescued the two crews under very heavy fire. At the time the crews of the disabled Carriers had expended their ammunition and the enemy were rushing the two disabled Carriers on foot. This N C O's timely and courageous action entirely on his own initiative saved the lives of the crews and their weapons.

**Figure 1.1: Parkash Singh's VC Citation, as reported in the London Gazette<sup>14</sup>**

Nevertheless, like any army divided on the lines of colonizer and colonized, India soldiers faced their own unique brand of challenges off the battlefield. Traditionally, commissioned officers in the Indian Army were exclusively white, British Indians. Following the First World War, however, a policy of 'Indianization' was implemented in an attempt to placate pro-independence activists, allowing native born Indians the chance to become a commissioned officer for the first time in 100 plus years of British military presence. Indianization had a profound impact on the composition of the Indian Army; in 1939, there was a 10:1 ratio of British Indian Officers to native Indians; by 1945, this gap closed to a 4.1:1 ratio, with a total of over 8000 Indian Commissioned Officers (ICOs) earning an officer's commission by war's end.<sup>15</sup> However, just because native born Indians were now able to serve as commissioned officers did not erase any racial or cultural tensions felt between them and their white counterparts. Nearly every memoir written by an ICO commissioned before the Second World War talked about or mentioned stories of discriminatory practices they encountered from their white counterparts.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> War Office, His Majesty's. "Victoria Cross Citations." *The London Gazette*, May 11, 1943.

<sup>15</sup> Barkawi, 331.

<sup>16</sup> Barkawi, 332.

The level of discrimination and racism felt by some ICOs were indirectly responsible for the creation of one of the Second World War's murkiest untold stories, that of the Indian National Army. After the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Imperial Japan launched a whirlwind series of successful conquests against European colonial holdings in Southeast Asia. In particular, the stunningly quick capture of British Malaya and Singapore, the so-called 'Asian Gibraltar', yielded thousands of British and Commonwealth prisoners, many of whom came from the Indian Army. Subsequently, the Japanese recruited some of these prisoners, with INOs forming an important nucleus, into the Indian National Army, luring them with the idea of forcibly liberating their homeland with Japanese support. To what extent the Japanese will keep their many promises to the penal soldiers of the Indian National Army is a matter of vitriolic scholarly debate. What is known is that the systemic racism and discrimination felt by some ICOs were enough for them to turn traitor and join the Axis, as one surviving INA officer testified during a military trial: "We also felt and agreed upon that so far concerning our career in the Indian Army there had been distinctions between the British Officers and the [ICOs]. The [ICOs] had not been treated as well as our English comrades or brother officers."<sup>17</sup> While the INA did not contribute much to the overall war effort, its very existence made the British question the supposed loyalty and reliability of their colonial forces in India, especially in regards to long term prospects of stability and costs in the post-war world. In that regard, it stands to reason that, while the INA was more or less a glorified propaganda unit for the Japanese, it nevertheless helped hasten the British exit from India.

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<sup>17</sup> Barkawi, 332.



**Figure 1.2: Indian Soldiers of 19th division open fire on Japanese emplacements in Mandalay, Burma, 1945<sup>18</sup>**

### **The Sun Slowly Sets**

On May 9, 1945 the war in Europe came to an end with the unconditional surrender of all German forces. Four months later, the Japanese followed suit after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Soviet invasion of the Japanese Manchuria. The Second World War formally ended on the Battleship USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay on September 2, 1945, six years and a day since its start. For Great Britain, ostensibly a member of the winning side, the ceremony aboard the *Missouri* probably felt like a bittersweet dirge. Despite the mood of the cathartic celebrations occurring throughout England at war's end, the British Government knew that their time as a world power was rapidly coming to an end. The war essentially left them, for lack of a better word, scant broke, with little in the way of resources or funds to maintain her colonies and dominions.

Furthermore, the abysmal failure of Britain to defend colonies such as Malaya and Burma was a signal to the rest of the Empire that her time in the sun as a world power was ending. Sure enough, voices agitating for independence not so much grew louder, but rather became deafening

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<sup>18</sup> 1. R.E Taylor, *THE CAMPAIGN IN BURMA, 1945*, photograph (Mandalay, Burma, 1945), Imperial War Museums.



roars. Britain's exit from India in 1947 served as the first domino in a long line of decolonization efforts. However, rather than a clean and safe exit from her role as imperial overlord, Great Britain's extrication was more often than not messy and left lingering problems in her former colonies and dominions. Nevertheless, the British government strove to keep as much of their empire as possible, even with the loss of India and growing calls for independence amongst her remaining colonies. The driving question behind all of this was at what costs, in terms of lives and money, would the British government and her people be willing to accept to keep her empire.

### **The Malayan Emergency**

Among Great Britain's efforts to maintain at least a semblance of empire, the Malayan Emergency ranks among one of the most controversial. Today the country of Malaysia, British Malaya was rich in natural resources, particularly tin and rubber. The latter was harvested via vast rubber plantations located deep within the Malayan jungle, and alongside the tin mines were manned by the country's significant ethnic Chinese minority, which the ethnic Malays outnumbered only slightly.<sup>19</sup> During the Second World War, Malaya found itself under Japanese occupation, with the ethnic Malay majority more or less collaborating with their erstwhile occupiers. The Chinese minority, in solidarity with their Nationalist and Communist counterparts on the Asian mainland, did the exact opposite, forming partisan groups to resist the Japanese. This further increased tensions between them and the Malay population, which was already strained by economic competition and cultural and political differences. After the Second World War, and particularly after Mao Zedong's communist victory over the Nationalists in the Chinese

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<sup>19</sup> Stone, David R. "Britain's Exit from Palestine, Malaya, and Kenya." *War in The Modern World*. Lecture presented at the The Great Courses Signature Collection, May 11, 2023.

