The Omnipresent Threat: Fifth Columnists’ Impact on the Battle of Hong Kong, December 1941
By Bradley St. Croix

Abstract: The battle of Hong Kong forced the British garrison to fight against an irregular force, something they rarely did in the Second World War. Numerous factors contributed to the raising of this fifth column force including British colonial attitudes towards non-white inhabitants of the colony. Japanese coercion was also used to gain information and support from locals. These fifth columnists aided the Japanese attackers by pinning down garrison troops with sniper fire and surprise attacks. They also provided valuable intelligence on garrison positions. The Hong Kong police and criminal gangs played important roles in this battle, the former not adequately suppressing the fifth columnists threat and the latter furthered their own interests while simultaneously aiding the Japanese attackers. The fifth columnists were not a vital part of the Japanese victory at Hong Kong, but they added to the numerous advantages that the attackers already possessed.

Keywords: Fifth Columnist, Hong Kong, Second World War, Hong Kong Police, Colonialism

The British colony of Hong Kong faced a unique situation among the Allied armies during the Second World War when it was attacked by Japanese forces in late 1941: the defending garrison it had to fight an irregular force. This unprecedented circumstance effectively negated the British garrison’s defence plans particularly once the irregular and regular elements of warfare were blended. Irregular warfare was not taken into account for the defence planning of the colony in the interwar years creating a major gap in the garrison’s defence. Questions surrounding the defence of Hong Kong against Japan began after the First World War and had a major impact on the fighting in the colony in 1941. Until 1921, Hong Kong was the main British Empire naval base in the Pacific when it was replaced by Singapore. After this change questions arose as to what to do with Hong Kong as a military base. Historian Kent Fedorowich argued this did not diminish Hong Kong’s strategic importance. Up until 1938 the British Admiralty still recognized Hong Kong as an important forward base in a possible war against Japan (Fedorowich, Cocked Hats and Swords: 117). It was to be used as a staging area for operations. When fighting broke out between China and Japan in 1937 Hong Kong was threatened as war raged near the Hong Kong border with China. When Canton was occupied by Japanese forces in 1938, Hong Kong was surrounded by hostile forces, and despite discussions to the contrary, was not abandoned by the British military. Christopher Bell argued that the demilitarization of Hong Kong in peacetime was rejected due to fears of losing prestige among their allies, enemies, and the colonial population (Bell, Our Most Exposed Outpost: 72). The ad hoc planning negatively affected the defence of Hong Kong in 1941.

As the Second World War began in 1939 the protection of the British Pacific colonies became secondary to fighting Nazi Germany. Resources were stretched thin, and as long as limited resources were used, Hong Kong could continue to be defended. As part of this policy, Hong Kong was classified in 1940 as an outpost to be held against the Japanese for as long as possible (75). The defenders of the colony were drawn from across the British Empire. They consisted of two regiments of the British army, the 1st Battalion, Middlesex Regiment and 2nd Battalion, Royal Scots and two Indian army battalions, 5th Battalion, 7th Rajput Regiment and the 2nd Battalion, 14th Punjab Regiment plus the locally raised Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps (HKVDC) and various Royal Navy personnel and ships. In late November the garrison was reinforced by two Canadian battalions, the Royal Rifles of Canada and the Winnipeg Grenadiers as part of the use of limited resources strategy to defend the colony. Kent Fedorowich argued the sending of two Canadian battalions to Hong Kong was a symbolic reinforcement that was part of a larger strategy designed to reinsure British allies of their commitment to defend their empire and to deter a Japanese attack (Cocked Hats and Swords: 157). These garrison troops were tasked to defend a portion on the Chinese mainland called the New Territories. The city of Kowloon, on the mainland, sat across from the island of Hong Kong. This was the battleground where the Japanese and irregular fought against the minimally supplied and undermanned garrison.

Fifth columnists, plain-clothed Japanese troops, looters, Triad gang members, and the numerous non-uniformed persons who attacked the colony are the focus of this article. The underground elements of the battle will be brought to the forefront. The conventional elements of the battle will only be explained when it is necessary to provide context to the activities and motivations of the fifth columnists and the other groups. Irregular warfare was used by the Japanese to compliment conventional warfare, a practice that often blurred the line between the two types of war in Hong Kong. The Japanese did not direct all of the groups working against the garrison, but the Japanese forces benefitted from it. In order to understand what, if any, impact the irregular forces had, the garrison’s recollections are heavily relied. The impact of the fifth columnists on the battle cannot be easily quantified but a re-examination of their role in the battle is long overdue. Confusion and fear were created by the fifth columnists and irregular forces even while most of their actions were ineffective in their original intentions. While the fifth columnists’ role in the battle was not essential to Japanese victory but their role is far more ambiguous than the lack of impact previously claimed.

