

Malaya, 1948: Britain's 'Asian Cold War'?

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Working Paper: #3

April 2002

The Cold War as Global Conflict
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Introduction

Between 8.30 and 9am on 16 June 1948, in the Sungei Siput area of Perak, northern Malaya, three Europeans were shot dead. They were estate managers of rubber plantations and the perpetrators were guerrillas in the 'mobile corps' of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). These murders culminated a series of attacks and 'outrages' against estate managers in Penang, Selangor and in the southern state of Johore. Late that afternoon, the colonial government declared a State of Emergency in Perak and Johore that was extended, two days later on 18 June, to the whole of Malaya. An immediate casualty was civil liberty. Under emergency regulations a range of dictatorial powers were decreed: 'seditious' publications were proscribed; coercive powers of detention, arrest, trial, deportation and 'banishment' were introduced; the death penalty was prescribed for carrying unauthorised firearms; and the registration of the entire adult population was commenced. On 17 July the MCP itself was banned and more than 1000 arrests were made.¹ The Malayan Emergency had begun.² It was to last another twelve

¹ Various MCP 'front' organisations were also banned, including the New Democratic Youth League, the Indian New Democratic Youth League and the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army Ex-Servicemen's Association. By the end of 1948, 1,1779 were held in detention, another 637, along with 3,148 families, were deported, and every person over twelve was photographed, thumb-printed and issued with a National Registration and Identity Card.

² Although it bore many of the characteristics of a colonial war, the misnomer 'emergency' was used throughout the twelve years. It was employed *not* for 'public relations' purposes (Frank Farudi, 'Creating a Breathing Space: The Political Management of Colonial Emergencies', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 21(2), September 1993, p.94). The real reason was economic: property damage to the Malayan rubber and tin estates was covered by London insurance companies only during 'riot and civil commotion' *in an emergency*. Under this clause of their policies, insurance companies could repudiate their liability for losses of stocks and equipment for civil war or ongoing armed conflict. A cash-strapped British government would then have to pick up the tab. It was primarily for this fiscal reason, too, that MCP guerrillas were labelled, for the first three years, 'bandits', and the British counter-insurgency was termed 'The Anti-Bandit Campaign'. According to the British High Commissioner in Malaya, 'these considerations lie behind the preference for such names as "bandits", "thugs", and "terrorists" which have not the same significance for insurance companies'. (Public Record Office, Kew [henceforth PRO], PRO CO 537/4773, no.3, despatch no.5 from H. Gurney to A. Creech Jones, 30 May 1949). But as one Foreign Office official noted, 'it seems to me largely nonsense to refer to the Guerrillas as "bandits, pure and simple, a motley band of ruffians"...There is an extremely high degree of political training and organisation and to refer to them as bandits is to misunderstand the whole problem which they present.' (PRO FO371/84478, Minute, A.E. Franklin to Malaya Committee, minutes of 3rd Meeting of the Malaya Committee, 7 May 1950). Moreover, the British belatedly discovered that 'bandit' was the identical term used by the Japanese occupiers during WW2 and, instead of de-legitimising the MCP, as intended, it led some Malayan Chinese to equate the British re-occupation with the Japanese occupation. On 20 May 1952

years, until 31 July 1960, although its outcome - the complete defeat of the communist insurgency by the British and colonial army, police and security services – had been achieved by 1958.³

In mid-1948 the British Labour government led by Clement Attlee was preoccupied with the containment of the Soviet Union in Europe.⁴ By then, the bolts of the Iron Curtain had slammed shut: the democratically elected government in Czechoslovakia was displaced by a Soviet-engineered *coup d'état*,⁵ Russian attacks on the Marshall Plan had sharpened, and the eleven-month Berlin Blockade, which to British government officials resembled incipient war, had commenced. The spectre of another catastrophic European conflict haunted the Foreign Office.⁶ Its pugnacious Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, worked indefatigably - and, ultimately, successfully - to persuade the United States to participate in a military alliance, the nascent North Atlantic Treaty, that would provide western Europe with a bulwark against Soviet expansion.

However, with the crisis in Malaya, Great Britain was obliged, abruptly, to look eastward. The Cold War in Southeast Asia became a reality. With its imperial reach stretching from India to Singapore, Britain had long seen a special role for itself in the 'Far East'. As well as its Commonwealth connections, it had close links with Siam, a treaty with Burma, friendly relations with the French and Dutch (each anxious to re-

the hybrid term 'Communist Terrorist' or, simply, 'CT' replaced 'bandit' - presumably without jeopardising insurance cover.

³ 1958 witnessed an unprecedented level of MCP surrenders; see Kumar Ramakrishna, 'Content, Credibility and Context: Propaganda, Government Surrender Policy and the Malayan Communist Terrorist Mass Surrenders of 1958', *Intelligence and National Security*, 14(4), Winter 1999, pp.242-66.

⁴ Ann Deighton (ed.), *Britain and the First Cold War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), chs.2, 9. Labour was in office from 1945 until 1951 when it was defeated by the Conservative Party led by Winston Churchill.

⁵ For Foreign Office awareness of the NKVD's complicity in this and the murder of Jan Masaryk, see Igor Lukes, 'The Czechoslovak Intelligence Service and Western Reactions to the Communist *Coup d'État* of February 1948', *Intelligence and National Security*, 8(4), October 1993, p.81. To the Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, the *coup* was a defining moment if not a turning point; he told the US Ambassador on 25 February: 'We are now in a crucial period of six to eight weeks which will decide the future of Europe'. Peter Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945-51*, (London: Jonathon Cape, 1992), p.350.

