
‘Defend Lanka Your Home’: War on the Home Front in Ceylon, 1939–1945

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In December 1941, Ceylon was transformed from a backwater into a key Allied military base when Japan went to war, though its wartime significance is largely unknown. The nature of the changes visited upon the island, and the manner in which an apparently insignificant colonial home front contributed tellingly to the strategic prosecution of the war, is the subject of this article. Several key themes are examined: the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean and Ceylon; the transformation of Ceylon’s physical infrastructure as it became a military encampment; the work of Ceylonese-led departments of state in bringing the island to war readiness; the dire food situation caused by the Japanese conquest of import-supplying countries; propaganda and public information drives aimed at ensuring local participation in the war effort; the recruitment of indigenous labour for war-related tasks; unrest caused by the influx of thousands of foreign soldiers and provisions made for their welfare; and the role played by the media in conveying war information and propaganda. The article concludes with an assessment of the intimate links between Ceylon’s war experience and the coming of national independence in 1948.

‘Forward together! British Lion and Lion of Lanka. Man the defences of Lanka your home. Join the Army now.’¹

In December 1941, Ceylon was transformed from a backwater into a key Allied military base when Japan went to war, though its wartime significance is largely unknown.² In becoming a major strategic

¹ Sri Lanka National Archives (henceforth SLNA), Colombo, H. 29/1, Wartime posters.

² Thanks to the British Academy for sponsoring a research trip to Sri Lanka in August 2007. Thanks to the Director of the Sri Lanka National Archives for permission to use the photographs. Thanks also to Lieutenant Colonel Anton Gash, Defence Attaché, British High Commission Colombo; Upali Senaratne; Professor Hew Strachan and an anonymous reader for helpful comments; and Dr Andrew Stewart for references and suggestions. A version of the paper was delivered to the South Asian Seminar at the South Asian Studies Centre, St Antony’s College, University of Oxford, 16 October 2007, and to the Defence Studies Department Lunchtime Seminar, King’s College London, 20 February 2008.

asset, Ceylon's home front was transformed. The Government of Ceylon told London that the war 'has so profoundly affected the economic and social structure of the country, that it has made a return to anything like pre-war conditions most unlikely'.³ The nature of the changes visited upon the island, and the manner in which an apparently insignificant colonial home front contributed tellingly to the strategic prosecution of the war, is the subject of this article. Several key themes are examined: the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean and Ceylon (population 6060000 in 1945); the transformation of Ceylon's physical infrastructure as it became a military encampment; the work of Ceylonese-led departments of state in bringing the island to war readiness; the dire food situation caused by the Japanese conquest of import-supplying countries; propaganda and public information drives aimed at ensuring local participation in the war effort; the recruitment of indigenous labour for war-related tasks; unrest caused by the influx of thousands of foreign soldiers and provisions made for their welfare; and the role played by the media in conveying war information and propaganda. The article concludes with an assessment of the intimate links between Ceylon's war experience and the coming of national independence in 1948.

Military disaster in the east upset imperial and Allied strategic calculations by conclusively disproving the universally held assumption that Singapore would deflect any threat to India and the British Indian Ocean empire. Representing the calm assumptions regarding the seemingly limitless defensive capabilities of Singapore, the *Times of Ceylon* reassured readers on 8 December 1941 (the day of the attack on Pearl Harbor) that 'frequently it has been stated that the defence of Ceylon is assured by the huge perimeter stretching from Egypt across the Himalayas to Singapore'.⁴ The defensive shield was shattered, however, when the Japanese scored a series of stunning victories resulting in the capture of the eastern colonies of the USA, the UK, France, and the Netherlands.

It was at this point that Ceylon found itself unexpectedly thrust into the front line and threatened with invasion from powerful Japanese forces.⁵ Following the sinking of HMS *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, what remained of British naval power retreated to Ceylon. As Japanese forces swept across the region's European colonies, thousands of troops and civilians arrived in Colombo as refugees. Despite calamitous defeats in the east, the convoy system connecting Britain and its distant battle fronts and imperial appendages still had to function. The waters of the

³ Library of the National Museum of Sri Lanka, Colombo, *Post-War Development Proposals* (Colombo, 1946).

⁴ SNLA, *Times of Ceylon*, 8 December 1941.

⁵ See A. Jackson, *Ocean Victory: Britain's War from Suez to Sumatra* (forthcoming). Ceylon's strategic role is also covered extensively in M. Tomlinson, *The Most Dangerous Moment: The Japanese Assault on Ceylon, 1942* (London, 1976) and A. Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London, 2006).

Indian Ocean were vital for the defence of India and the Middle East, for imperial communications with Australasia, for oil exports from Iran and Iraq, and for Lend-Lease deliveries to the Soviet Union. As well as being a pivotal strategic location for such defensive operations, Ceylon soon became a key springboard for Allied offensives intended to regain the lost colonies from Burma to Sumatra.

So Ceylon became a surrogate Singapore when the island ‘fortress’ meekly surrendered in February 1942. As its strategic value rocketed, Churchill viewed the protection of Ceylon as being of the utmost importance. As he told the House of Commons in April 1942, ‘after [the] virtual annihilation of British, Dutch, and United States light forces in Javanese waters and the loss of Singapore, Java and Sumatra, we naturally consider Ceylon as a key point we have to hold’.⁶ With the Japanese in Burma, Malaya, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and dominating the Bay of Bengal, Ceylon was assailed from all sides. In April 1942 the same Japanese fleet that had attacked Pearl Harbor steamed towards Ceylon and the coast of India. A large, but inferior, British fleet, commanded by Admiral Sir James Somerville, combed the waters south of Ceylon searching for Admiral Nagumo’s force. An engagement would have led to the biggest sea battle since Jutland, but, mercifully for the British, the opposing fleets failed to locate each other. Though calamity was avoided, the Japanese attacked ports in India and Ceylon, causing panic and destroying many merchant vessels, and sinking a British aircraft carrier, two heavy cruisers, and numerous other warships.

Ceylon buzzed with military activity and the multifarious construction projects that attended its rise to military prominence. It became a refugee camp, a haven for escaping ships and aircraft, and for the thousands of servicemen and civilians lucky enough to escape death or internment at Japanese hands. It also became a major Allied headquarters facility – home to Mountbatten’s Supreme Allied Command South East Asia and its staff of 7000; the headquarters of the Eastern Fleet responsible for patrolling the 28 million square miles of the Indian Ocean; and the headquarters of the RAF’s Indian Ocean reconnaissance operations. It became the main base for Allied special forces operating behind enemy lines in Japanese-occupied territory, and headquarters of the Dutch and Free French forces operating in the east. It was home to Far East Combined Bureau, Bletchley Park’s main eastern outstation, as well as the secret services of the Allies, including MI6 and the American Office of Strategic Services, forerunner of the CIA. During 1944 and early 1945 Ceylon acted as the assembly point for the huge British Pacific Fleet, which was sent to take part in the final American-led assault upon the Japanese home islands, and major raids against Japanese-occupied territory, involving carriers and battleships, were launched from Trincomalee.

⁶ C. Eade, ed., *Secret Session Speeches by the Right Honourable Winston S. Churchill* (London, 1946).