The term fifth columnist will be utilized to provide some clarity to this confusing set of events. As the modern term of guerrilla warfare does not well represent the irregular fighting that occurred in Hong Kong. C. N. M. Blair’s study of irregular war created in the aftermath of the Second World War offers a useful explanation of guerrilla, “the official British definition is more limited in its application, for the word ‘guerilla’ is defined as ‘a full-time member of an organised irregular band engaged in open warfare in his own country for a cause

other than personal gain’” (Blair, *Guerilla Warfare*: 2). However, this definition does not fit for the many individuals engaged against the garrison. Many people exploited the deteriorating conditions in Hong Kong to loot and rob, motivated by personal gain rather than political ideals. During the Second World War “fifth columnist” was a fairly new term used to describe an irregular band of fighters. It first appeared during the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Nationalist General Emilio Mola claimed that he was relying on four columns to push on Madrid while another column was waiting inside the city to join the attackers (Carney, *Madrid Rounds Up Suspected Rebels*: 2). The phrase fifth columnist quickly entered the lexicon to mean a group of people within a given territory that would aid an external enemy during an attack or invasion. It was widely used in the western military circles and media in the lead up to and during the Second World War. The use of fifth columnist for the battle of Hong Kong is still problematic as many of the participants cannot be said to be working for the Japanese directly.

Determining who the members of the garrison thought were fifth columnists is a difficult task. It appears that anyone who attacked the garrison troops and was not in uniform was labelled a fifth columnist. Looters and Triads are sometimes separated in the reports and diaries but the difference between the groups is unclear. Plain clothed Japanese soldiers were often mistaken as fifth columns but some of these soldiers had been in Hong Kong for an extended period thus blurring what the term fifth columnist actually can mean. Some, like Major Evan Stewart of the HKVDC for example, called them saboteurs (*Actions of HKVDC*: 4). The ambiguity of this term will be addressed. The definition of fifth columnist will be clarified by separating out the different groups and their motivation for fighting. Irregular forces will also be used to describe groups that cannot rightly be called fifth columnists.

Official documents from both British and Japanese sources downplay the role of the fifth columnists. On 29th January 1948 a supplement to the *London Gazette* was published, written by Major General C. M. Maltby, commander of British garrison at Hong Kong in December 1941. Maltby was one of the few to offer a definitive conclusion on the impact of the fifth columnists but offered a contradictory narrative of the fighting. The irregular forces are barely mentioned as Maltby concluded that the fifth columnists had caused little damage to Hong Kong and its defences and that their only real impact was “... straining the nerves of a number of the men” (*Maltby, Operations in Hong Kong*: 701). Maltby later contradicted himself in the despatch when he blamed the fifth columnists for denying the defenders the sole possession of the knowledge of the terrain as they led Japanese troops through the hills and around defensive positions. He was cut off from the actual fighting while in the underground headquarters of the garrison on the island. Also, the Japanese army did not include the fifth columnists in a description of the battle. In an American translated Japanese account of the battle, there is no mention of the fifth columnists at Hong Kong. In detailing the decision by Governor Sir Mark Young to surrender the colony, this document highlighted the confusion behind the garrison’s lines as one of the reasons Young had chosen to
capitulate on Christmas Day. But what caused the confusion was left unmentioned. Whatever the reasons for these omissions, the fifth columnists’ absence in Japanese and British accounts highlights the need to re-examine their role in the fighting.

The British colonisers created an environment ripe for Japanese victory and the recruitment of fifth columnists. Hubris among the defenders negatively impacted their preparations. One example is the strong connection between the British and Canadian defenders. Having fought together on the Western Front of the First World War and defeating the Germans led to overconfidence in the next war. Ted Ferguson, a Canadian author, demonstrated this attitude, “other than the shelling and the fifth-columnist snipers, though, he felt there was nothing to sweat about. The Japanese would never set foot on the island. As the Kaiser discovered in World War 1, when the Brits and Canucks got together, they were an unbeatable combination” (Desperate Siege: 110). This overconfidence coupled with the poor defence planning of the colony added to the long list of advantages that the Japanese possessed before the battle even began. British intelligence gathering was also negatively affected by this hubris. Antony Best has argued that British intelligence gathers and military leaders, simply did not believe that the Japanese would attack the British Empire. They believed the Japanese would turn to Thailand instead. Years of British neglect to provide resources to intelligence gathering and infighting caused the failure to predict Japanese intentions in 1941 (Best, British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia: 192). Racial stereotyping contributed to this failure as British military commanders believed that the Japanese were poor fighters and not a threat. They were quickly proven wrong.

The attack on Hong Kong was a well-planned and coordinated affair. The Japanese ensured their pre-attack intelligence was as updated as possible by scouting the locations of defensive guns, anti-aircraft batteries, and possible landing spots on Hong Kong island. Major Stewart noted that before the battle there was nothing the officials in Hong Kong could do to stop Japanese nationals from gaining intelligence about the colony’s defensive positions. No acts of sabotage appeared to have been carried out before the battle, but artillery positions may have been established in warehouses before the battle. They were smuggled into the colony and kept hidden until the fighting began. Ken Cambon of the Royal Rifles noted these guns were firing from positions that could have only been prepared before the battle (Guest of Hirohito: 13). Stewart noted the accurate fire of a high calibre gun against the pillboxes on the shore of the island hidden inside a warehouse (Stewart, Actions of HKVDC: 16). Arthur Gomes of the HKVDC claimed these guns where located near the current Cross Harbour Tunnel on the southern tip of Kowloon (A Volunteer in the Battle for Hong Kong: 1). British preparations for the battle, by comparison, did not match Japanese efforts.