⁶ At this time most Britons were convinced, according to one historian, 'that there was a real danger of the Soviet Union and other communists taking advantage of the weakness of Western Europe to extend their power. We know now that this did not follow, but nobody knew it at the time. This was a generation for whom war and occupation were not remote hypotheses but recent and terrible experiences.' Alan Bullock, *Ernest Bevin: Foreign Secretary 1945-1951*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p.345.

colonise Indochina and Indonesia respectively) and a direct presence in Hong Kong, Borneo and Malaya. Great Britain's relationship to the region was economic as much as strategic and it made the Attlee administration especially nervous about the possibility of the encroachment of communism into Southeast Asia:

[T]here is a distinct danger that, as measures are developed for the security of Europe and the Middle East, pressure [from Russia] upon South East Asia will increase. Conditions there are generally speaking favourable for the spread of Communism, and if the general impression prevails in South East Asia that the Western Powers are both unwilling and unable to assist in resisting Russian pressure...eventually the whole of South East Asia will fall a victim to the Communist advance and thus come under Russian domination.⁷

A crucial Western power that was 'unwilling' - but not 'unable' - to be drawn into the region, despite the persistent exhortations of Bevin⁸ and Foreign Office officials, was the United States. Until the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, the US State Department stepped back from any significant commitment - whether political, economic or military - to this region which it considered primarily a British and French sphere of influence.⁹

So Great Britain, at least until 1950 and certainly in Malaya, had to go it alone. From 1948 until 1957, when the back of the communist insurgency was broken, it sank immense resources into the campaign. By October 1950, it had committed twenty-one infantry regiments, two armoured car regiments and one commando brigade, totalling

⁷ PRO CO 967/84, Colonial Office memorandum, 23 March 1949.

⁸ Indicative of Bevin's more bellicose position was the seminal Cabinet paper he wrote in March 1948 entitled, pointedly, 'The Threat to Western Civilisation'. PRO CAB 129/25 (CP 48/72), attached to memorandum by Bevin, 3 March 1948.

⁹ *Foreign Relations of the United States* [henceforth *FRUS*], 890.00/9-1349, 1949(7), pp.1204-8, 'Report of Discussions of Far Eastern Affairs in Preparation for Conversations with Mr. Bevin', 13 September 1949. The Foreign Office believed that 'the full development of [Southeast Asia] can only be brought about with United States assistance, but at present there is an obvious reluctance on the part of the Americans to risk a further loss after their experience in China'. PRO CAB 129/37/1, CP (49)207, Memorandum, E. Bevin, 'The United Kingdom in Southeast Asia and the Far East', 18 October 1949. Ovendale suggests that the American administration was 'wary' because it was 'conscious that much of Asia was unconvinced of its devotion to peace, its lack of imperialistic ambition, and its interest in Asian freedom and progress'. He also refers to American 'naivety and selfishness' at this time. Richie Ovendale, 'Britain, the United States, and the Cold War in South-East Asia, 1949-1950', *International Affairs*, 58(3), Summer 1982, pp. 447, 462-3.

nearly 50,000 troops.¹⁰ An official estimate put the overall cost at a staggering £700 million, of which the UK government spent £520 million.¹¹ At the end of 1948, it was estimated that the Emergency was costing between M\$250,000 – M\$300,000 per day.¹² In one year alone, 1951, the Emergency cost the government £69.8 million.¹³ This is especially significant when we consider the state of the British Treasury in the late 1940s. World War II drained the British economy to such an extent that it could scarcely meet existing commitments let alone accept new ones. Its very economic viability seemed in doubt, especially during the ‘dollar gap’ crisis of 1947. As one of Attlee’s chief advisors wrote in December 1947:

[W]e are a bankrupt nation. It will tax our strength and determination to the utmost during the next years to provide for our necessary imports by exports. Until we succeed we shall only keep alive through the charity of our friends.¹⁴

In addition, exports in 1947-48 had been crippled by a severe fuel crisis, the product of a particularly fierce winter that gripped most of Europe, and fears of imminent economic depression were widely-held. All this was in a period of spiralling government spending arising from its post-war plans to implement the welfare state. A vast program of state socialisation – from coalmines to national health – was realised, but the government’s capacity to pay for its domestic legislation was in doubt. Austerity was therefore more than a rhetorical catchcry mouthed by Whitehall to justify continued wartime rationing; it shaped diplomatic relations and strategic initiatives.

¹⁰ PRO CAB 21/1682, DO (50)92, Top Secret Minute, E. Shinwell, Secretary of State for War to Cabinet Defence Committee, 24 October 1950. The combined numbers of police and troops expanded from 11,000 in 1947 to 69,000 in 1951. For an excellent discussion of the British deployment of forces during the Malayan Emergency, see Karl Hack, *Defence and Decolonisation in Southeast Asia: Britain, Malaya and Singapore 1941-1968*, (London, Curzon, 2001), ch.4 (esp. pp.143-9).

¹¹ National Archives of Australia, ACT [henceforth NAA], Series A452/2, Item 1968/4248, ‘Review of the Emergency in Malaya from June 1948 to August 1957 by the Director of Operations, Malaya’ (Secret), p.19; see also PRO WO 106/5990.

¹² *Communist Banditry in Malaya: The Emergency, June 1949-December 1949*, Kuala Lumpur: Department of Information [1950], p.8.

¹³ PRO CO1030/403, ‘Briefs (Economic and Financial) for the Secretary of State’s Visit to Malaya: 10. Cost of the Emergency’ (nd).

¹⁴ PRO DEFE 5/6, COS(47)251, memorandum from Sir Henry Tizard.

