

# WARTIME PROPAGANDA

## The Battle for Minds and Hearts

**Benjamin Seet** shares highlights from his collection of World War II leaflets air-dropped by Allied Forces over Japanese-occupied Southeast Asia between 1942 and 45.



**Benjamin Seet** is one of a small number of aerotractologists, individuals who collect and study air-dropped propaganda warfare leaflets used in military campaigns. Over the past 20 years, he has put together one of the largest private collections of leaflets used in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaya.

Propaganda warfare is the use of information and psychological operations to influence the outcome of a military campaign. It seeks to persuade, dissuade or deceive, as well as to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes and behaviour of the target population through the use of provocative images and the written or spoken word. On the battlefield, propaganda works to undermine the enemy's morale and to promote dissension, while at the same time boosting the morale of friendly troops and canvassing goodwill from local populations.

Across the Pacific theatre of World War II (1941–45), propaganda warfare leaflets were employed extensively by the Allied Forces. These were air-dropped, often after a bombing raid, over areas with military and civilian populations in Japanese-occupied territories. Southeast Asia came under the Psychological Warfare Division of the South East Asia Command (SEAC) based out of Calcutta, India, covering operations in Malaya, Siam (Thailand), Burma (Myanmar), French Indochina (Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam) and the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia).

During the early part of the war, the SEAC printed about 200,000 leaflets a month, with the number increasing to two million by September 1944, and almost 20 million by March 1945. After Rangoon (Yangon), Burma was taken by the Allied Forces in May 1945, the propaganda campaign focused on Malaya and Siam, with more than three million leaflets dropped over Malaya alone from May to July. Unfortunately, few leaflets survived the Japanese Occupation and the passage of time; today a small number reside in various archives and in the hands of private collectors.

Leaflets were printed in either Calcutta or Colombo, and dispatched to 15 Psychological Warfare Division units in Royal Air Force bases spread across India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). The leaflets came in a number of standard sizes and were packed in 25-pound gunny sacks, each containing between 2,500 and 10,000 items. Instructions were clearly provided as to the target country and popula-

tion, with different codes for the intended drop areas and populations. Each leaflet bore an alpha-numeric code starting with the letter "S" to represent SEAC, and additional letters for the country, followed by a unique serial number. For example, SB for Burma, SMA for Malaya and SS for Siam, while leaflets for Japanese troops were given the generic SJ and marked with a blue label.

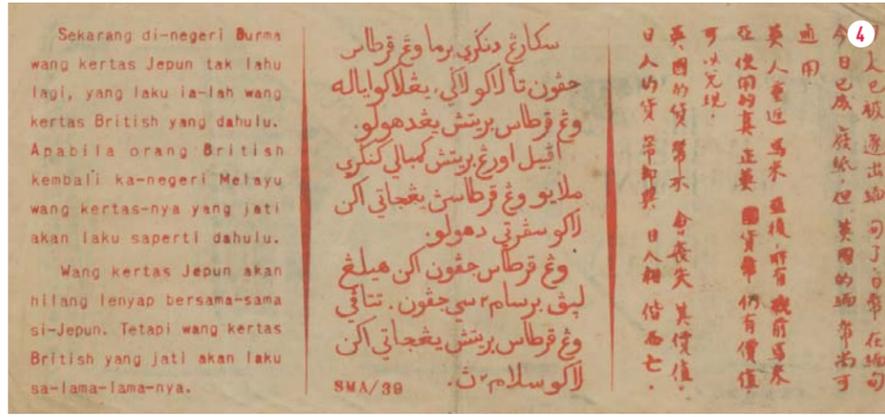
Leaflets targeting civilian populations aimed to stir public discontent with Japanese rule, to assure them that the Allies would defeat Japan and that the colonial powers would soon make a triumphant return. Information on the leaflets included news of Allied successes in Europe and the defeat of Germany; the collapse of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere; the worthlessness of the Japanese currency; and the people who suffered under their Japanese overlords.

Pitched against the highly indoctrinated Japanese soldier, the immediate objective of the leaflets was to "manipulate his core beliefs to make him less determined in his opposition", with the longer-term objective of "destroying his morale to such an extent that rapid advance was made possible". To achieve this, the SEAC propaganda played on the increasing losses and isolation of the Japanese forces; the bombing of their beloved homeland; and the plight of the Japanese soldier facing homesickness, hunger and a shortage of supplies. In August 1945, the propaganda campaign culminated in a series of leaflets proclaiming the surrender of the Japanese Imperial Army.