A significant change in the defensive strategy of the colony further weakened the garrison. The late Canadian reinforcement altered the original plan to leave a token force on the mainland to carry out demolitions. Maltby’s changes called for three battalions to defend a line of defence dubbed the Gin Drinkers Line, named
after the bay where the line ended. It was to be held for as long as possible. After
the line fell, all battalions were to retreat to the island and resist against the
attacking force. But the garrison lacked any reliable naval or air support, not the
only missing requirements of modern warfare for the garrison. Operational
security was lacking, a mistake exploited by the Japanese. Major A. Goring, who
escaped from Hong Kong at the end of the battle, noted that, “Japanese intelligence
was extraordinarily good. Consular staff, spies, probably Japanese officers and
men in disguise, and possibly fifth columnists, had made an extremely accurate
and comprehensive survey of all our fixed defenses [sic] and vital
communications, and of the role of our troops during ‘morning’ exercises,” before
the battle began. Allowing these exercises to take place without security put the
defenders at a large disadvantage as the Japanese could see troop strength and
organization. Goring also detailed how little was done by the Hong Kong police
and the colonial government to stop Japanese intelligence gathering. One such
occurrence was the failure to remove a Colonel Suzuki from the colony after the
ture intention of his mission in Hong Kong was discovered. Japanese and British
officers had often been exchanged in the inter-war years to learn each other’s
language. When it was pointed out that Suzuki had no intention to learn English,
the Japanese Consul-General admitted he was really an Intelligence officer. He was
asked to leave Hong Kong, but no action was taken on his deportation. Fear of
upsetting the Japanese played into these decisions as Oliver Lindsay described:
“During the months before the Japanese invasion, the Hong Kong Government, in
keeping with the War Office’s policy, did not take rigorous action in the face of
blatant Japanese hostile provocation. For example, the Governor, then Geoffry
Northcote, reported that Formosans were entering the Colony as fifth columnists.
He wanted to deport them, but the Foreign Office cautioned against such action,
fearing reprisals” (The Battle for Hong Kong: 63). Goring noted the extent of this
intelligence work “[…] the Japanese were able to gauge very accurately the exact
minimum force necessary to capture Hong Kong, the most advantageous landings
points, and to destroy or disable our fixed defences and vital communications
piecemeal very rapidly and methodically.” Reports on Japanese strength at the
Hong Kong border where also incorrect. In a report September 1941 it was claimed
that there were only 5,000 Japanese troops along the border: Poor intelligence
gathering and lack of action on the part of the colonial government severely
hampered the garrison’s ability to fight both the Japanese forces and the irregular
forces.

Understanding who the fifth columnists were and why they fought for the
Japanese is a difficult task. Establishing how many took part in the battle is even
more difficult due to the fluid definition used in primary sources. In his memoir of
the battle, Leo Paul Berard of the Winnipeg Grenadiers claimed he later found out
that there were over two thousand fifth columnists. (17 Days Until Christmas: 61.)
James MacMillan of the Royal Rifles claimed that the island “teemed” with fifth
columnists who had been in place on the island for well over a year: Arthur
Gomes did not provide an exact number but said that there were many fifth
columnists: Some fifth columnists were Japanese nationals who were rewarded
and decorated by the Japanese army for their work before and after the battle (Stewart, *Actions of HKVDC*: 4). They were easily able to obtain employment to disguise their true purpose in the colony as no real control measures were put in place at the border (Endacott, *Hong Kong Eclipse*: 64). Despite this, the majority of the fifth columnists where Chinese living in Hong Kong. Over 750,000 people entered Hong Kong in the period from July 1937 to 1938 fleeing the war in southern China. Around 30,000 were forced to sleep in the streets as the colony was not equipped to handle the excess population (11). The poor treatment of these people by the colonial administrators led to many civilians assisting the invaders despite Japanese conduct in the war with China. Historian Gerald Horne cited racism and colonial repression as some reasons why the colony fell and why people chose to fight against the garrison (*Race War*: 31). The lack of recruiting of these same people for defence purposes also contributed to the fall of Hong Kong. Many in the colonial and military administration feared arming the Chinese population as they doubted their loyalty to Hong Kong (31). The large number of Chinese living in the colony could have contributed greatly to defence of the colony especially concerning so many were refugees fleeing Japanese violence on the mainland.

