



The battle of PENANG

Earth Thought Notebooks

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Histoire & stratégie

Penang, island of dreams with its soft hills with waterfalls and its blond beaches, at the bottom of the Bay of Bengal. In 1786, the British soon made it their own, renaming it "Prince of Wales Island", with Georgetown as its capital, designed by the indefatigable Colonel Light, starting from the small pre-existing Sino-Malaysian town, on the edge of a beautiful harbour with a comfortable draught, easy to watch and protect... By Madam Professor Françoise THIBAUT

Penang completes the English stranglehold on Southeast Asia, and forms with Malacca and Singapore "the Strait Settlements". Hong Kong, the first gateway to China, and then Shanghai complete this network: these squares, often located on islands and estuaries, are trading posts where relatively few soldiers are stationed because the power of the British colonial system is not imperial but mercantile: they are mainly sought after as support points for the commercial navy^[1] and the initiatives of "state farms" or private entrepreneurs.

Penang is a key element: its geographical location allows it to link India and China in peace and quiet: opium transited Penang in huge quantities from 1830-1840, as did all kinds of tropical goods destined for Europe. Suez, after 1875, dramatically reduced travel times. For example, it was through Penang that botanist Robert Fortune, in 1850, smuggled the priceless tea shoots he had stolen from the Yellow Mountains in central China to adapt them to the foothills of the Himalayas, the source of one of the United Kingdom's most fabulous enrichments. The local sultans and wealthy Chinese families are not to be outdone, however, as some of the largest fortunes in Asia are created on this end of the island whose serenity seems destined for eternity.

Patatras! The war is declared in Europe at the beginning of August 1914: France, Russia, Great Britain (and its ally at that time, Japan) are allied against Germany and Austria-

Hungary. It will thus be this "Great War", whose initial pretext, a century later, seems derisory. This gigantic "devastation" of the world also contains the year 1917 [2] and its upheaval, on which we are still living, and considerable colonial consequences. Indeed, the Allies hastened to dislodge (or try to dislodge) the Germans from the possessions that the Congress of Berlin of 1888 had allocated to them and from the trading posts they had obtained when the Chinese empire was dismantled (notably the rich Quingdao concession). It is quite obvious that Emperor Wilhelm does not hear it this way.

This is where the affair of the "Battle of Penang" comes in. And the confrontation will be maritime: indeed, the "Powers" have recently discovered the joys of metal combat units, armed with formidable guns: battleships, gunboats, torpedo boats and destroyers now haunt the oceans, equipped with powerful engines, accompanied by supply ships. Thus, on 28 October 1914, on the orders of its general staff, the German cruiser Emden appeared in Penang harbour and sank the Russian Jemtchoug, before destroying the French destroyer Le Mousquet on the same day on its return from an inspection mission off the port. This first act of hostility in the area followed previous clashes in the South China Sea and off Colombo; it triggered a succession of attacks, destruction and shipwrecks, and above all a race to follow in the footsteps of the Emden: It will cross in the Indian Ocean, sinking several allied units before being trapped on November 8 off the Cocos Archipelago by several pursuers, and, in very poor condition, will be forced to surrender. The odyssey of Iberville and the Pistol is also told at length (from the archives of Vincennes).

This affair, secondary compared to what is happening in Europe, in fact triggers a strategic and diplomatic imbroglio not very glorious, intensifies the maritime fight all around, is to It intensified the all-out maritime struggle, was at the origin of the mutiny in Singapore a few weeks later and, not least, contributed to the Russian sailors' definitive disenchantment with the Tsar (which began with the pitiful defeat of Tsushima on 28 May 1905). It was they, in the fight, who paid the heaviest price.

Although Great Britain and Japan had the most powerful fleets in South-East Asia, English negligence was put forward because of the lack of surveillance of the port and the misjudgment of the local authorities. Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, hastened to bury the file and to bias the explanations which remained, on the part of all the protagonists, very fragmented and romanticized. A little later, the Reverend William Cross tried to uncover the truth about this sinister attack in Penang, but he was soon "advised" to keep quiet. As for the French, they were accused of "cowardice" and slowness.

John R. Robertson has conducted a thorough investigation and delivers us, with "The Battle of Penang"...which is as close to accurate as possible, based on the military records of all the protagonists. The story is gripping, vivid, with rare maps and photographic documents. It demonstrates the vanity of the confrontations and their uselessness. The losses were considerable: about twenty units lost "for nothing", nearly 2,000 men missing or prisoners.

A very fascinating testimony on the colonial and maritime aspects of the Great War, which were very little known in France. The book will certainly appeal to sailors.

^[1] Read about this approach in Charles Zorgbibe's Disraeli (ed. De Fallois, pages 402 et seq.).

^[2] Complete with the very beautiful 1917, the year that changed the world of J.C. Buisson (at Perrin's),

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