Figure 1 'Get in the Scrap' (Reproduced by kind permission of the Director of the Sri Lanka National Archives)

I. Refugees and Military Rule

A tide of humanity washed up on Ceylon's shores as people struggled to escape the Japanese advance. On 6 February 1942, 3 000 women and children from Malaya and Singapore were greeted on the dockside by the Colombo Evacuees Committee.⁷ Many servicemen and officials also reached Ceylon, such as W.F. Wegener, the chief mechanical engineer of the Federated States of Malaya Railways. He promptly produced an

⁷ SLNA, *Times of Ceylon*, 7 February 1942.

inventory of all the rolling stock that his organization had destroyed prior to the Japanese conquest, including 185 locomotives and over 5000 four-wheeled trucks, and his scorched-earth experience helped officials in Ceylon prepare for the worst.⁸ Another specialist group of refugees was the Malaya Meteorological Service, dispatched to Ceylon three days before Singapore’s capitulation in order to form a new RAF Meteorological Service as the island colony stepped into the shoes of the captured peninsula.⁹ General Sir Archibald Wavell, supreme commander of the short-lived American-British-Dutch-Australian (ABDA) Command, left Java for Ceylon in an American aircraft as the Dutch East Indies fell; his chief of staff, Lieutenant General Sir Henry Pownall, arrived in Colombo aboard an overcrowded destroyer that had left Tjilitjap under Japanese attack; and the Dutch naval headquarters in the east re-established itself in Ceylon after closing for business in the Dutch East Indies.

Because of Ceylon’s escalating strategic importance, the British government decided to unify command under a military commander-in-chief, mindful of the disastrous civil-military disjuncture that had contributed to the downfall of Malaya and Singapore. Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton was put in supreme command of Ceylon, and the governor, Sir Andrew Caldecott, ceased to be the premier official on the island. This was an unprecedented move in the history of the modern colonial empire, and the first time that a unified command structure had been applied to an operational theatre. Layton’s instructions from the British government could not have been more explicit:

1. You are appointed Commander-in-Chief. All naval, military, air and civil authorities in area, including the Governor and civil administration, will be subject to your direction. 2. Your immediate task is to ensure that all measures necessary for the defence of Ceylon are taken forthwith and that civil and military measures are properly coordinated.¹⁰

In breaking the news of his subordination to a military commander, the secretary of state for the colonies, Lord Cranborne, told Governor Caldecott that Ceylon and its dependencies were henceforth designated a ‘military area’, given the island’s position as a vital communications link and base for the concentration of forces, and because of the threat of Japanese attack.¹¹ The sudden appointment of Admiral Layton as supreme commander nearly led to Caldecott’s resignation, though the two men managed to form a working relationship. Most

⁸ SLNA, Governor’s Dispatches 440, W.F. Wegener memorandum, 26 January 1943.

⁹ SLNA, Governor’s Dispatches 441.

¹⁰ SLNA, Sessional Paper III (1942), *Directive Issued by HMG to His Excellency Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton KCB DSO* (Colombo, 1942).

¹¹ The National Archives, Kew (TNA), CO 54/985/6 no. 3. Reproduced in K.M. de Silva, ed., *Sri Lanka, Part One: The Second World War and the Soulbury Commission, 1939–1945*, British Documents on the End of Empire Series (London, 1997), p. xlvi.

importantly, Layton continued to make use of the existing political system in which Ceylonese politicians occupied key government positions. He had been given almost dictatorial powers by London, as Ceylon's defence was considered a priority by the Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff. But he was prudent enough to realize that the co-operation of the governor and the Ceylonese political elite would be vital. The Board of Ministers, which with the encouragement of the Colonial Office had become a quasi-cabinet, was properly co-opted. In March 1942 a War Council was established under the presidency of Layton, of which the governor and all the ministers were members. Thus was instituted an extremely effective political and administrative alliance that harnessed Ceylonese-run ministries and colonial administrators to the imperial war effort.

To back up these arrangements to prepare Ceylon from within, forces were rushed to the island in order to give it credibility as a defended base. By mid-1942 there were nearly three divisions of fighting troops and many more recruited locally. These ground forces included crack British and Australian brigades and Indian and East African divisions. Six squadrons of fighters (including Hurricanes), bombers, and reconnaissance aircraft were in place by March 1942, and by that date the Eastern Fleet that operated from Ceylon's ports comprised five battleships, three aircraft carriers, and dozens of cruisers and destroyers. It was the largest fleet that had sailed under a single commander in the war to date, and the unenviable task of Admiral Sir James Somerville was to search for Admiral Nagumo's mighty Japanese fleet in the waters south of Ceylon, while continuing to safeguard the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean.

II. The Transformation of Ceylon's Physical Infrastructure

Ceylon's strategic elevation necessitated hasty and extensive preparations, in which the unified command structure enabled the civil authorities to contribute fully to the military effort. These military preparations continued as the island became a major headquarters and advanced base for the serious fighting that was expected to come as the Japanese were pushed out of Burma, and a large-scale amphibious invasion was planned for the recapture of Malaya. Anti-aircraft guns, barrage balloons, and searchlights appeared around ports and towns, and defensive trenches were dug in case the invader should come; air-raid shelters, first-aid posts, and cleared fields of fire appeared in coastal settlements; harbours were expanded to take more warships, defended by artillery and anti-torpedo booms; flying-boat anchorages were established on inland lagoons; and airstrips and barracks sprouted across the country.

Throughout the island land and buildings were requisitioned by the military. Offices and schools were shut down, areas of jungle and offshore islands were declared ‘out of bounds’ in order to become military practice grounds, swathes of coconut trees and bush were cleared for aerodromes and military camps, and lagoons and mangrove swamps became ideal training environments for troops destined to fight in Burma. In Colombo schools and colleges were closed and taken over by the military, as hospitals, barracks, or intelligence centres. The Anderson golf course near naval headquarters in Colombo became the site of Far East Combined Bureau. The National Museum in central Colombo was requisitioned as army headquarters. A mortuary and signals office were constructed in its grounds, and the museum’s collections so hastily dispersed ‘for the duration’ that much was lost or damaged.¹²

All sorts of military facilities appeared across the island, from Jaffna in the north to Bentota and Galle in the south. Koggala lagoon on the south coast became a ‘protected area’ and major flying-boat base, and it was from here that Canadian flying boats took off and spotted the powerful Japanese fleet that came to attack the island in April 1942, giving precious warning to its defenders. The whole area surrounding Trincomalee became a ‘special area’ – known as Trincomalee Fortress Area – as it was hastily developed into Britain’s most important naval base in the east.¹³ Even bastions of European colonial society had to make sacrifices for the war, as tennis courts were turned into vegetable gardens and the Colombo Cricket Club and Colombo Racecourse were requisitioned by the RAF. A governor’s ordinance passed under the Defence (Miscellaneous) Regulations declared the island of Kachchativu in the Palk Strait a bombardment range for the Royal Navy, though pilgrims were still allowed to visit the island’s Roman Catholic shrine on special permits.¹⁴

The physical transformation of the island was augmented by a tremendous increase in the volume of traffic, on land and in the air and in Ceylon’s ports. Army vehicles dominated the roads, and the skies above came alive with aircraft. As a measure of the weight of air traffic, 44 Fleet Air Arm squadrons were stationed at or passed through China Bay aerodrome during the war. Aerodromes were constructed throughout the island, for example at Sigiriya near the ruined city of the ancient Buddhist kings. Mountbatten records that 7 000 trees were cleared for a new runway near Kandy, and the extended facilities at China Bay enabled 50 giant American B-29 Superfortresses to use Ceylon as a base for a strike on Sumatra in 1944.

¹² SLNA, Sessional Paper IX (1944), *Report of the Auditor-General for 1942–43* (Colombo, 1944).