Many of the fifth columnists were identified in garrison documents and recollections as being supporters of Wang Ching-wei, the leader of the puppet government established by the Japanese in 1940 at Nanking. His name is now synonymous with traitor in China for his collaboration. Wang was a member of the Nationalist Chinese government for much of the 1930s (Boorman, *Wang Ching-Wei*: 515-516). Wang became disillusioned with the war against Japan and subsequently left his government position in late 1938. In his new position at Nanking, Wang sought to bring peace between the Nationalist government based at Chungking and Japan. His government shared the pan-Asian and anti-Western views espoused by Japan’s government (519). His supporters used Hong Kong as their headquarters and even published their own newspapers in the early days of the movement. Their ranks continued to grow as some supporters slipped into Hong Kong with the thousands of refugees (Snow, *Fall of Hong Kong*: 46). Certainly these principles were attractive to some of the people living in Hong Kong and China which is why they supported the Japanese attack as fifth columnists. The goal of overthrowing the British colonisers and restoring Asian control of Hong Kong made Europeans who lived through the battle view these supporters as traitors. American journalist Gwen Dew, who was in Hong Kong when Japan attacked, was one holder of this opinion (Dew, *Prisoner of the Japs*: vi). She recounted, “the traitorous Wang Ching-wei Chinese took off their civilian clothes and stood in their true colors [sic], the greenish uniform of Japan” (48). Dew was not the only one to assume the fifth columnists were supporters of Wang. P. A. MacMillian of the Royal Artillery assumed that the fifth columnists shooting at the troops retreating through Kowloon were either Wang supporters or ethnic Chinese from the Japanese colony of Formosa. Benjamin Proulx, a naval reservist living in Hong Kong, claimed that the majority of the fifth columnists were Wang supporters (*Underground from Hong Kong*: 24). The claims of traitorous behaviour were
influenced by the feelings of racial superiority on the part of the Europeans in the colony.

The fifth columnists’ contributions to the battle are subject to many rumours and unconfirmed reports. Some events border on hyperbole but many events are collaborated in numerous accounts. To better understand these events, they will be grouped into four main categories; assistance to Japanese, sniping, sabotage, and signalling. Each will be covered below. Clothing was often used by Japanese troops and irregular forces alike. The Gin Drinkers Line fell in part due to the Japanese use of clothing to confuse the garrison. Japanese troops in civilian clothing had been spotted by the Redoubt’s commander cutting barbed wire and telephone lines around the Shing Mun Redoubt. Elements of irregular warfare, blended with conventional tactics, were well executed by the Japanese leading to the unhinging of the Gin Drinkers Line. Once the wire was cleared, the Japanese troops employed the infiltration tactics they had perfected in the war with China. Once the Gin Drinkers Line fell, the British troops began to fall back to Kowloon for evacuation to Hong Kong island. A. Goring recalled that Japanese troops entered Chinese homes and took all the clothes they could find to disguise themselves. They moved through streets unnoticed and were able to use the air raid tunnel systems to move behind the garrison lines. Captain Everette Denison of the Royal Rifles described his difficulty in telling between the crowds of Chinese refugees and Japanese troops, who had just landed on the island especially during the engagement near the Sai Wan Fort. Benjamin Proulx recalled seeing Air Raid Precaution (ARP) helmets scattered on the road near Repulse Bay and speculated these were disregarded by fifth columnists who had been using them as a part of a civilian disguise (38-39).

The use of surprise attacks on garrison positions further added to the confusion of the battle. One of the more brazen attacks by the fifth columnists struck the police training school. Men were seen making signals in the hills near the Police Training School outside Kowloon on the night of 11th December. As the police fired on signallers, loud explosions were heard near the school as British soldiers were attacked by ‘Chinese’ with grenades. It was later revealed that they were Japanese troops in civilian clothes. The police were ordered to abandon the station and retreat to the waterfront of Kowloon to be evacuated. The Japanese used deception to move closer to the school and to force the retreat of the police from the mainland. Surprise was also used on the island. D. M. McDougall claimed, “there was a definite existence of a Chinese Fifth Column and these were used to guide small Japanese parties, start rumours...” He also noted that ARP tunnels were used by the Japanese troops, guided by fifth columnists move across the island and attack garrison troops on the west side of the island causing confusion and surprise. The Middlesex war diary details the splitting of the garrison on the island: “There is not the slightest doubt that they were assisted by followers of Wang Ching Wei, and fifth columnists, who acted as perfect guides, and by the morning of December 19th [sic] they had nearly reached the crest of JARDINES LOOKOUT [sic], the occupation of which a once threatened the East and West

Communications of the Island, and enabled them to overlook the Wong Nei CHONG GAP [sic].” The splitting of the garrison on the island brought about the fall of the colony and the fifth columnists played an important role in this process.

The actions of the fifth columnists created confusion and fear among the members of the garrison. The fifth columnists struck randomly at numerous points all over the colony seemingly coming out of nowhere. Homemade bombs placed on roadsides and sent through the mail added to the confusion. Several of these bombs went off before the Japanese attack began (Banham, *Not the Slightest Chance*: 27-28). For example, one bomb killed a civilian and wounded another at a factory in Lo Lung Mei Village in the northeast corner of the New Territories. Most of these bombs did little damage including one placed outside the Kowloon Motor Bus Company where garrison vehicles were stored. Another bomb was discovered on open ground near the Castle Peak Road near the mainland’s coastline, requiring the police’s attention to be removed. These bombs were mostly ineffective, but they demonstrated the extensive operating area of the fifth columnists. Wenzell Brown, an American professor, was present at the battle and described the fear that overcame Canadian troops: “They had been in Hong Kong for only a few weeks and, until the fighting started, had been stationed in Kowloon. For days they had fought in unknown territory against the hardened Japanese troops. They had been outnumbered five to one. Every passing coolie might be a Japanese in disguise. They had come across their own sentries garroted to death. Horror was in their eyes” (Brown, *Hong Kong Aftermath*: 35). Most of Brown’s account is anti-Japanese propaganda but this description aligns with other accounts of the irregular elements causing fear and panic in the garrison ranks. Conventional battles are confusing on their own, the adding irregular elements further adds to the fog of war.