This economic imperative explains, in part, the relentless British pressure (especially throughout 1947) on the United States to commit itself to the fight against communism in Europe. The Marshall Plan and the Berlin Airlift testified to that commitment. But in Malaya, it was a different story. There was no ‘charity’. Symptomatic was this episode. On 22 June 1948, four days after the declaration of the State of Emergency throughout the Malayan Federation, the Deputy Commissioner of Police for Malaya met with the American Consul in Kuala Lumpur to request assistance. Specifically, he wished to acquire 10,000 US Army 30 caliber Winchester carbines and two million rounds of ammunition. Apparently these guns were ‘ideal’ for use by the special constabulary then being formed to counter the communist insurgency but unobtainable from the manufacturer. The American Consul deferred rather than acquiesced. He recommended that the Commissioner consult instead the Malayan Chief Secretary. At a subsequent meeting the Consul noted that the Deputy Commissioner told him ‘despondently’ that he was referring the matter to the British Colonial Office.¹⁵

The question that therefore arises – and it is a core concern of this paper – is why, at this time of acute financial difficulty and without, in this instance, crucial American support, did the Attlee Labour government commit itself to a costly campaign in a colony whose march to *Merdeka* seemed imminently realisable?¹⁶ In answering that question, this paper will attempt three things: first, it will survey and challenge contemporary and historical judgements concerning the origins of the Malayan Emergency. Second, it will argue that these origins cannot be understood without recognising the influence of indigeneous pressures and internal developments which, in contrast to the historiographical consensus, were more crucial than the role of the external, Cold War dimension. It will thereby

¹⁵ National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC [henceforth NARA], General Records of the Department of State, RG59: 846E.00/6-2848, William M. Blue, Kuala Lumpur, to Secretary of State, Washington, 28 June 1948, ‘Discussion of Present Situation in Malaya with Government Authorities’.

¹⁶ Independence was achieved, during the Malayan Emergency, on 31 August 1957. It is outside the scope of this paper to outline the pressures on, the concessions given or the steps taken towards decolonisation; indeed, it is probable, as Stockwell concludes, that the insurgency ‘did not in itself determine the speed or the manner of Britain’s departure from Malaya’. A.J. Stockwell, ‘Insurgency and Decolonization during the Malayan Emergency’, *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Studies*, 25(1), March 1987, p.80. Hack concludes that the question of the Emergency’s impact on decolonisation remains ‘unanswerable’. Karl Hack, *Defence and Decolonisation in Southeast Asia*, p.137. For an excellent overview of the path to decolonisation, see A.J. Stockwell, ‘British Imperial Policy and Decolonization in Malaya, 1942-52’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 13(1), October 1984, pp.68-87.

restore the agency of 'local' actors. Third, it will suggest that the MCP insurrection was not the product of clear-sighted preparation and careful coordination, as usually alleged, but was inadequately planned and poorly executed.

Contemporary assessments

The predominant explanation for both the origins of the insurgency and British determination to defeat it, advanced then and, as we shall see, accepted by commentators since, was the external threat of communism posed by the Cold War. An official report, marked 'Secret' and written by the Director of Operations in Malaya, Lt. Gen. R.H. Bowen, summarised this view:

The Malayan Communist Party campaign is part of a wider Soviet-inspired drive to obtain control of what is strategically and economically one of the most important areas of South-East Asia...In June 1948, on the instructions of the Cominform issued at two conferences in Calcutta four months earlier, the MCP started a campaign of murder, sabotage and terrorism designed to paralyse the Government and develop into armed revolution.¹⁷

These assertions – of Soviet inspiration, Cold War expansionism, MCP initiation and, significantly, Calcutta as the conduit for Cominform instructions – were echoed in various forms by the Attlee administration. They were indicative of a readiness to perceive conspiracies. When, in July 1948, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, Arthur Creech Jones, justified his authorisation of the banning of the MCP and allied organisations, he referred to the MCP as 'the nerve centre of the whole subversive movement'.¹⁸ Both the Colonial Office in October and the Cabinet Malaya Committee in November emphasised the 'substantial grounds for regarding the Malayan outbreak as stimulated by Moscow' and the existence of a 'communist plot' to overthrow by armed force the Malayan government.¹⁹ A lengthy and detailed paper prepared for Cabinet by

¹⁷ NAA A452/2, 1968/4248, 'Review of the Emergency in Malaya', p.3. This document was made available to the Australian Prime Minister's Department by the British High Commission in July 1967 for a meeting concerning defence and security arrangements in the South Pacific. It was declassified in 1998.

¹⁸ *House of Commons Debates*, 23 July 1948, vol.454, p.787. Only the Communist MP, Willie Gallacher, challenged this assessment as 'a foul slander' and 'an attack on the Malayan working class'. Ibid, p.790. On the role of Creech Jones, see Kenneth O. Morgan, 'Imperialists at Bay: British Labour and Decolonization', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 27(2), May 1999, p.236.

¹⁹ PRO CO 537/2638; PRO PRE M 8/1406/2, MAL C(50) 12.

the Permanent Under-Secretary of State warned of dangers that 'will affect the whole security of South-East Asia' from 'a powerful Communist Fifth Column, corroding from within'.²⁰ The Soviet role was stressed by the Russia Committee: 'the Soviet Legation at Bangkok was clearly designed to be the centre of Soviet activity in the whole of South East Asia and Soviet couriers passing through Singapore en route for the Far East or Australia were a constant source of danger'.²¹ One of these 'couriers' was L.L. Sharkey, the general secretary of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). After attending the Calcutta conferences,²² Sharkey travelled to Singapore and, allegedly, 'played a considerable part in persuading the Malayan Communists to adopt a policy of violence'.²³

The link between the inaugural conference of the Cominform, which postulated the 'two camp' thesis, the Calcutta meetings, and 'the marked increase in Communist activity in South-East Asia immediately afterwards', was also articulated by the South-East Asia Department of the Foreign Office.²⁴ A 'Top Secret' joint memorandum submitted to the Cabinet Defence Committee by the Minister of Defence and the Secretary of State for War located the Malayan Emergency in a wider context. It argued that strong armed action 'against the guerrilla in Malaya is a vital step in the "cold war" against communism in the Far East. The Malayan campaign is not isolated and must be considered in relation to the Far East theatre as a whole'.²⁵ The Chief Intelligence Officer in Malaya, Major Harry Fisher, stretched the geographical context to include Europe. In conversation with the US Consul in Kuala Lumpur, he suggested that the terrorist campaign 'was merely one phase of a war which would soon break out in Europe over

²⁰ PRO CAB 129/37/1, 'The United Kingdom in South-East Asia and the Far East', 27 October 1949.