¹³ SLNA, H. 29.4.12, CFD 306/38, Defence Regulations (Miscellaneous).

¹⁴ W.T. Jayasinghe, *Kachchativu and the Maritime Boundary of Sri Lanka* (Pannipitiya, Sri Lanka, 2003).



Figure 2 'Careless Words Kill.' (Reproduced by kind permission of the Director of the Sri Lanka National Archives)

The place most affected by the physical transformations caused by the war was the inland town of Kandy (population 37147), home to South East Asia Command (SEAC) from early 1944. Unlike Colombo

and Trincomalee, Kandy had no previous military experience and was therefore rather shaken by its encounter with Admiral Mountbatten and his massive SEAC staff (7000-plus) when they descended. Mountbatten lived at the King’s Pavilion in Kandy, near the Temple of the Tooth. A daily train service, known as the ‘SEAC Special’, provided regular transport between the network of military headquarters in Colombo and those in Kandy. The beautiful Royal Botanical Gardens at Peradeniya, just outside Kandy, had been requisitioned in March 1942.¹⁵ There, on the banks of the Mahaweli River, Mountbatten’s headquarters fanned out from colonial buildings with pillared verandahs and red-tiled roofs. Temporary buildings sprouted amid giant Java figs and coconut avenues, all overlooked by the mountain range known as the Knuckles. Kandy thus underwent a massive transformation as it became one of the most important military headquarters in the world. Hotels were taken over for officers, the Maduma Bandara Park was converted into a NAAFI recreation hall, a Wrennery for female other ranks was constructed on the eighth and ninth holes of the golf course, the Automobile Association of Ceylon’s Members’ Garage was taken over as an army store, St Anthony’s College became a military hospital, and large RAF bases were established at Polgolla and Uyanwatte.¹⁶

III. The Department of Civil Defence

In achieving the degree of civil-military co-operation that pertained, the supreme command of Layton was important, as was his formation of a War Council uniting British and Ceylonese officials. The high level of Ceylonese input befitted Ceylon’s status as the most constitutionally advanced colony in the empire. The 1931 constitution had introduced universal suffrage and ‘endowed the leading politicians with positions of authority unimaginable in most of Britain’s colonial possessions’.¹⁷ This was exercised through a Board of Ministers drawn from the State Council, and during the war this quasi-cabinet was responsible for much of Ceylon’s war preparation. The State Council was led from 1942 by Don Stephen Senanayake. Another senior Sinhalese politician of importance during the war was Oliver Goonetilleke, created a Companion of St Michael and St George in the 1942 New Year’s honours list.¹⁸ On the same day Goonetilleke’s new department – the Department of Civil Defence – was also created, with Dr Ivor Jennings, vice-chancellor of the University of Ceylon, appointed as deputy.¹⁹

¹⁵ SLNA, Dr S.F. Chellappah, *Administrative Report of the Director of Medical and Sanitary Services for 1944* (Colombo, 1945).

¹⁶ N. Karunaratna, *Kandy Past and Present, 1474–1998* (Colombo, 1999).

¹⁷ K.M. de Silva, ‘Ceylon (Sri Lanka)’, in R. Winks, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 5, *Historiography* (Oxford, 1999), p. 484.

¹⁸ SLNA, *Ceylon Civil List, 1942*.

¹⁹ D.T. Aponso-Sariffodeen, ‘How D. S. Saved Ceylon from a Food Crisis’, *Sunday Times* (Colombo), 24 March 2002.

Goonetilleke's department was a powerful war ministry responsible for preparing the island for attack and assisting the imperial military authorities in any way possible. It was also responsible for the National Food Campaign as the island faced major food shortages. Preparing Ceylon for war required more than just physical preparations: it required government to communicate with the people and prepare them for the novel and dangerous situation faced by the island. The department unleashed a barrage of propaganda and information aimed at getting people to take the war seriously, while avoiding panic and overreaction. One of the department's main tasks was the organization of the island's extensive air-raid precautions (ARP) programme, involving wardens, bomb shelters, first-aid training, and the enforcement of blackout regulations. The civil defence commissioner ordered the clearance of slums in Colombo as part of the fire-gap policy adopted so that fires caused by incendiary bombs would not spread. ARP and first-aid posts were established throughout the city, and the department built underground air-raid shelters, each accommodating about 50 people. Sirens were installed around the country, and, as in Britain, church bells remained silent unless there was a general invasion warning. People were encouraged to join 'house fire parties' and were asked to contribute to blood banks. Goonetilleke planned for 140 air-raid wardens' posts in Colombo alone, requiring 2 400 air-raid wardens.²⁰

These preparations were not excessive. Throughout 1942 the Japanese threat was real, and everyone was mindful of the complete failure to make adequate civil defence preparations in Malaya and Singapore. The public worried about the prospect of invasion, and tales of Japanese atrocities in captured cities from Shanghai to Singapore were common currency. In January the governor noted that people were taking money out of savings banks and hoarding coinage, and that Indians were returning to the subcontinent. When air-raid sirens sounded in Colombo, stampedes occurred. In the State Council there were 'clamorous demands for evacuation' of the coastal towns of Batticaloa, Colombo, Galle, and Trincomalee, and well-to-do families moved inland.²¹ The Department of Civil Defence even prepared camps in case of the need for mass evacuations from coastal areas targeted by the enemy, and the officer commanding troops in Ceylon placed posters around the country offering rewards of up to Rs 5 000 (c. £375) for information on enemy landings, parachutists, sabotage, and spies. The state of panic engendered by the Japanese raids on Colombo and Trincomalee in April 1942 caused thousands of people to flee inland, leading to steep rent rises. Many more people left for

²⁰ Rhodes House Library, Oxford (henceforth RHL), Mss Brit. Emp. s 365, papers of the Fabian Colonial Bureau, box 151, Ceylon, 1938–1965 (henceforth Ceylon, 1938–65), A.R. Caton, 'Sketch of Ceylon', Fabian Colonial Bureau, February 1942.

²¹ *Op. cit.*

India. Of the 3 000 workers on the books of the Colombo-based firm Walker Sons on the day of the raid, only 123 turned up for work the day after, their workplace having been devastated by the explosive destruction of a British destroyer in the dry dock.²² A full six months after the event, only 700 people were working for the company. People were taking no chances. The extent of migration from Colombo caused by the enemy attacks, and the serious impact this had on the island’s war effort, led the government to sack 1 166 employees for deserting their posts. As the governor told the colony:²³

We had reason to be proud and still more reason to be self-assured. We had been tested and we had been proved. Our RAF men could *give it* and our civilians could *take it*. All seemed right. Since then all has gone all wrong. The ports of Colombo and Trincomalee today are playing at suicide. I went around the harbour last evening and found nothing doing. Not only the harbour, but the whole of the internal communications were not functioning.²⁴

After seeing neighbouring colonies fall to the enemy, Ceylon itself was now under attack. A Department of Civil Defence poster asked, ‘If the enemy comes again – will you be ready?’, and advertised literature such as *ARP for Everyman*, *Everyman’s ARP for Animals*, and *After a Raid: What Shall I Do?*, ‘a book every householder in Colombo should possess’.²⁵ It should be remembered that, even as late as 1944, Japan remained in control of Burma, the Royal Navy had only just begun striking at enemy-occupied territory from its Ceylonese bases, and Japanese sea power remained considerable. There was great concern in February 1944, for example, when ULTRA intelligence revealed a large concentration of Japanese warships at Singapore. For people living in the South-East Asia region there was still no visible sign that the Allies were beating the Japanese.