Another method of disruption was the sending of fake signals to confuse garrison troops. The war diary of the East Infantry Brigade recalls a confusing exchange of orders that no one in the garrison seemed to have made. Rumours of a Japanese landing on Hong Kong island on 15th December was brushed off as a fifth column message. Telephone lines were cut causing communication problems between different military and civilian organizations of the garrison. Japanese leaders were also thought to be listening in on garrison communications by tapping into the communications network. As the Royal Scots war diary mentioned that no telephone line could be treated as secure, steps were taken to encode messages. There were numerous instances of the police investigating reports of fifth column activities like signalling or snipers only to find nothing at the reported location. The 1st Battalion Middlesex were put into danger by the confusion created in the cancelling of orders which were placed again leading to them almost being cut off by snipers and other fifth columnists. The sniping was often random and missed their targets, but the confusion created cannot be discounted.

At different points during the battle there was confusion over who the garrison troops were engaging in combat. “C” Company of the Royal Rifles engaged in a...
fire-fight and hand to hand combat with an unidentified force at Sai Wan Fort on the night of 18th December when the regular Japanese landed on the island. The force was thought to be comprised of Chinese coolies as the platoon commander Lieutenant A. B. Scott reported to the Company Headquarters. The Canadians were pushed back from the fort. This setback led to even more confusion as Eastern Brigade Commander Brigadier Wallis argued with Major Bishop of the Royal Rifles about who controlled the fort. Wallis was convinced that Canadians held the fort, while Bishop, who commanded the Canadians in the area, knew this was not the case. A counterattack on the fort revealed the dead bodies of regular Japanese troops and Chinese fifth columnists wearing armbands bearing Japanese symbols. The enemy was cleared from the side of the hill on which the fort stood but the garrison could not retake the fort due to its very high walls. Measures were eventually adopted in an attempt to deal with the confusion caused by the fifth columnists and plain-clothed Japanese soldiers.

As the battle raged, panic over the fifth columnists led to extreme actions by the garrison. In his memoir, Canadian signaller William Allister detailed the order to shoot any suspected fifth columnists on sight. Allister vividly recounted a Canadian officer was questioning a man, but language difficulties precluded the man from answering so he was subsequently was taken behind a building by two Canadian soldiers and shot. Allister’s recollection of this incident shows the psychological toll that the killing of possible civilians could have on the members of the garrison. He notes that the two soldiers returned looking distraught. Allister described the shooting as "cold-blooded murder" and fought back nausea (Where Life and Death Hold Hands: 24). This led Allister to question who was responsible for the man’s death and he recounts being very shaken by the shooting. John Sutcliffe Whitehead, an anti-aircraft gunner during the battle, recalled worrying about sniper fire in houses behind him on the island early in the battle. Squads were despatched to capture anyone with arms and execute those caught with arms whether they were firing them or not. Causing psychological stress to the defenders may not have been the intended consequence of the Japanese use of fifth columnists but stress was caused by these actions and negatively affected the troops’ ability to fight.

Numerous cases of sabotage were reported to be caused by fifth columnists. When the conventional battle commenced many attempts were made at disrupting the garrison. As pre-planned demolitions of bridges and roads were carried out on the mainland by British engineers, fifth columnists undid much of this work. Communication lines were severed early in the battle and the wire leads of the explosives were cut after a British demolition teams had left. (Stewart, Actions of HKVDC: 8). Regular British troops were rushed in their demolition work and continued their retreat to the Gin Drinkers Line. Minor attempts at sabotage were conducted like putting paraffin in fire buckets in hospitals.

Fifth columnists caused disruption to the transportation system of the garrison. Lorries were a frequent target causing delays of ammunition, food, and troops. At one point in the battle, a police car was struck by a truck and some police were

*Close Encounters in War Journal, 1: “Close encounters in irregular and asymmetric warfare” (2018)*
The war diary makes no mention if this was an intended attack on the police. The fifth columnists used numerous methods of attack and therefore this tactic could have been a deliberate attack. Charles Barman of the Royal Artillery provided important insights into the impact the fifth columnists had on the garrison’s logistics. He served as a Battery Quartermaster Sergeant responsible for providing ammunition to the various guns placed throughout Hong Kong moving ammunition from central dumps. When he was evacuating from the mainland, the ship he was on suddenly stopped in the middle of the harbour during an air raid directed at Kowloon. When Barman went to the wheelhouse and ordered the coxswain to get the ship moving, the latter who was trying to make the ship a sitting target for the planes, Barman drew his revolver on the coxswain and got the ship under way again. Upon reaching Hong Kong, Barman arrested the coxswain for being a fifth columnist who had been in the employ of the Japanese from before the battle (Barman, *Resist to the End*: 23-24).