²¹ PRO FO 1110/33, Minutes of Meeting, Russia Committee, 14 October 1948 ('Top Secret'). Similarly Lt. General Briggs believed that 'the roots [of the uprising] may well lie outside Malaya, in Russia in particular'. PRO CAB 104/263, statement by Sir Harold Briggs, 20 April 1950. Briggs was appointed 'Director of anti-Bandit Operations' in Malaya in March 1950; he arrived in Kuala Lumpur on 3 April 1950

²² It needs to be appreciated, which some historians do not, that there were, in fact, *two* Calcutta conferences. The first conference, organised by the World Federation of Democratic Youth and the International Union of Students (19-25 February), was attended by the MCP delegate. The second, the Congress of the Indian Communist Party (28 February-6 March), was not. Sharkey attended both.

²³ PRO FO 1110/33, Minutes of Meeting, Russia Committee, 14 October 1948

²⁴ PRO FO 1110/189, 'Outline of Communist Strategy in South-East Asia', 15 August 1949 (PR 2887/11/913).

²⁵ PRO CAB 21/1682, DO (50)92, 'Present Situation in Malaya', 24 October 1950 (Top Secret brief for Defence Committee).

the Berlin situation'.²⁶ Similarly, the Chief Secretary of Malaya, Sir Alexander Newbould, according to the US Consul whom he briefed, held the 'rather widely held belief that Moscow is making a push in the East now that she seemed to be stopped temporarily in Europe'.²⁷ Creech Jones was another who subscribed to this belief: 'once the path of the Communists was blocked in Europe', he wrote, 'there would be a very concerted effort in the East'.²⁸ Thus, British success in Malaya was regarded as 'a vital step in the "Cold War" against communism in the Far East'.²⁹ We can see, then, that, to contemporary opinion, the framework of the Cold War was critical to understanding and responding to the Malayan insurgency.

Such assessments were not confined to private discussions, closed committee meetings and top secret memoranda. Those within the Chinese, Malay and British communities who owned wireless sets were able to hear these views expressed, albeit in a more extreme form, during a remarkable broadcast over Radio Malaya on the evening of 7 July 1948. It was titled 'The Conflict in Malaya', it was delivered by the recently-appointed Commissioner-General for the UK in Southeast Asia, Rt. Hon. Malcolm MacDonald, and it was long (the transcript was eighteen pages).³⁰ The language was often lurid, vitriolic and morally-charged. Indeed, it was not dissimilar from some of the 'red-baiting' pronouncements then emanating from Washington. 'It is the Communists who are now trying to impose upon you a vicious, tyrannical rule...Our action will not cease until their wicked movement has been utterly destroyed'. The aim of the communists was 'to establish gangster rule in Malaya' and therefore HMG and the governments of Malaya

²⁶ NARA RG59, 846E.00/10-2448, Blue to Acheson, 24 October 1948.

²⁷ NARA RG59, 846E.00/10-2848, confidential memorandum, 23 June 1948, 'Enclosure No.1 to Despatch No.10 dated June 28, 1948'.

²⁸ PRO CO 717/172/52849/9/1948, no.15, 22 June 1948.

²⁹ PRO PREM 8/1406, Part 2, DO(50)92, memorandum from Minister of Defence and Secretary of State for War, 24 October 1950.

³⁰ NARA RG59, 846E.00/7-948. Text transmitted to Department of State, 9 July 1948. MacDonald, the son of former Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, had been a British M.P. since 1929. Between 1935 and 1948 he had served variously as Secretary of State for the Colonies, Minister of Health, UK High Commissioner in Canada, Governor-General of the Malayan Union, and Governor-General of Malaya, Singapore and British Borneo. His views were authoritative and respected. According to one writer, he was 'one of the most influential and persuasive diplomats that Britain had ever sent to Malaya'. J.P. Ongkili, *Nation-building in Malaysia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.82. Indeed, it has been argued that Whitehall's policy on Malaya was influenced primarily by MacDonald's conviction that external pressures (whether China or Russia) had determined MCP behaviour. Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *The Left Wing in Southeast Asia*, (New York: William Sloan, 1950), p.154.

and Singapore would not rest ‘until their power has been broken and they themselves are exterminated’.³¹ Only then would there be ‘safety for your homes’. For MacDonald there were no ambiguities, no nuances. The ‘terrorist outbreak’, he said, ‘is part of a deliberate plan by the Malayan Communists to stage a violent revolution and capture the government of this country. That is a sober statement of fact’. But the purpose of his broadcast was sanguine rather than ‘sober’: it was designed simultaneously to alert the populace to the gravity of the threat and – by outlining exhaustively, if not exhaustingly, the harsh counter-measures that had been taken or were planned – to fortify listeners. One who did listen was the American Consul General in Singapore, Paul Josselyn. He cabled the Secretary of State: ‘Do not consider MacDonald’s accusation and warning exaggerated...public has frank statement difficulties confronting govt [sic] and its determination to suppress disorder’.³²

Besides the desire to crush communism, a desire aggravated by the onset of the Cold War, there was another, less publicly acknowledged reason for massive military commitment at a time of limited resources and fiscal parsimony. It concerned economic exigencies. Once the Japanese were defeated in 1945, Great Britain was determined to return to Malaya even if not to Burma or India. This second colonial occupation, this new imperialism, occurred because of Malaya’s dollar-earning capacity. As Creech Jones told Cabinet (but not parliament):

During 1947 the total value of the exports of Singapore and the [Malayan] Federation together was £151 million of which dollar exports accounted for £56 million. [Malaya] is by far *the most important source of dollars in the colonial empire* and it would gravely worsen the whole dollar balance of the Sterling Area if there were serious interference with Malayan exports.³³

. In 1948 the US imported 727,000 tons of rubber, of which Malaya supplied 371,000. The US imported 158,000 tons of tin of which all but 3000 came from Malaya. In terms of dollars, rubber production exceeded in total value all domestic exports from Great

³¹ Similarly, Creech Jones referred to the need to ‘liquidate the guerrilla bands’. PRO CAB 129/28, CP(48) 171, ‘The situation in Malaya’, 1 July 1948.