IV. Labour and War Production

Another main theme in Ceylon’s war experience was the recruitment of thousands of people for war work – by the military and by government departments seeking to increase food production and undertake an array of vital military tasks. In addition to the labour demands of the National Food Campaign (see below), thousands of workers were required for other war-related purposes. There was the need to

²² D. Bennett, ‘Walker Sons and Company War Record’, private manuscript, 1945. Now in the National Maritime Museum, London. See A. Jackson, ‘Refitting the Fleet in Ceylon: The War Record of Walker Sons and Company’, *Journal of Indian Ocean Studies* (2002).

²³ SLNA, 5/439, Dispatches 1942, Caldecott to Lord Cranborne, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 17 October 1942.

²⁴ Op. cit.

²⁵ SLNA, H. 29/1, Wartime posters.

increase Ceylon's output of strategic raw materials for export, and to produce goods to satisfy the military authorities. The Ceylon Defence Force was expanded, its strength rising from 2300 in 1939 to over 26000 in 1945, and the Ceylon Naval Volunteer Reserve rose from a couple of hundred officers and ratings to over 1500. Thousands more people were enlisted in the island's semi-military labour formations or were employed by the military and companies working for it.

Production for export was a most important calling as Ceylon, mirroring the military situation, found itself called upon to make good the loss of Malaya. Because of the demand for Ceylon's exports, the island became an important dollar-earning territory of the sterling area, and ended the war with sterling balances of Rs 1260 million (c. £94523630). After the loss of Malaya, Ceylon provided 60% of the Allies' natural rubber. It produced over a quarter of the world's tea, and during the war the British Ministry of Supply contracted to buy the entire crop. Ceylon exported copra, and during the war became the empire's most important source of graphite, as enemy conquests robbed Britain of its traditional sources. American and British demand rocketed, and some companies offered 400% above peacetime prices. The Ministry of Supply's Raw Materials Department bought Ceylon's entire output.²⁶ Minor products such as coir fibre and kapok benefited from Ministry of Supply demand as it sought to provide emergency bedding for use in the aftermath of air raids. Finally, Ceylon developed a cinchona bark scheme in answer to the colonial secretary's request in December 1939 for increased production of quinine throughout the empire (the world's major source, the Dutch East Indies, was lost to the Japanese in early 1942).

In addition to the extensive war work of the Department of Civil Defence, other government departments contributed significantly to the war effort. In December 1941 the Department of Development and Agricultural Marketing undertook to supply 16000 charpoys to a newly arrived Indian Army division. The department then received an order for 1 million panjies (defensive spikes placed in the ground facing towards the enemy, measuring 2 feet 6 inches in length), and 140 men were employed in Colombo making them – though the Japanese raid on 5 April 1942 caused the entire workforce to flee; only half ever returned. Nevertheless, 2212200 panjies were eventually made.²⁷ The department also made 5000 'donkey camp beds' of jute hessian for the army, 23000 bamboo telegraph poles, 2500 latrine screen posts, 2620 bivouac posts, and 700 camouflage nets. Other tasks undertaken by the Department of Development and Agricultural Marketing included building stores for thousands of tons of paddy rice imported

²⁶ RHL, Ceylon, 1938–65, Dr Alfred Neustatter, 'Graphite Problems in War Time', 11 December 1942.

²⁷ SLNA, R.H. Bassett, *Administrative Report of the Commissioner for Development and Agricultural Marketing from January 1940 to December 1945* (Colombo, 1946).

from India. By 1945 the department was also preparing 15 000–20 000 meals a day for the Colombo docks (upwards of 15 000 men worked in the port).²⁸

Other important war work came under the purview of the minister for communications and works, Sir John Kotalawala, in his role as commander-in-chief of the Essential Services Labour Corps (ESLC). This several-thousand-strong outfit was formed to provide mobile, disciplined emergency labour. Its first emergency tasks were performed during the Japanese raids. In Colombo it stepped into the breach and filled public service posts that had been deserted. Railway staff that had fled were replaced by ESLC personnel, selling tickets and manning trains. They coaled a ship, loaded coal wagons, and even ran deserted shops so that people could continue to purchase goods and to deter looters.²⁹ Other semi-military formations included the Agriculture Corps, the Ceylon Boys Technical Training Corps, and the Ceylon Boy Scouts Messenger Service.³⁰

Private companies also undertook valuable war work. Walker Sons, for example, repaired and refitted naval and merchant vessels, including 10 battleships, 29 aircraft carriers, 50 cruisers, 46 destroyers, 32 submarines, 91 troop transport liners, 10 hospital ships, 138 tankers, and 1 932 merchant vessels, as well as making 39 000 pieces of furniture for SEAC headquarters.³¹

The scale of military and war-related employment brought an end to the unemployment that had blighted the island in the inter-war years. By 1945, 83 500 civilians were employed on SEAC military works, and unemployment had plummeted to 4% of its 1939 level. SEAC created heavy military expenditure and had an invigorating economic effect. At its peak in 1944 expenditure was estimated at Rs 435 million (*c.* £32 633 158), up from Rs 264 million in 1943.³² Military demand led to a boom, though spending was on non-productive goods and services, as the island was ‘converted into an advance base for military operations’. As S.A. Wickremasinghe of the Ceylon National Congress Executive Committee told British Labour MPs, because of the emergency situation ‘all unemployed were absorbed by emergency essential services and auxiliary services’. But when the war ended, ‘half a million people were likely to be unemployed’.³³

²⁸ *Op. cit.*

²⁹ SLNA, Sessional Papers IX (1943), A. Weerasinghe, *Report of the Assistant Civil Defence Commissioner in Charge of Essential Services Labour Corps March 1942–March 1943* (Colombo, 1943).

³⁰ RHL, Mss Ind Ocn s 235, Speeches of His Excellency the Governor of Ceylon, Sir Andrew Caldecott, *Ceylon Daily News*, 26 May 1942.

³¹ Bennett, ‘Walker Sons’.

³² Library of the National Museum of Sri Lanka, Colombo, *Post-War Development Proposals* (Colombo, 1946).

³³ RHL, Ceylon, 1938–65, Notes for Labour MPs, 23 October 1945.

V. 'Dig Harder for Your Larder': Food Shortages and the National Food Campaign

'The new theatre of war in the East' created by Japan's entry into the conflict meant that 'the outlook for food in Ceylon assumed a new gravity', as the prospect of food imports, on which the island depended, became 'very gloomy indeed' when Japan conquered Asia's rice bowl territories. Over 70% of Ceylon's rice had come from Burma before its conquest in March 1942. The Japanese raids on Ceylon and the attack on both coasts of India in the following month led to 'a very serious dislocation of the vital trade traffic with India'.³⁴ It was the Department of Civil Defence that assumed responsibility for the colony's food strategy. The National Food Campaign became a sophisticated enterprise that used propaganda – in the form of posters, calendars, advertisements, certificates, and even stickers – to encourage the population towards greater food self-sufficiency, backed up by government inducements such as land grants and free agricultural implements.³⁵ The food production drive featured an Emergency School Production campaign involving 5000 school and 'CDC [Civil Defence Commission] Restaurants' modelled on the 'British Restaurants' in Britain.³⁶ Extremely detailed information appeared, such as the pamphlet *Food in Wartime: What to Grow in Home Gardens*.³⁷ People were exhorted to use new crops, particularly wheat and wheat flour, greens for iron and vitamins, chillies and French dwarf beans, and to rotate crops and prepare manure. Nutrition demonstration vans toured rural areas showing how to cook with unfamiliar ingredients. There were also government farms producing food, tended by men recruited into the Agricultural Corps, a 'volunteer land army' comprising up to 15000 labourers.