Sniping and random rifle fire was the most used tactic by the fifth columnists. Numerous accounts of the battle, both civilian and military, detail random rifle fire from odd sources. Arthur Gomes also recalled coming under fire while moving through Kowloon at the beginning of the battle. The firing began early on the island as “C” Company of the Middlesex Regiment reported sniping on motor transport on the island on 9th December. Sniping was directed at troops who were directing the evacuation of the mainland. Denison detailed sporadic sniping behind the lines. Patrols were conducted by the Royal Rifles to locate the snipers but were unsuccessful. Whitehead recounted feeling worried about sniper fire coming from behind him on the island before the Japanese had landed. He claims this fire came from Wang supporters who had buried arms in fake graves in Happy Valley on the island. While it is difficult to determine completely who was behind all the sniper fire, the firing that began on the island before the Japanese landings show that fifth columnists put the garrison on edge. The unskilled nature of the fifth columnist sniping made it no more than a nuisance for the garrison but did strain the nerves of many of its members and epitomized the ambiguous role of the fifth columnists.

Artillery signalling was the main way that the fifth columnists aided the Japanese. At night, any light was used by the Japanese gunners to hit mobile targets on the island. The dangers of light and moving convoys at night gave the fifth columnists an opportunity to strike the transportation of the garrison. Charles Barman faced two such instances of this fifth column activity. When bringing a convoy of trucks along the coast of the island, Barman noticed flashes of light directed at the mainland. He decided to have the convoy push through to a small village and take cover from a suspected impending artillery barrage. The resulting bombardment did no damage to the convoy but the Chinese drivers had run from the trucks from fear of the artillery shells. After a delay, the convoy loaded ammunition with new drivers although one truck was destroyed by artillery fire. When loading another convoy, Barman noted that a Chinese driver had turned on the lights of the truck he was driving. Once the convoy was underway, an artillery
barrage opened up on the convoy but the suspected fifth columnist disappeared before he could be handed over to the police (Barman, Resist to the End: 36, 46). The East Brigade War Diary detailed that when convoys moved by the Canossian Mission near the north shore they came under artillery fire. While most of these artillery barrages did little damage, they did cause delays in moving ammunition to the various guns around the island and causing some Chinese drivers to desert. The fifth columnists signalled the Japanese troops on the mainland to direct artillery to targets on the island. This crude method of intelligence gathering was used by the Japanese gunners with devastating effect. Garrison anti-aircraft guns, artillery positions, and coastal pillboxes were targeted. The police war diary noted several occurrences of signalling activity. The East Brigade war diary noted that when pillboxes were occupied, they were immediately fired on by Japanese artillery. Events like these made their war diarist claim, “there can be no doubt that the enemy made successful use of Chinese & Indian 5th [sic] Columnists.” Multiple methods were used to signal the Japanese gunners including flares, flashing lights, and even waving blankets towards the mainland. When violations of the blackout were noticed by the police towards the battle’s end they opened fire on the offending house or building. Panic and a severe lack of manpower was the cause of this drastic response to the supposed fifth column signalling.

The role of the Hong Kong Police is important to understand as its members most often engaged with the fifth columnists and those civilians aiding the Japanese invaders. The police’s main duty was to prevent fifth column activities and maintain order behind the frontline but were also used in a conventional combat role as infantry. These responsibilities blended elements of conventional and irregular warfare by members of the garrison. In August 1941, the police were officially deemed eligible to become militia by Governor Geoffrey Northcote and Legislative Council if the colony were ever invaded. This was done to give them the protections of international law for combatants. Training with revolvers and rifles took place but it is unclear what types of weapons were used by the regular police. Their military training was quite limited. Before the battle attempts were made by the Japanese to cause police to desert. They distributed pamphlets that encouraged Sikh police to defect to the Japanese while the loyalty of the Chinese detectives was in question (Jones and Vagg, Criminal Justice in Hong Kong: 177). The police force was not ready for the war.

At the beginning of hostilities, the police rounded up enemy aliens and took them to holding areas. The Japanese consulate was sealed off and all diplomatic staff were interned. Responsibility for patrolling urban areas and the waterfront of the island in an anti-sabotage role fell on the police force. When the Japanese landed on the island police acted as regular infantry. The police were also responsible for detaining individuals suspected of being possible fifth columnists. Numerous Chinese people of doubtful loyalty were detained. In one instance numerous suspected fifth columnists were rounded up and shot on a street which later became known as Blood Alley (Snow, Fall of Hong Kong: 61). Maintaining of order often went to extreme measures. Looters were killed to control them at
warehouses along the Kowloon coast. When the police began to lose control of the situation, they decided to let the looting go on instead of letting the material and food fall into the hands of the enemy.

The police sometimes did more harm than good by initiating confusion and panic amongst the garrison, “the Kowloon Police arrived [on the mainland] in a very nervous condition on the 10th and spread fantastic stories of fifth column activity.” The panic sowed on the mainland infected the troops on the island. The pressures of combat took their toll on some men’s mental health. Two separate reports detailed the death of Chief Inspector Albert Baker when he committed suicide after being severely reprimanded for setting a poor example for his subordinate officers. He was found dead with a gun shot wound to the head. The chaos of battle and their lack of training took their toll on the police, severely affecting their ability to maintain order in the rear areas of the battle. In the documents created in the battle’s immediate aftermath, the police were credited with effectively handling the fifth columnist threat. This conclusion does not hold up to scrutiny. Maintaining reputations in the post war period, no doubt, accounted for this situation. The action of the fifth columnists has shown the police were not effective in reducing the impact of irregular war on the Hong Kong garrison.