³² NARA RG59, 846E.00/7-948, Josselyn to Acheson, 10 July 1948.

³³ PRO CAB 129/28, CP(48) 171, Cabinet memorandum, 1 July 1948. Emphasis added.

Britain to the United States. During 1946-1950, it derived US\$700 million income from rubber exports to America.³⁴ Any interruption of that supply, such as that presented by the insurgency, would seriously impair the British economy. In that year, 1948, Britain was still struggling to maintain the value of its sterling and the 'dollar gap' seemed to be getting wider. This financial crisis made earnings from the 'Sterling Area', in which Malaya was the linchpin, all the more crucial. The maintenance and security of British business in Malaya was therefore of central economic importance to the imperial government.³⁵

Historians' assessments

Stripped, usually, of its Cold War clothing, the 'communist plot' thesis became the prevalent interpretation of the Malayan Emergency. The judgement that at the Calcutta conference in February 1948 the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) transmitted to the MCP a directive to take up arms is, according to Yeo Kim Wah, 'the orthodox view and by far the most widely accepted version of the communist uprising in Malaya'.³⁶ In many respects this is correct. Not surprisingly, perhaps, historians writing during the early Cold War years, and influenced by that milieu, fell overwhelmingly into this category. Morrison, Thompson and Adloff, Mosley, Purcell, Masani, Miller, Pye, Brimmell, and Josey all subscribe to the 'orthodox' view.³⁷ This view took root and

³⁴ Richard Stubbs, *Counter-insurgency and the economic factor*, Occasional Paper No. 19, (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies), 1974, p.3. Malaya produced one third of the world's total output of natural rubber, more than one half of the world's total output of first grade rubber and one third of the world's total output of tin.

³⁵ According to White, the insurgency was 'fully recognised as a threat to British business', and the government did work to restore and maintain business confidence 'to the extent that there was no mass exodus of British capital from Malaya'. Nicholas J. White, *Business, Government, and the End of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.123. See also PRO CO 537/6089, No.5, 'Malaya and the sterling area', 26 April 1950.

³⁶ Correspondence, *Journal of South East Asian Studies*, 1(2), September 1970, p.155.

³⁷ See Ian Morrison, 'The Communist Uprising in Malaya', *Far Eastern Survey*, 17(24), December 1948, pp.281-6; Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *The Left Wing in Southeast Asia*, (New York: William Sloan, 1950), p.155; Philip E. Mosley, 'Soviet Policy and Revolutions in Asia', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 276, July 1951, p.96; Victor Purcell, *Malaya: Communist or Free?*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1954), p.132; M.R. Masani, *The Communist Party of India: A Short History*, (New York: Macmillan, 1954), pp.89-90; Harry Miller, *The Communist Menace in Malaya*, (New York: Praeger, 1955), p.76; J.H. Brimmell, *Malayan Communist Party: A Short History*, (Singapore: Donald Moore, 1956), pp.19-20; Lucien W. Pye, *Guerilla Communism in Malaya: Its Social and Political Meaning*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1956), p.84; Alex Josey, *Trade Unionism in Malaya*, (Singapore: Donald Moore, 1958), p.21. See also the intriguing 43-page booklet

foreshadowed the more recent historiography of the Malayan Emergency. Jackson, for example, alleges that at Calcutta, the MCP delegation, through the Russians present, 'received fresh instructions from Moscow'. The MCP, along with other Southeast Asian communist parties, was 'ordered to go on the offensive' with a 'carefully orchestrated' insurrection. Reiterating the contemporaneous perspective and illustrating a simplistic understanding of Cold War geo-politics, Jackson argues that the Soviet intention was to divert British attention and military resources from Europe to Asia to enable 'a major political offensive in Europe', particularly in the Balkans, Berlin and Italy.³⁸ Mackay concurs: he argues that with the impact of the Berlin Airlift (which, however, did not begin until 24 June, *after* the Emergency commenced) Stalin was 'in urgent need of some diversionary activity to deflect the attention of the Western powers'. Consequently, the Soviet Union - 'the Almer Mater of international revolution' - 'sent the fiery cross' around the region with which it 'set South East Asia alight'.³⁹

Less colourfully, Trager concludes that Calcutta was 'the signal for the post-war re-entry of the Soviet Union into South and Southeast Asia'.⁴⁰ Clutterbuck implies a direct link between the Calcutta conference, which 'decides on armed revolution throughout Southeast Asia', and the 'outbreak of rioting, sabotage and assassination in Malaya'.⁴¹ For Thompson there is no doubt: 'In the case of Malaya, it is now known that instructions were received from Moscow' at Calcutta. The MCP, he maintains, 'was a well-placed pawn which Russia could not fail to use, and if necessary sacrifice, in the cold-war

published in April 1956, *Soviet Imperialism and the Malayan Communist Party* in NAA A7133/3, 13, 'Australian Secret Intelligence Service – Records on Singapore and Malaya – Part 2'. The booklet's 'tone', plus the fact that no author or publisher was listed, suggests that it emanated from the Information Research Department, a clandestine anti-communist propaganda unit operating out of the British Foreign Office - but linked with and funded from the same source as MI6 - and which distributed unattributable material to selected recipients.

³⁸ Robert Jackson, *The Malayan Emergency: The Commonwealth's Wars 1948-1966*, (London: Routledge, 1991), pp.12-13.

³⁹ Donald Mackay, *The Malayan Emergency 1948-60: The Domino That Stood Still*, (London: Brassey's, 1997), 29.

⁴⁰ Frank N. Trager, *Marxism in Southeast Asia: A Study of Four Countries*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), p.268.