The loss of normal rice supplies meant that large purchases were made in India – though, with the Bengal famine looming (itself largely caused by the loss of external rice supplies), the subcontinent was not in a position to supply all that was required. Wheat and wheat flour (30000 tons per month) were brought from Australia to supplement rice stocks.³⁸ In November 1942 rice rations for British troops were suspended so as to make more available for civilians.³⁹ In the same month questions were asked in the House of Commons in London about the island's food situation, and it was announced that rations

³⁴ SLNA, Administrative Reports 1946, G. de Soya, *Administrative Report on the Workings of Cooperative Societies from May 1942 to April 1945* (Colombo, 1946).

³⁵ SLNA, H. 29/1/2, Posters, leaflets, pamphlets issued in connection with the National Food Campaign by the Propaganda Department, Director of Food Supplies.

³⁶ Bassett, *Administrative Report*.

³⁷ SLNA, *Food for Everyone* (Colombo, 1944) and *Food in Wartime: What to Grow in Home Gardens* (Colombo, 1944).

³⁸ SLNA, Governor's Dispatches, Governor to Lord Cranborne, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 21 November 1942.

³⁹ SLNA, *Times of Ceylon*, 18 November 1942.

were at two-thirds of normal consumption.⁴⁰ The Japanese raids on Ceylon in April 1942 hindered food distribution because so many people fled, and within 48 hours post-raid food distribution had broken down. Looting took place, despite posters warning that it was a crime punishable by death. Elsewhere food stockpiles were abandoned.⁴¹ Don Senanayake, minister of agriculture, was placed in charge of emergency food schemes. General food rationing was introduced, and the Municipal Council of Colombo issued 566 919 ration books. The Colombo municipality organized 54 rice depots to distribute rations, and the Civil Defence Commission introduced a Milk Supply Scheme and a network of depots.⁴²

To avoid a food crisis Senanayake entered into negotiations with India and succeeded in getting Ceylon included as part of the economic orbit of India, as well as establishing greater local and governmental control over the island’s food and food distribution arrangements:

With the Japanese air raid on Ceylon the non-Ceylonese trader, who dominated the import trade together with the wholesale and retail trade, vacated Ceylon causing an overwhelming food shortage ... Mr Senanayake took this opportunity to bring the import trade under Government control and assured the distribution of foodstuffs, island-wide, with the assistance of the Co-operative Movement. His actions avoided a devastating food crisis and marked the turning point in price controls and effective distribution of food throughout the island.⁴³

The co-operative movement became a central element in the government’s response to food shortages, and it experienced ‘epoch-making’ progress.⁴⁴ In 1942 the co-operative movement had 2 000 societies with 92 000 members and capital of Rs 7 million (*c.* £526 315). Three years later this had risen to 6 400 societies with 1 100 000 members and capital of Rs 26 million (*c.* £1 954 887). The Food Control Scheme, adopted to regulate the distribution of supplies through a network of approved merchants, was considered satisfactory for basic foodstuffs such as rice and flour, but for other products the public reaction was to take distribution into their own hands. This is where the co-operative movement came into its own. As a government publication explained:

The economic background was one of severe scarcity and rigid economic controls. Despite these controls, profiteering in consumer goods had become so rampant by the beginning of 1942

⁴⁰ Op. cit., 19 November 1942.

⁴¹ Bassett, *Administrative Report*.

⁴² SLNA, Sessional Paper I (1944), *Administrative Report of the Commissioner of the Municipal Council of Colombo for the Year 1942* (Colombo, 1944).

⁴³ Aponso-Sariffodeen, ‘How D.S. Saved Ceylon’.

⁴⁴ SLNA, Administrative Reports, 1946, G. de Soyza, *Administrative Report on the Workings of Cooperative Societies from May 1942 to April 1945* (Colombo, 1946).

throughout the country ... that the people themselves were led to ask for cooperative distribution as the only effective remedy for their pressing ills.⁴⁵



Figure 3 ‘Lanka Calling.’ (Reproduced by kind permission of the Director of the Sri Lanka National Archives)

⁴⁵ Op. cit.

Serious though the situation was, Ceylon was spared more acute distress, as rice imports were procured from elsewhere. The Middle East Supply Centre found Egyptian rice for export, and Ceylon remained dependent on this source for the remainder of the war. New sugar supplies also had to be found following the loss of Java.⁴⁶ In 1944 several meatless days a week were introduced in Colombo and other towns. Pork became the only meat served in city cafes, and vegetarian menus were introduced in June 1944.⁴⁷ Food shortages had dire ramifications for some people in Ceylon. As was noted by the Fabian Colonial Bureau in London, tuberculosis increased mainly as a result of malnutrition (due to increases in the cost of living and the reduction in foodstuffs available) and overcrowding as the war stopped building projects and the military requisitioned real estate.⁴⁸

Despite Ceylon’s precarious food situation, the island’s population was still expected to participate in the empire-wide system of donations aimed at aiding the prosecution of the war. In a war loans broadcast on 14 February 1941, the governor said that ‘if we lose the war we shall lose everything that makes life worth living. Give til it hurts!’⁴⁹ The Government of Ceylon organized war loans for the British government and ran the Ceylon Government War Purposes Fund throughout the conflict. Ceylonese donations kitted out the WAAF recreation room and other facilities at RAF Chicksands Priory.⁵⁰ A ‘hot meals service’ provided by monies raised in Ceylon’s Central Province featured a mobile canteen that toured bomb-damaged residential areas, and another mobile canteen was provided by the Girl Guides of Ceylon.⁵¹ Every issue of the *Times of Ceylon* devoted a column to the ‘Send a Plane’ fund, and by November 1942, 25 fighters had been purchased for the RAF at a cost of £7500 apiece.⁵² In December 1941 a large dummy tank travelled around Colombo advertising the Printers’ Pie Tank Week Carnival.⁵³

VI. Tensions with Soldiers from Overseas

With thousands of military personnel stationed in Ceylon, civil-military relations were sometimes strained as the indigenous population came to terms with various quotidian military encroachments. There was a dramatic increase in the incidence of venereal disease and prostitution as servicemen sought sex.⁵⁴ Australians on visits to Colombo

⁴⁶ See E.M.H. Lloyd, *Food and Inflation in the Middle East, 1940–45* (Stanford, CA, 1956).

⁴⁷ SLNA, *Times of Ceylon*, 5 May, 23 May, 26 May 1944.

⁴⁸ RHL, Ceylon, 1938–65.

⁴⁹ RHL, Mss Ind Ocn s 235, Speeches of His Excellency the Governor of Ceylon, Sir Andrew Caldecott.

⁵⁰ SLNA, H. 29/4/12.

⁵¹ SLNA, *Times of Ceylon*, 13 November 1942.

⁵² Op. cit., 13 May 1944.

⁵³ Op. cit., 26 December 1941.

⁵⁴ Chellappah, *Administrative Report*, vol. 1.