Criminal organizations in Hong Kong blurred the lines between of loyalty and the two sides of the battle. It was often claimed that these groups helped to suppress the fifth column threat, but they often acted in their own interests, further adding to the chaos and confusion of the fighting for their own gain. Yet their exact role in the battle is unclear partly because of a deal struck with the Hong Kong government. A rumour spread that a mass murder of white civilians by Triads was to occur the night of 11th December. Arthur Gomes heard after the war that the plot was designed by the Japanese and they paid the Triads to kill families to demoralize the garrison troops (Lai, Recollections of the Battle of Hong Kong: 31). This resulted in a meeting between police representatives and the leaders of five Triad Societies. Kwong Chi Man and Tsoi Yio Lun, Hong Kong historian and author respectively, noted that the Triads demanded a large sum of money far beyond what the British could provide. The negotiations did not go well initially. Representatives from the Chinese Nationalist government were brought in and managed to reach an agreement with the Triad leaders. An agreement was made between the Nationalist Chinese and Triad leaders that these organizations would not assist the Japanese to keep order in the colony (Kwong and Tsoi, Eastern Fortress: 183).

In exchange the Triads could extract “protection” money from the Chinese civilian population after the battle. The agreement was kept secret in the post war years, the war diary of the Hong Kong police was even altered to maintain secrecy. The offending passages describing the events of the meeting were altered, “the cooperation of the Triad Societies was won.” It was followed by the thinly crossed out “at the cost of the substitution of protection racket on Chinese Civilians in lieu of the anti foreign movement.” Documents were not the only sources to hide the
truth. In the official British army history of the Battle of Hong Kong, S. Woodburn Kirby claims that, “in general the Chinese population remained subdued and orderly, unmoved by propaganda leaflets dropped by enemy aircraft. Cases of armed banditry however did occur in the air raid shelter tunnels. These were effectively dealt with by the Chungking Government secret societies, which had been ignored in time of peace, but whose assistance was now sought and freely given” (Kirby, *The War Against Japan: I*, 127). The last sentence of this passage is simply untrue. Crime was not controlled nor was assistance freely given. The price was extremely high for those civilians left after the surrender. The colonial government traded the safety of the European population for that of the Chinese inhabitants.

The connection between the fifth columnists, criminal organizations, and the Nationalist Chinese government did little to help the colony’s defence. The garrison received some support from the Chinese Nationalist Government, but these representatives provided little intelligence support (Jones and Vagg, *Criminal Justice in Hong Kong*: 178). The police claimed to have worked with the Nationalist Chinese to stop the fifth columnists and limiting their impact on the battle. The criminal organizations were also took part of this, but their role is unclear. While the relationship between the Nationalist government and the criminal organizations is beyond the article’s scope, it is important to understand why the fifth columnist threat was misrepresented by these two groups. P. A. MacMillan claimed that the groups under the control of Admiral Chan Chak and Colonel S. K. Yi of the Nationalist Chinese military helped to keep order. MacMillian escaped Hong Kong with Chak and Yi near the battle’s end and must have learned about the supposed Nationalist contributions straight from them, skewing his take on what had occurred. The Chinese Nationalists’ need to inflate their own importance at British expense cannot be discounted as they relied on British, and American, supplies and financial support to stay in the war against Japan. The Nationalist’s suppression of fifth column activity appears to be heavily inflated for political reasons.

Once the battle began, assistance was offered by the Chinese nationalists to conduct irregular attacks against the Japanese troops on the mainland. These guerrillas would be able to attack the Japanese lines of communication. It was originally agreed that this force would be supplied with one thousand grenades taken from the ammunition magazines of the garrison. Originally there was difficulty in reaching the arms as one of the magazines was under Japanese fire but on the second attempt the grenades were retrieved. Giving the grenades to the Nationalists was ultimately rejected by Governor Young. There is no reason given for this decision in the official files. This resistance to arming the would-be guerrillas was part of the unofficial policy of keeping arms out of the hands of the colony’s ethnic Chinese population. The colonial government distrusted the Chinese and though the armed guerrillas might be convinced by the fifth columnists to turn the weapons against the British (Horne, *Race War*: 74). The
colonial government denied the garrison a chance to regain some advantage over the Japanese attackers due to concerns of the criminal gangs turning against them. 

The police war diary contains numerous reports of rice riots breaking out with the Triads encouraging civilians to do so. Civilians queued at shops to receive food after rationing had been instituted. The police would respond to reports of violence and bring order back to the distribution of rice. Despite the agreements reached with the Triads to maintain order, they were accused of inciting disorder at rice distribution locations. They used the resulting chaos to loot rice, nearby stores, and warehouses. Some of these claims of criminal activity were rejected by the war diarist for the police. But after the headquarters of the Shaukiwan Triad Society was raided after one such report, the claim was determined to be “groundless”.

The police may have avoided making any arrests against this group of Triads as they were supposedly supporting the garrison. Encouraging others to riot was done by the Triads to further their own interests. While their intents may not have been to help the Japanese, Triads’ actions certainly contributed to the Japanese victory in Hong Kong. The criminal groups actions show that the irregular elements in the battle were far from clear as to their loyalties and intentions.