Civil War, these Malayan Chinese partisan groups began to coalesce and organize under the banner of Communism, forming a united front for the troubles to come.

Both sides' red line was crossed when British Malaya was reorganized into the Federation of Malaya in 1948 as the first step towards independence. However, these political reforms mostly excluded the rights of the Chinese minority and gave preferential treatment to ethnic Malays, particularly in regards to government jobs.<sup>20</sup> As a result, many Chinese Malaysians turned to the Malaysian Communist Party under the leadership of Chin Peng, viewing the Federation of Malaysia as illegitimate and unsupportive of their rights. In June of that same year, Peng organized the same partisan groups that resisted Japanese occupation into a single organization called the Malayan Anti-British Army, and launched a insurgency against British and Malaysian authorities, targeting rubber plantations and their British owners. The day after the murder of 3 European planters and their workers by insurgents, British authorities declared an emergency throughout Malaysia, starting the conflict.<sup>21</sup>

At first, the British response was incredibly clumsy and ponderous, with deep jungle patrols yielding few, if any, victories against the Chinese Malaysian insurgents. And while British and Malaysian authorities were able to control the major cities and towns, the thick jungles and hills of the Malayan peninsula belonged to the insurgents, where they acted with impunity launching the hallmark operations of guerilla warfare: hit and runs, attacks on isolated positions, and ambushes. Their primary target were the Malayan rubber plantations where, thanks to their isolated positions in the jungle, proved to be easy targets; insurgents can hit a plantation, massacre its operators, at times including neutral or reluctant Chinese workers, burn

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<sup>20</sup> Paul, Christopher, Colin P. Clarke, Beth Grill, and Molly Dunigan. "Malaya, 1948–1955: Case Outcome: COIN Win." In *Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies*, 51–63. RAND Corporation, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt5hhsjk.14>.

<sup>21</sup> Paul, Christopher et al. ibind 54.

down and destroy equipment, and then vanish into the bush before British and Malayan authorities could do so much as organize a response. Both sides committed horrendous war crimes: there were multiple instances of British Army and the Malayan constabulary forces executing Chinese Malayan prisoners out of hand regardless if they were part of the insurgency or not, further embittering the conflict.

The British's position improved when in April 1950 Lieutenant General Sir Harold Briggs was brought out of retirement to oversee Counter Insurgency (COIN) operations in Malaya. To that end, he drafted a two-part plan to stop the insurgents, which was successfully carried out by his successor Sir Gerald Templer. The first phase of the so-called 'Briggs Plan' contained the classic hallmarks of COIN operations; first by improving British and Malayan jungle fighting tactics and strategies, followed by winning the 'hearts and minds' of the Malays. Special privileges and incentives were given to the Malaysian social elite to keep them on the side of the British, the most tantalizing of which was the promise of independence. Moreover, efforts and initiatives were undertaken to improve the quality of life for the populace, further bleeding away support from the Insurgents.

The second part of the Briggs Plan involved what Professor David R. Stone labeled as 'the systematic violation of human rights'.<sup>22</sup> Like any good insurgency, the Chinese Malaysian guerillas relied on the goodwill of the populace to provide them with goods and supplies, most importantly food which they received from Chinese squatters living near the rubber plantations. Noticing this weakness, British authorities uprooted these squatters from their homes and either concentrated them into villages that could be closely monitored and protected by regular forces and constabulary or simply deported them. Their deserted farms were subsequently burned to the

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<sup>22</sup> Stone, David R. "Britain's Exit from Palestine, Malaya, and Kenya." *War in The Modern World*. Lecture presented at the The Great Courses Signature Collection, May 11, 2023.

ground, leaving the insurgents to literally starve themselves into submission. To further accelerate the collapse of the Malaysian Insurgency, the British offered incentives for guerillas to give themselves up; by 1960 the Malayan Emergency was declared officially over, but organized resistance essentially ended five or six years earlier. Chin Peng attempted to negotiate an end to hostilities, but with his position rapidly collapsing he fled into exile.

From a military standpoint, the British essentially won in the Malayan Emergency. However, the military theorist Carl Von Clausewitz stresses that wars are fought for an innately political goal; one side can win battles over and over again and still lose the war. In this case, Malaya gained its independence in 1957, making British intervention in the region irrelevant. To this day, the Malayan Emergency stands as a global benchmark on how to conduct a successful counterinsurgency program while at the same time raising important questions on the efficacy of such operations, to say nothing of the moral and ethical dilemmas it presents, particularly for a liberal democracy such as Great Britain.

## **Conclusion**

During the closing days of the 20th century, Great Britain transferred the island of Hong Kong back to the People's Republic of China after the expiration of a 157-year lease dating back to the 18th century. Many commentators and news pundits labeled the event as the end of the British Empire. However, the empire really ended in the years following the Second World War. Despite herculean efforts to both win the war against the Axis and keep her empire intact, Great Britain was bled dry financially and militarily, not to mention receiving mortal and lasting wounds to her pride and prestige. In the end, Great Britain may have won the war, but was forced to let go of her empire and cede her position as a world power to newer polities, these ironically being her allies America and the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the very real contributions Britain's colonies and dominions achieved in the road to victory against Fascism in the Second World War. In spite of tragedies and amid growing questions about the validity of British imperialism, men and women across the globe did their part to answer the call when the mother country called for aid. The surrounding issues surrounding the effects of British colonialism still linger like a odorous smell, but as history has proven time and time again such smells are in the nose of the beholder and is far from merely being only just fragrant or rancid.

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