Figure 4 'Forward Together!' (Reproduced by kind permission of the Director of the Sri Lanka National Archives)

demonstrated the exuberance for which they were renowned at ports throughout the world, though it was African troops that caused most friction. In September 1943 East African troops stationed at Kiribathgoda allegedly shot and wounded some Sinhalese women. This provoked a flurry of angry debate in the State Council, along with criticism of the governor and the general officer commanding troops in Ceylon. The debate displayed the kind of racial prejudice that the deployment of African troops often stimulated. There had already been complaints about Africans ‘roving about in search of women and drink’.⁵⁵ After the shooting incident, bolts were removed from rifles in the offending camp. In the State Council there was fierce debate about the presence of African forces in Ceylon. ‘I must ask you, Sir, why on earth these African forces are in Ceylon? Why should there be any African forces in Ceylon? Ceylonese troops are in Africa!’ The speaker went on to say that it was as ridiculous as Chinese troops appearing in England for local defence. Mr Abeywickrama recounted an experience he had had in Galle. ‘One day I saw a procession of women going into the interior. I asked them where they were going; and they told me that they were leaving their homes because they were informed that the Africans eat children, that their best food was the flesh of infants.’⁵⁶ Another speaker recounted the common belief that ‘these people are brought here to eat up the Japs when they land in Ceylon’. It was ‘difficult to convince the villagers that they are not cannibals’. Some State Council members sympathized with these views, one suggesting that Africans ‘should be behind barbed wire’. A representative from the Anuradhapura region reported that African nakedness while bathing had annoyed Buddhist priests. One speaker made his sentiments entirely clear: ‘the broad-lipped Africans. They are a most ugly sight. It is awful to look at these fellows’. Not all speakers agreed; some argued that Africans were in fact the best troops in Ceylon, others that racial stereotypes had no place in the debate.⁵⁷

Other evidence reinforced concerns about the effects of stationing Africans in Ceylon. A censored letter sent by an army driver to his family in Uganda reported that ‘we are having enjoyment with white ladies. We pay seven and a half rupees to have a go with them’.⁵⁸ In October 1943 the general officer commanding troops in Ceylon told the War Office in London that sexual assaults by Africans in the SEAC area were causing a ‘political backlash’ in the Ceylon State Council.⁵⁹ African troops aroused resentment in most places where

⁵⁵ SLNA, Governor’s Dispatches 441, press cutting, *Ceylon Daily News*, 24 September 1943. See also SLNA, Governor’s Dispatches 442, G.H. Bromley, Deputy-Inspector of Police, CID, ‘Report on Traffic in Women and Children’, Governor to O. Stanley, Secretary of State for the Colonies, for League of Nations attention, 29 April 1944.

⁵⁶ SLNA, Excerpts from State Council proceedings, Governor’s dispatch to the Colonial Office, September 1943.

⁵⁷ Op. cit.

⁵⁸ TNA, WO 172/3985, quoted in T. Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File: Social Implications of Colonial Military Service in the King’s African Rifles, 1902–1964* (Oxford, 1999).

⁵⁹ TNA, WO 106/4500, GOC Ceylon Army Command to War Office, 12 October 1943.

they were stationed, Asians and Europeans sharing strong racist attitudes. The people of Ceylon regarded Africans as strange and terrifying creatures. Alfred Birkett's African regiment completed its jungle training in Ceylon. His first experience of the Sinhalese was 'when the headman of the village [and] some villagers ... stood round the baths of the African[s] ... Africans wore three quarter length trousers and somehow the story had got round that the reason for this was because they were black they had tails and the trousers hid the tails.'⁶⁰

VII. Media, Sports, and Welfare

In attempting to avoid unsavoury incidents and in order to maintain discipline, efficiency, and morale, extensive efforts were made to entertain the thousands of service personnel stationed in Ceylon. These efforts involved the provision of rest camps as well as radio programmes, newspapers, welfare organizations, and sports competitions. Near the well-known military rest camp at Diyatalawa in the hills was Nuwara Eliya, Ceylon's 'little England' hill station, which during the war became the island's 'outstanding resort for servicemen'.⁶¹ Here, as in other parts of the island, hotels were requisitioned by the military, including the St Andrew's. The first arrivals were survivors from HMS *Hermes*, sunk off the east coast during the Japanese raids. The first batch of survivors arrived in their oil-soaked clothes.⁶² All over Ceylon, rest camps and planters' bungalows hosted servicemen of all ranks.

Service newspapers were published in Ceylon and distributed throughout the island and the wider South-East Asia theatre. Titles included the *Ceylon Review: Ceylon's Weekly Journal for the Royal Navy, Army, RAF, Merchant Navy, and Civil Defence Services* and the tabloid-style *SEAC*.⁶³ Individual units published their own papers, too, such as *Tropic Tusker Tales*, the magazine of 413 Squadron Royal Canadian Air Force flying Catalinas from Ceylon. *Rhino*, a newspaper catering for the thousands of East African troops in South-East Asia, was also produced in Ceylon.

The English music broadcast on Radio Ceylon became a popular favourite for planters and servicemen alike. Radio SEAC represented an advance in popular broadcasting brought about by the war. It employed Colombo-based British announcers, including Desmond Carrington and David Jacobs, both of whom went on to work for the

⁶⁰ Alfred J. Birkett, 'With the East African Rifles in Ceylon', *WW2 People's War*, article A8831874, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/74/a8831874.shtml>

⁶¹ SLNA, *Times of Ceylon*, 13 June 1944.

⁶² St Andrew's Hotel, Nuwara Eliya. Thanks to the General Manager, Wester Felthman.

⁶³ The British Library Newspaper Library, Colindale, holds both papers.

BBC.⁶⁴ Camps in northern Ceylon ‘could sometimes pick up the Free French broadcasting from Brazzaville’, a Vichy station in Saigon, or Radio Jakarta.⁶⁵ On the local radio there was plenty of war information and general entertainment. A typical day’s programming included items such as ‘Arms for Russia’, the ‘Brains Trust’, a Tamil concert, Dvořák from the BBC, Sinhalese war commentary, and British Forces Radio. The Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation broadcast a weekly programme for ‘Ceylon Lads Overseas’ (there were upwards of 6 000 Ceylonese troops in the Middle East).⁶⁶

As well as newspapers and radio, Ceylon offered other forms of entertainment for service personnel. They watched films at open-air showings and city cinemas. Noel Coward visited Ceylon in May 1944 after his friend Admiral Mountbatten asked him to entertain troops in the eastern theatre.⁶⁷ At the National Theatre, Maradana, the Ceylon Amateur Dramatics Society staged over 35 free shows in late 1942 for the benefit of servicemen. The RAF took over St Bridget’s Convent in Colombo as a theatre.⁶⁸ Those in rural areas could occasionally see British war propaganda films, as mobile cinemas showed titles such as ‘London Can Take It’, ‘Desert Victory’, and ‘Birth of a Tank’.⁶⁹ Sport was a ubiquitous pastime for servicemen. William Dempsey, a signaller at the Trincomalee shore base HMS *Highflyer*, was a keen featherweight boxer and footballer. On 21 June 1944 he was ‘requested to box against HMS *Vengeance* onboard *Vengeance*’ in the Layton Cup.⁷⁰ Dempsey also played football against a touring side brought to Ceylon by the Arsenal and England footballer (and England cricketer) Denis Compton, stationed in India with the army.⁷¹

As well as being minister for communications and works and commanding the ESLC, the Honourable Lieutenant Colonel John Kotalawala ran the Services Welfare Organizing Committee (SWOC), dedicated to providing Ceylonese support for visiting imperial forces. SWOC’s work was fully endorsed by the island’s colonial government. As the governor said in a broadcast, ‘keep our defenders fit in mind as well as in body. We have now in our Island men come from all four corners of the earth to defend it. You have only to pass along our roads, streets, and lanes to see the British Commonwealth of Nations in microcosm.’⁷² The War Services League, a society of ex-servicemen who had

⁶⁴ D. Jacobs, *Jacobs’ Ladder* (London, 1963).