⁴¹ Richard L. Clutterbuck, *The Long Long War: Counterinsurgency in Malaya and Vietnam*, (New York: Praeger, 1966), p.185. See also Richard Clutterbuck, *Riot and Revolution in Singapore and Malaya 1945-1963*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1973), p.56.

period...'.⁴² Whilst accepting that MCP strategy was subject to or shaped by pressures from the international communist movement, some writers have maintained, without little evidence, that the Chinese Communist Party, not the CPSU, was the driving force.⁴³ However, even the American State Department and the British Cabinet Defence Committee *at the time* discredited such a view.⁴⁴

The MCP and the post-war period

The persistently expressed conviction that Soviet instructions, transmitted in Calcutta, precipitated armed uprisings in several Southeast Asian countries, is highly questionable. Like most allegations of communist plots tangible evidence, as opposed to seemingly axiomatic assumptions of cause and effect, is extremely thin. When we locate the discussion within the framework of the history of the MCP and the post WW2 conditions within Malaya, a different view emerges. This 'local' perspective enables the received interpretations of the origins of the Malayan Emergency to be challenged.

Immigrant members of a left-wing faction of the Kuomintang introduced Communism into Malaya in the 1920s.⁴⁵ After the expulsion of communists from the Chinese mainland in 1927 and the ineffectiveness of the attempt by the Comintern's Far Eastern Bureau in Shanghai to establish the Nanyang (South Seas) Communist Party, the MCP was formed in Singapore in early 1930. In the mid-1930s the Party re-organised and

⁴² Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam*, New York: Praeger, 1966), p.28. O'Ballance is less mono-causal than Thompson; he attributes the MCP decision to revolt to a 'number of combined factors' but still believes the role of the Calcutta conference to be the 'main consideration'. Edgar O'Ballance, *Malaya: The Communist Insurgent War, 1948-60*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), pp.76-7.

⁴³ See, for example, Donald Hamilton, *The Art of Insurgency: American Military Policy and the Failure of Strategy in Southeast Asia*, (Westport, Praeger, 1998), p.54; Gerald de Cruz, 'Correspondence', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, (1)1, March 1970, p.125; Charles B. McLane, *Soviet Strategies in Southeast Asia: An Exploration of Eastern Policy under Lenin and Stalin*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp.390, 399.

⁴⁴ NARA RG59, 846E.00/7-848, W.W. Butterworth, Director of the Far Eastern Division to C.S.Reed, Director of the Southeast Asia Division, 9 July 1948 ('There appears to be little substantiating evidence that the conflict is an extension of the war in China'); PRO PREM 8/1406/2, DO (50)94, 'Political and economic background to the situation in Malaya', 15 November 1950 ('Links with the Chinese Communist Party have been up to the present very tenuous and there is virtually no evidence of direct assistance').

⁴⁵ The following brief overview is drawn from Brimmell, *A Short History of the Malayan Communist Party*; Pye, *Guerilla Communism in Malaya*, Cheah Boon Kheng, *The Masked Comrades: A Study of the Communist United Front in Malaya, 1945-48*, (Singapore: Times Books International, 1979) and Cheah Boon Kheng, *Red Star Over Malaya*, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983).

gained control of sections of the labour movement, including its spearhead, the Malayan General Labour Union. Once the Sino-Japanese war commenced in 1937, the MCP formed 'anti-Japanese' united front organisations within the Chinese community and established new cells in both urban and rural areas. Nevertheless, it lacked a strong mass base and its support never embraced the predominant Malay population.⁴⁶ With the invasion of Malaya in 1942, the Party established the Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) and began to receive arms, ammunition and training from the British to assist its guerrilla activities.⁴⁷ For the first time the MCP had a military 'arm' which, with its experience of guerrilla fighting and operational conditions, was revived in 1948. The MCP emerged from the war, and the jungles, strengthened and more popular: only the savage justice meted out by the MPAJA in mass trials of alleged collaborators and traitors tarnished its reputation as the backbone of Malayan resistance to the Japanese occupation. In Singapore, the 23-year old Chin Peng, the future leader of the illegal MCP for the entire period of the Emergency, marched in a victory parade and was awarded the prestigious Order of the British Empire.⁴⁸

When the British returned to Malaya in late 1945, the MCP acquiesced. Under the authoritative and charismatic leadership of Loi Tek, it pursued not an anti-colonial armed struggle – as did the Vietminh and the Indonesian communists – but 'moderate' policies: it cooperated with the British Military Administration, disarmed and disbanded the MPAJA (each member, once demobilised, received M\$350 and a bag of rice),⁴⁹ and supported a united front strategy of open politics and covert permeation. For the first

⁴⁶ Almost half of the population (44%) was indigenous Malay, more than one third (38%) was Chinese (most imported by the British to work on rubber plantations) and the remainder was of Indian descent. In 1947, of the estimated 12,500 full-time MCP members, only 35 were Malays; 760 were Indian. (P.B.G. Waller, *Notes on the Malayan Emergency: Strategies and Organisation of the Opposing Forces*, Menlo Park, 1968, pp.10-11.)

⁴⁷ The British mission was codenamed Force 136, a small unit within the Far East Special Operations Executive, led by Col. Spencer Chapman.

⁴⁸ He never received this decoration because it arrived from London just after the Malayan Emergency commenced and the award was then cancelled. For Chin Peng's biographical details, see Gene Z. Hanrahan, *The Communist Struggle in Malaya*, New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1954), Appendix 111, p.137.

⁴⁹ However, the MCP retained or buried a significant cache of arms that had been abandoned by the British at the start of the war or obtained from the Japanese at the end of the war. It also withheld about 20% of the wartime drops of arms it had received from the British; these arms were redeployed during the Malayan Emergency.

eighteen months after British reoccupation, the MCP focused on strengthening its prewar eminence in the trade union movement. By 1947 it controlled, through the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions, 214 out of a total 277 registered unions.⁵⁰ This hard-won success became pyrrhic when the leadership of the Party disintegrated. Its internal crisis at a critical historical moment was a central reason for the MCP abandoning peaceful agitation for armed struggle.