The SEAC propaganda campaign, together with campaigns mounted by American and Australian forces, represented a systematic and psychological effort to influence wartime objectives. This set the stage for the more pervasive use of propaganda in the Malayan Emergency, as well as in the subsequent Korean and Vietnam wars, and in ensuring a place for the "battle for hearts and minds" in modern warfare. ♦

### References

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**(Preceding page)**  
**1 Left hand, right hand (SJ/121, June 1945)**  
 This leaflet, intended for Japanese troops in Burma, Siam and French Indochina, announces the defeat of Germany. The text on its reverse reads: "The Allies have been fighting Germany with the right hand, and Japan with the left hand. You know what the Allied left hand alone has done against Japan..... The Allied right hand alone has smashed to pieces the German army, once the most powerful in the world. And now the Allied right hand is moving across to join the left hand against Japan. Truly Japan's armed forces will be like a snowflake on a fiery furnace. The end draws near."

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**2 Padi sales: Japanese rule impoverishes the farmer (uncoded, 1942)**  
 Such leaflets intended for civilians sought to create discontent against the Japanese rulers. This early example in Burmese reads: "Have to toil almost to death. Can sell only a little at an uneconomic price. Nothing useful can be bought with the money. Down with Japanese robbers!"

**3 4 Japanese money will die just like Japan (SMA/39)**  
 Propaganda leaflets that resembled money were particularly effective as there was a higher chance that they would be picked up. This reproduction of the \$10 Japanese Occupation note used in Malaya bears a diagonal stripe with the words: "Japanese money will die just like Japan". The reverse, printed in Malay, in both romanised and Jawi script, as well as Chinese, reads: "The Japanese have been chased out of Burma. Japanese currency in Burma is like waste paper, but British currency can be used again. When the British return to Malaya, the true British currency that was used before the war will become valid as before. British currency will last forever, unlike the currency of Japan which will perish like Japan."

**5 B-29s over Japan's skies (SJ/95, 1945)**  
 The South East Asia Command (SEAC) took every opportunity to portray images of B-29 Superfortresses bombing the Japanese homeland, causing "manmade earthquakes" and "huge fires and great damage". One leaflet highlighted how the B-29s flew 2,400 km from Saipan in the Pacific Ocean and bombed Tokyo in daylight, while another announced that 1,500 tonnes of explosives were dropped in the first month of operations. One can imagine the effect on the morale of the Japanese forces.

**6 The Burma dream is over (SJ/43, October 1944)**  
 This leaflet targeted Japanese troops retreating from Manipur in Burma. The image of unburied dead played on the Japanese belief that the dead should be buried in their homeland. The Japanese text on the reverse reads: "The summer grasses are all that remains of warrior's dreams. 50,000 of your comrades rot in Burma.... Soon the jungle grasses will hide the bones of thousands more brave Japanese soldiers, but they cannot hide the incompetence of your commanders."

**7 Ai Sa-ren-daa (SJ/106, May 1945)**

This leaflet in Japanese, dropped over Japanese troops in Burma, bears the words "I will be loved", which when read out, sounds like "I surrender". The text on reverse reads: "Learn well and carry in your head these two words. A time will come when you will need them.... Memorise these words - Ai Sa-ren-daa."