⁶⁵ Phillip Max Skelsey, ‘Ceylon’, *WW2 People’s War*, article A3790343, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/43/a3790343.shtml>

⁶⁶ SLNA, *Times of Ceylon*, 2 December 1942.

⁶⁷ Op. cit., 18 November 1942.

⁶⁸ Op. cit., 5 December 1942.

⁶⁹ SLNA, Governor’s Dispatches 440, January–June 1943.

⁷⁰ Interview with William Dempsey, Woodstock, 6 September 2007.

⁷¹ Op. cit.

⁷² RHL, Mss Ind Ocn s 235, Speeches of His Excellency the Governor of Ceylon, Sir Andrew Caldecott.

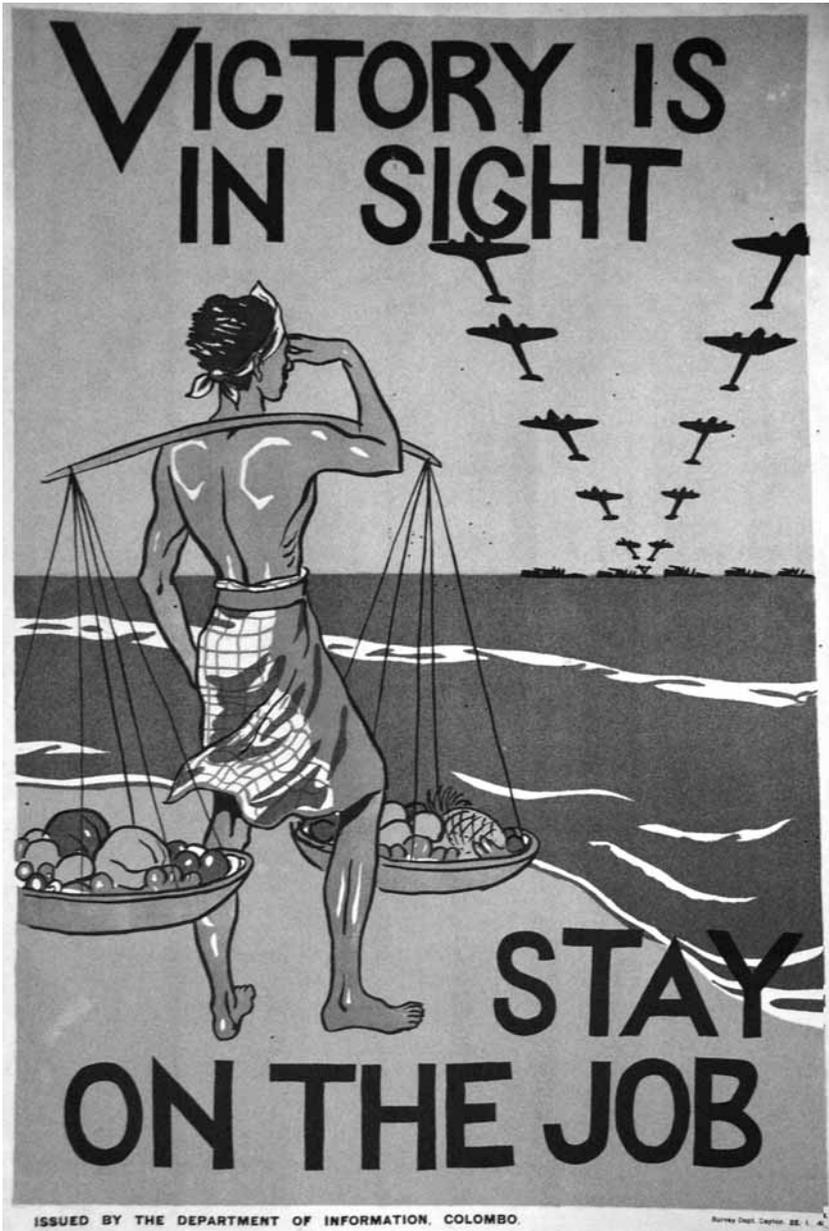


Figure 5 ‘Victory is in Sight.’ (Reproduced by kind permission of the Director of the Sri Lanka National Archives)

served in imperial and local military forces in the past, supported the governor’s aims by making items to be sent to servicemen, producing 5 000 gifts and comforts in 1943 alone.⁷³

VIII. Wartime Political Developments

Ceylon made significant progress towards independence during the war, and in many ways because of it. At the outbreak of war Ceylon already enjoyed a significant level of self-government, and Sir Andrew Caldecott had been sent out as governor in 1937 to smooth the way for further political advance ‘at a time when agitation for constitutional reform was intense’.⁷⁴ Local politicians such as Senanayake appreciated Caldecott’s aims, and he earned their confidence. The war temporarily halted constitutional advance, ‘but Caldecott was convinced that if Ceylon’s war effort were to be maintained a positive approach was required’.

In dealing with the British during the Second World War, Senanayake’s ‘strategy entailed bargaining for Dominion Status ... as a quid pro quo for the total support of the Ceylonese towards the British war effort’.⁷⁵ Despite general co-operation, politicians such as Senanayake walked a political tightrope because others wanted more intense pressure to be put on the British. Nevertheless, cordial relations were aided by the fact that the island’s main political party was one of modest ambition, preferring the constitutionalist, as opposed to the confrontational, approach. ‘From the outset, the Ceylon National Congress was an overwhelmingly conservative body. It was not until 1942 that it put forward independence as its main political goal’ (in the same year the Colonial Office turned down a State Council request for Sir Stafford Cripps to visit Ceylon when he went to India).⁷⁶ The president of the Ceylon National Congress succinctly expressed his party’s views in a letter to the governor:

We believed that the War in which England is now engaged in was being waged for the freedom of small nations throughout the world. The recent declarations appear to restrict that freedom to such nations of Europe as have lost their independence. The Congress considers it anomalous that the people of Ceylon, a subject people, should be participating in a War effort to restore freedom to European nations, while they themselves are to continue indefinitely in a state of subjection within the Empire.⁷⁷

⁷³ SLNA, *Times of Ceylon*, 25 May 1944.

⁷⁴ J. O’Regan, ‘Caldecott, Sir Andrew’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

⁷⁵ Aponso-Sariffodeen, ‘How D.S. Saved Ceylon’.

⁷⁶ De Silva, ‘Ceylon’, p. 453.

⁷⁷ RHL, Ceylon, 1938–65.

The Ceylonese leaders saw that collaboration augmented their bargaining position, and the Board of Ministers took every opportunity to emphasize the importance of the island's contribution to the war effort and to press Britain for reform. The Ceylonese elite were prepared to accept dominion status *within* the Commonwealth, an important fact as far as Whitehall was concerned. In 1943 a request for political advance tabled by the Board of Ministers elicited from Whitehall the promise of 'full responsible government under the Crown in all matters of internal administration' to be worked out after the war, with Britain retaining control of defence and external relations. As the report explained, 'HMG have very fully appreciated and valued the contribution which Ceylon has made and is making to the war effort'.⁷⁸ This British declaration was regarded as a triumph for Senanayake, though it became the subject of much controversy. On the strength of it the ministers, with the assistance of Dr Ivor Jennings, a noted constitutional expert, prepared a draft order in council and submitted it to the British government in February 1944, urging that it should be considered immediately and not at the end of the war.