On 3 March 1947, on the eve of a specially-convened MCP Central Committee meeting, the Vietnamese-born secretary general, Loi Tek (also known by his peculiar alias ‘Mr Wright’), disappeared. He was never seen again.⁵¹ More significantly he took with him not only a vast knowledge of the Party’s infrastructure but also the bulk of the Party’s considerable funds.⁵² It emerged that he was a triple agent, working for the British Special Branch in Singapore both before and after WW2 *and* collaborating with the Japanese intelligence service (*Kempeitai*) during the war.⁵³ His treason seriously compromised the MCP. The information he supplied led, for example, to the ‘Batu Caves massacre’ in September 1942 when a large number of senior Party members were captured and many beheaded by the Japanese, and to the capture of large supply and ammunition dumps in February 1947 by Selangor police, just weeks before his defection.⁵⁴

Although Chin Peng immediately assumed leadership, the fallout from the Loi Tek affair was both traumatic and enduring; the Party took at least twelve months to recover from

⁵⁰ This was assisted by widely-held economic grievances in the immediate post-war years. In 1946 basic wages were fixed at pre-war scales whilst the cost of living was 300% higher than in the pre-war period. Housing was characterised by high rents, short supply and overcrowding. Official food rations were inadequate and the cost of black market rice was exorbitant.

⁵¹ For a thorough account of the strange case of ‘Mr Wright’, see Anthony Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya 1948-1960*, (London: Frederick Muller, 1975), pp.38-43. See also O’Ballance, *Malaya: The Communist Insurgent War*, p.72; Miller, *Jungle War in Malaya*, pp.34-6; Clutterbuck, *Conflict and Violence*, pp.53-4.

⁵² Loi Tek absconded with approximately M\$350,000 plus many valuables, which created an acute shortage of funds for the MCP. See PRO CO 537/3752, ‘Malaya-Political Intelligence Summary for May 1948’, Minute by D.J. Kirkness, CO Eastern Department.

⁵³ For an account of his activities in the 1930s and during the Japanese occupation, see Pye, *Guerrilla Communism in Malaya*, p.84, n.4; Cheah, *Red Star Over Malaya*, pp.82-100.

⁵⁴ PRO CO 537/3757, H.T. Pagden, to Colonial Office, ‘Appendix 1 – Loi Tek. Communist leader’.

its impact.⁵⁵ These paralysing effects have been documented by others and will not be detailed here.⁵⁶ What is important, in the context of this paper, is that after Loi Tek's defection became known to the MCP rank and file, strong pressure was placed on Chin Peng to repudiate the policies of his discredited patron. These policies, as outlined earlier, were moderate: Loi Tek was the architect of post-war collaboration with the British and peaceful permeation of student and worker organisations. 'But for him', noted a British intelligence report in 1948, 'an attempt would have been made in 1945 or 1946 to organise a more militant campaign by the Communists'.⁵⁷ His presence, in other words, was a powerful barrier to aggressive militancy. His absence opened the door to such militancy. Moreover, he used his role as triple-agent to eliminate actual or potential leadership rivals, and intelligence he provided resulted in the round-up and consequent collapse of the communist leadership in the all-important Party centre in Singapore. Thus he bequeathed a leadership structure characterised by youth, inexperience and ill-discipline. The more radical middle-level cadres, trained in the jungle in WW2, versed in armed resistance and committed to the ideals of the MPAJA, were in the ascendant. Their demands to adopt a more insurrectionary strategy found increasingly receptive ears within the MCP hierarchy. And this was at least six months before the Calcutta conferences.

But there was another reason, again internal to Malaya, for the shift to a more militant posture. It was the interplay between labour unrest and colonial repression. Although the industrial relations of post-war Malaya were highly complex and rarely static, with many variations within and between class, race and region, certain patterns can be discerned.⁵⁸ First, the paternalism of the inter-war years crumpled. 1942 abruptly dismantled one of

⁵⁵ The organisational confusion and internal division in 1947-8 was due to this, not to 'Moscow's failure to provide overall guidance'. (Brimmell, *A Short History*, p.19.)

⁵⁶ See, in particular, Short, *The Communist Insurrection*, pp.41-3.

⁵⁷ PRO CO537/3752, Political Intelligence Journal, 30 June 1948, Serial No. 12/1948, p.443. It was Loi Tek who most strongly argued, at the 8th Plenum of the MCP in January 1946, for the reaffirmation of a reformist rather than revolutionary Party policy.

⁵⁸ For a more comprehensive discussion, see Charles Gamba, *The Origins of Trade Unionism in Malaya: A Study in Colonial Labour Unrest*, (Singapore: Donald Moore, 1960); M.R. Stenson, *Industrial Conflict in Malaya*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) and T.N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). These sources were essential to the sketch that follows.

the most regulated labour regimes in the British Empire. The immediate post-war period, when the labour market was in disarray, found a workforce less compliant, more independent. Estate workers no longer dismounted from their bicycles when a planter passed by; Chinese contract labourers, less bonded to their employers and more mobile, were no longer willing to tolerate exorbitant charges for the necessities of life. Employers bristled at this erosion of labour control but it contributed to rebelliousness and to the rapid growth of unionism.