Fifth columnists added to the numerous disadvantages that the British defenders of Hong Kong already faced in December 1941. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities, the British government hoped to avoid war with Japan so little tactical planning was conducted in 1941 and Hong Kong was not prepared for war. The Canadian reinforcement failed to stop the Japanese attack. The British garrison leaders’ hubris came from an overconfidence based on racial stereotypes that the Japanese were poor fighters. The police, the intelligence apparatus, and the Hong Kong government did little to stop the fifth column threat before the battle and could do little once the fighting broke out. The blending of conventional and irregular warfare created many problems for the garrison. Assistance to Japanese such as guiding them along trails, sabotage of vehicles, sniping, and artillery signalling by fifth columnists and other irregular elements advantaged the Japanese attackers over the British garrison. The ineffective work of the Hong Kong police to curb the fifth column threat only compounded the problems while even generating more issues for the garrison defenders. The mishandling of the criminal organizations added to the chaotic fighting. The Japanese victory was not dependent on the fifth columnists, the ambiguous influence by the fifth columnists and other irregular forces can no longer be ignored as an important factor in the battle of Hong Kong.

References

Primary Sources

Canadian War Museum

20110043-001, Diary, James MacMillan.
19810684-028, Royal Rifles of Canada War Diary, Everette Denison.

University of Hong Kong Hong Kong Government Reports Online
Hong Kong Legislative Council, Draft Bills.
Hong Kong Administrative Reports.

Imperial War Museum Oral History Interviews
Gomes, Arthur Ernesto.
Whitehead, John Sutcliffe.

Library and Archives Canada
Department of National Defence Fonds, RG 24.

The National Archives United Kingdom
CAB 44/173.
CO 129/592/4.
CO 968/9/4.
WO 106/3560A.
WO 172/1686.
WO 172/1689.
WO 172/1690.
WO 206/2423.

Secondary Sources


Maltby, C. M. Operations in Hong Kong from 8th to 25th December, 1941. «London Gazette», 29/01/1948: 699-726.


The author would like to thank Carrie Charters for the excellent editing help. Galen Roger Perras provided many important insights into the battle and provided important sources. Carol Reid at the Canadian War Museum directed me to soldier’s diaries that were very helpful in gaining the perspectives of the common soldier. Finally, I must acknowledge my partner Alison who provides so much support.

Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), Department of National Defence fonds, RG 24, volume 20538, file “Japanese Land Ops (from Jap Sources) 8 Dec 41-8 Jun 42 by Mil Int Service, War Dept Washington d/18 Nov 42”, 7.


Canadian War Museum (hereafter CWM), 20110043-001, James MacMillan, diary, 71.


TNA: CO 129/592/4, Hong Kong Police War Diary (WD), 9.


CWM: 19810684-028, Royal Rifles of Canada WD, Everett Denison, 16, 19.

TNA: CO 129/592/4, Police WD, 19.

TNA: WO 206/2423, Mr. McDougall’s Account of the Fighting in Hong Kong, Enclosure 1-B.

TNA: WO 172/1689, 1st Bn Middlesex Regiment Hong Kong WD, 7.

TNA: CO 129/592/4, Police WD, 11.

TNA: WO 172/1686, East Infantry Brigade Hong Kong WD, 16.

CWM: 19810684-028, RRC WD, 5.

TNA: CO 129/592/4, Police WD, 9.


TNA: WO 172/1689, 1st Bn Middlesex Regiment (Hong Kong) WD 8-25 December 1941, Appendix 2D, D Company, 2.

CWM: 19810684-028, RRC WD, 16.

CWM: 19810684-028, RRC WD, 18.


TNA: WO 206/2423, McDougall’s Account of Fighting.

TNA: CO 129/592/4, Police WD, 8.

IWM: Gomes, Reel 7.

TNA: WO 172/1689, 1st Bn Middlesex Regiment (Hong Kong) WD 8-25 December 1941, Appendix 2C, C Coy, 2.


CWM: 19810684-028, RRC WD, 15.

IWM: Whitehead, Reel 4.

TNA: WO 172/1686, East Infantry Brigade WD, 133.

TNA: CO 129/592/4, Police WD, 12.

TNA: WO 172/1686, East Infantry Brigade WD, 133.

- TNA: CO 968/9/4, Great Britain Internal Security The Work of the Hong Kong Police During the Siege, 21 July 1942, 4.
- TNA: CO 129/592/4, Police WD, 8.
- University of Hong Kong Government Reports, (hereafter UHKGR) Hong Kong Legislative Council, Draft Bills No. S. 384, No. 17-18.41.-1, 730-731.
- TNA: CO 129/592/4, Police WD, 23, 35.
- TNA: CO 968/9/4, Police During the Siege, 11.
- TNA: CO 968/9/4, Police During the Siege, 30.
- TNA: CO 129/592/4, Police WD, 25.
- TNA: CO 968/9/4, Police During the Siege, 7.
- TNA: CO 129/592/4, Appendix B, Extracts Made from Reports of Certain Officers Summarising Important Police Aspects of the Siege, 1.