The well-intentioned British procrastination was in line with Whitehall's policy of postponing constitutional discussions throughout the colonial empire for the duration. In the case of Ceylon, however, an exception was made. This came about as a result of pressure from senior British military and civilian officials in Ceylon in favour of a significant advance towards full self-government as soon as possible. The Ceylonese elite's support for the war effort had built their confidence, garnering the backing of Admiral Layton, Governor Andrew Caldecott, and the supreme Allied commander South East Asia, Lord Mountbatten. These powerful advocates petitioned the Colonial Office for constitutional advance, with Mountbatten sending a particularly influential letter to London. As a result, a commission under Lord Soulbury was appointed.

Nevertheless, despite the British government's surprising willingness to send out a commission before the end of the war, and the signal achievement this represented for the Ceylonese leaders, the path did not run entirely smooth. The ministers decided officially to boycott the Soulbury commission, which arrived in December 1944, and withdrew their own draft order in council. They were alarmed by the fact that the commission's remit had been extended beyond that suggested by the Colonial Office in 1943. In particular, the Sinhalese political elite did not want issues of communal representation to be discussed in public: 'Sinhalese politicians sought responsible government and Dominion status, in order to pre-empt British introduction of a constitution designed to secure the political rights of the Tamil minority.'⁷⁹

⁷⁸ SLNA, *Sessional Paper XVIII* (1943), *Reform of Constitution* (July 1943), p. 4.

⁷⁹ M. Thomas, B. Moore and L.J. Butler, *Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe's Imperial States, 1918–1975* (London, 2008), p. 53. For this period also see RHL, RH 010 r. 92/1946, *The Colonial Office List 1946* (London, 1946).

Thanks to the wisdom of Senanayake and the wiles of Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, however, the Soulbury commission was courteously received, and it obtained a cross-section of local opinion. The commission’s eventual report, in fact, closely mirrored the draft previously drawn up by Senanayake and his colleagues. The Tamil Congress, led by G.G. Ponnambalam, argued for parity of representation in any future legislature, and other groups, such as the British business elite, opposed the rapid moves being made towards self-government. Eventually opposition was overcome, however: even the Tamil Congress was prepared to accept that constitutional safeguards would assuage their concerns for minority rights.

This general picture of political co-operation does not tell the whole story of national politics during the war years. Early in the war there were strikes on plantations aimed at winning the right of organization. Some of these strikes were led by the Marxist Lanka Sama Samajist Party (LSSP). The party’s anti-war propaganda alarmed the Colonial Office, and the strikes that it encouraged rattled the planter community and led to calls for an end to all political activity. The party criticized the State Council and the colonial government, and campaigned for policies to alleviate poverty, unemployment, and disease. It contested State Council elections and ‘has been likened to the left wing of the Indian National Congress’.⁸⁰ The party’s vision was ‘modernizing – Japan was often hailed as an example – and reformist’, and it ‘indefatigably denounced imperialism’, having opposed in the 1930s both the establishment of an army and the state-sponsored celebrations of the king’s coronation.⁸¹

In March 1940 LSSP members burned an effigy of the governor on Galle Face Green, and Caldecott was personally attacked in articles in the party’s paper, referred to as ‘the rogue elephant’ and the ‘chief imperial henchman’.⁸² Such a marginal party could be ignored in the ‘phoney war’ phase, but with the fall of France in 1940 the party was declared illegal and its leaders arrested under the provisions of the defence regulations. The LSSP State Council members, N.M. Perera and Philip Gunawardena, and other party leaders were arrested on 18 June 1940 and detained without trial. In early April 1942 Dr Colvin de Silva, leader of the LSSP, and three other party leaders escaped from Bogambara gaol. A round-up of prominent members followed, but the escapees remained at large, the party’s underground network working to protect them. There were other indications of wartime nationalism, including the formation of a Lanka Regiment of the Indian National Army drawn from Ceylonese people living in Malaya and Singapore.

⁸⁰ N. Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities* (Sri Lanka, 2006), pp. 205–06. See also H.M. Desai and George Motha (members of the Ceylon Indian Delegation), ‘Memorandum on the Rights and Status of Indians in Ceylon’, 4 September 1942, RHL, Ceylon, 1938–65.

⁸¹ Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka*, p. 208.

⁸² C. de Silva, *Towards a Dictatorship: The Governor’s Reform Proposals Explained* (Colombo, 1942). De Silva was president of the LSSP.

IX. Conclusion

The article has revealed the remarkable extent of the home front experience of Ceylon, and the many parallels between the colonial and the British home front experience. In becoming a major Allied base in the front line of the war against Japan, Ceylon's home front was affected in numerous ways. Peoples' daily lives were affected by the food situation and the transformation of the island's physical infrastructure. Refugees and foreign servicemen arrived in large numbers (just as released prisoners of war stopped at Colombo at the end of the war as they journeyed home), and a great deal of internal migration took place as a result of the fear of enemy attacks. Ceylon was the venue for the first experiment in unified command as the British government recognized the importance of ensuring that a repeat of the Singapore disaster did not take place. The media was dominated by the war effort, and posters and advertisements were visible throughout the island as the government sought to engage with the population in order to manage expectations, provide valuable information, and sustain morale. The armed forces and labour formations engaged in war work offered employment opportunities for tens of thousands of people. Government ministries prepared the island's civil defences and co-ordinated a national food campaign, and indigenous politicians played a key role in mobilizing the colony – soon to become an independent nation – for war. The alliance between the colonial government and indigenous political leaders provided reach and legitimacy for the war effort, and allowed Ceylon to mobilize in a more sophisticated and far-reaching way than was the norm in the colonial empire. In marked contrast to the Indian National Congress, the political elite co-operated fully with the British, while making sure that this co-operation was viewed as a quid pro quo for post-war independence.⁸³ Thus the mobilization of the home front for war directly contributed to the smooth path to independence, one of the fruits of which was a defence agreement which enabled the British to use Ceylonese bases until the late 1950s.⁸⁴

⁸³ For political material see de Silva, *Sri Lanka*; and de Silva, 'Ceylon'. See also SLNA, *Sessional Paper XVIII* (1943), *Reform of the Constitution*. For wartime politics see Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka*; R. Siriwardena, *Working Underground: The LSSP in Wartime – A Memory of Happenings and Personalities* (Colombo, 1999); A. Richardson and B. Pitt, eds, *Blows against the Empire: Trotskyism in Ceylon: The Lanka Sama Samajist Party, 1935–1964* (London, 1997); W. Muthiah and S. Wanasinghe, *Britain, World War Two and the Sama Samajists* (Colombo, 1996); J. Russell, *Communal Politics under the Donoughmore Commission, 1931–1947* (Colombo, 1983); and I. Jennings, *The Constitution of Ceylon* (Oxford, 1949).

⁸⁴ Even before the war had ended the British government's Post-Hostilities Planning Committee had concluded that Ceylon would remain vital for Indian Ocean defence and in the event of war against the Soviet Union. See TNA, FO 371/SO774, Post Hostilities Planning (44) 28 (0), 'Security of the Indian Ocean', 18 February 1945. Thanks to Dr Andrew Stewart for giving me a copy of this document. For the use of Ceylon as a naval base until the late 1950s, see A. Jackson, 'The Royal Navy and the Indian Ocean Region since 1945', *Royal United Services Institute Journal* CLI (2006), pp. 78–82.

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