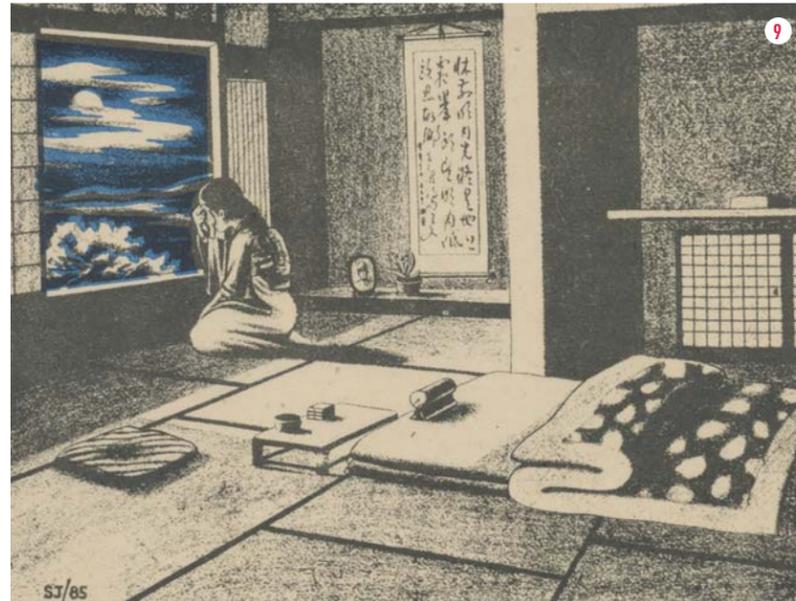


**8 Japan surrenders (SJM/54, 25 August 1945)**

The news-sheet *Gunjin Shimibun* was produced at a shop in Calcutta, India, by Major Peter Glemser, who was in charge of the so-called "white propaganda" at the Psychological Warfare Division of the South East Asia Command (SEAC). It provided Japanese troops with regular updates from the warfront, based on the principle that "truth was the most powerful type of ammunition in the word war against the Japanese". This particular issue announced Japan's surrender.

**9 Japanese nostalgic leaflet (SJ/85, March 1945)**

Nostalgia was a common theme for propaganda leaflets, reminding Japanese soldiers of the homes they left behind. The text on the wall scroll in Japanese reads: "In front of the bed is cast a stream of bright and lovely moonlight.... Such a quiet and bright night is apt to make the stranger admire the beauty of the moon when he raises his head, but when he stoops down to think of his homeland he cannot but become homesick."



**10 Warning! (SMA/17, February 1945)**

A leaflet dropped over population centres in Malaya, with the word "Warning!" printed in English, Jawi, Chinese and Tamil. The reverse reads: "We come to destroy the Japanese only. Keep away from danger! Avoid Japanese aerodromes, harbours or military works of any kind! Help us by helping yourselves!"



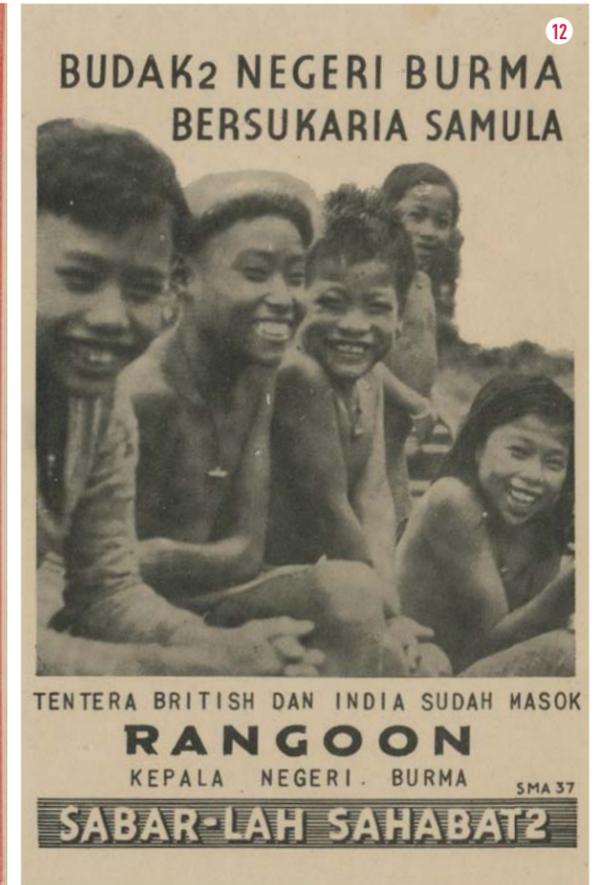
**11 SMA/15 (February 1945)**

This leaflet in Malay dropped by the RAF 160 Squadron over Malaya provided "good news" from the warfronts, including the Allied re-occupation of France and Belgium, the advance into Philippines and the bombing of Japan. It ends with the reminder, "Do not forget this sign [South East Asia Command insignia]. This is the sign of victory."



**12 The children in Burma are happy again (SMA/37, May 1945)**

This leaflet in Malay dropped over Malaya announced that the Allied Forces had advanced into Rangoon, Burma, and ends with the exhortation, "Patience, friends" (as their turn would come).



**13 Army message form (HQ 48 2nd Infantry Brigade, 1944)**

This hand-written message was sent from the 2nd Infantry Brigade HQ to its sub-units, along with samples of propaganda leaflets. The pencil inscription at the top right-hand corner ties this to leaflet SB/47, which was dropped in Burma in October or November 1944. The message provided instructions to army regiments on what to do when

surrendering Japanese soldiers were encountered. This message reads: "Herewith copy of SEAC pass through Allied lines. Any person in possession of one of these passes have to be sent to Div HQ immediately. Instructions on pass are self-explanatory."