Second, the popularity, resources and reach of the General Labour Union, re-named the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions (PMFTA) in late 1946, were – by pre-war standards – immense. The activities of the PMFTA were wide-ranging (sponsoring schools, conducting small businesses, industrial negotiation) and its membership base diverse (from itinerant workers, rickshaw drivers, hawkers to contracting gangs and craft guilds). By April 1947 its membership was 263,598, more than 50 per cent of the total workforce. It was legal, constitutional and agitational – and it was controlled by the Communist Party.⁵⁹ In April 1946 the British Military Administration, anxious to restore stability to a restless workforce and an unsettled economy but also to break centralised communist control of the trade union movement, introduced the Trade Unions Ordinance that required the supervision and registration of all trade unions. It enforced this restrictive policy until early 1948 and was the prelude to the final destruction of the PMFTA. Although the PMFTA had organised a successful general strike on 29-30 January 1946, in the face of superior strength and British resolve, it backed away from open conflict. Undoubtedly, the ‘moderate’ hand of Loi Tek also played a role. But some MCP activists were discontented with this lack of revolutionary fervour and their concerns and frustrations were confirmed after the leadership crisis of March 1947. By then, a strike wave was engulfing the country. In the twelve months from April 1947,

⁵⁹ This represented the peak of MCP support; with the outbreak of the Emergency it lost this base and defections and surrenders eroded its full-time membership. An unregistered communist-run body, the Singapore Harbour Labourers Union, was also a bastion of militant power in Singapore, conducting several successful strikes in 1947, a two-day general strike in April 1948 and an abortive May Day rally on 1 May. Along with the PMFTA, it was banned after the amendment to the Trade Union Ordinance at the end of May 1948. See Clutterbuck, *Conflict and Violence*, pp.45-5.

512,000 man-days were lost in Malaya and 205,000 in Singapore.⁶⁰ Many were ‘wild cat’ strikes, initiated without official authorisation and they ebbed and flowed with fluctuations in the labour market. The sources of this industrial unrest were complex and varied and need not concern us here. Suffice it to say it was symptomatic of a momentum from below that both emboldened and propelled the MCP to adopt a more militant, even revolutionary, stance.

Third, the response of employers was unyielding and their actions draconian. They were bitter over the erosion of their paternalistic ‘rights’ over the workforce, fearful of the growing power of the communist-dominated union movement, concerned about productivity and profit margins during a difficult period of post-war reconstruction, and determined to restore stability and order. Thus, they cracked down on labour organisations. In doing so they were assisted – cautiously and perfunctorily in 1945-6; more earnestly in 1947-8 – by the colonial administration. The interests of state and capital coincided insofar as each was committed to the restoration of business confidence and the containment of the politicisation of industrial unrest.⁶¹ Prior to the outbreak of the Malayan Emergency, it was primarily the employers who attempted to re-impose discipline. New employer associations were formed, such as the Incorporated Society of Planters; it recommended flogging, banishment and even execution for ‘vicious malcontents’, ‘agitators’ and other ‘subversive elements’ who masqueraded as adherents of a ‘utopian political faith’.⁶² Words were translated into deeds. As the price of rubber dropped in the winter of 1947, managers exercised their powers of dismissal and applied eviction orders to expel labour activists from their plantations. Attitudes hardened further. During strikes in Kedah in mid-1947 after a substantial wage cut, planters insisted they

⁶⁰ Stenson, *Industrial Conflict in Malaya*, p.200.

⁶¹ There is considerable debate over the extent to which Whitehall and, in particular, the Colonial Office supported employers’ demands, and collaborated with and protected commercial interests in Malaya even as it accepted the argument of a ‘communist plot’. The best analysis of this issue concludes that the Attlee government regarded British employers’ claims as alarmist and self-interested. Moreover, government and business never worked hand-in-glove, as alleged, the first often meeting the second with indifference. Rather, the Labour government provided protection to ensure that Malaya’s dollar-earning capacity was maintained, not to defend the interests of rubber and tin companies. White, *Business, Government, and the End of Empire*, pp.100, 103, 123-4. See also Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds*, p.35. For a contrasting but less persuasive view, see Stenson, *Industrial Conflict in Malaya*, p.169, 233.

⁶² *The Planter*, 23(10), October 1947, pp.241-3.

would negotiate only with contractors, not the unions. Some instituted their own employment regulations that severely circumscribed union activity. Known union activists, or ‘agitators’, were dismissed and non-unionised ‘scab’ labour was employed. On the other side of the divide, strikes were accompanied by ruthless picket action and violent intimidation of strikebreakers. Threats were made on the lives of managers and occasionally these threats materialised. Many managers evacuated their families to Penang. To the European community, therefore, terror was actual as well as implied. Militant activity, inflamed by evictions and growing unemployment, was especially evident in the Sungei Siput area in Perak. It was here, in June 1948, that the murders of three rubber plantation managers triggered the State of Emergency.⁶³

The insurrection in Malaya needs to be seen within this broader context. Three main developments have been identified: an unyielding and repressive ‘national bourgeoisie’ increasingly assisted by local authorities, security forces and the police;⁶⁴ a less malleable, more militant, better organised but still restless workforce; and endemic anxiety and violence on the rural frontier. The MCP was aware of the first, influenced by the second and saw opportunities in the third. From early 1947, these developments converged; by May-June 1948, they collided. Although the MCP was plagued by internal inquisitions in the aftermath of the Loi Tek affair, it was ready to rekindle revolutionary fervour. It was losing its grassroots support in urban areas largely due to the assault on its key ‘front’ organisations by the colonial government, now taking tough action to curb unrest and restore stability.⁶⁵ Its post-war strength in rural areas, where rivalries and internecine conflict between individual estate unions were legion, was limited and undependable.⁶⁶ It therefore embarked upon a rural revolt for which, as we shall see, it

⁶³ For a detailed, if jaundiced, description of these murders, see Harry Miller, *The Communist Menace in Malaya* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1955), 81-4.

⁶⁴ For the debilitated state of the Malayan Police Force, until August 1948, see A.J. Stockwell, ‘Policing during the Malayan Emergency, 1948-60: communism, communalism and decolonisation’, in David. M. Anderson and David Killingray, *Policing and Decolonisation: Politics, Nationalism and the Police, 1917-65*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp.108-111 and Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds*, pp.35-6.

⁶⁵ Especially active in imposing control was the newly-arrived and hard-line Commissioner for Labour, R.G. Naughton.

⁶⁶ As the Political Bureau of the MCP later lamented, ‘Owing to the then incorrect line followed by our Party, we abandoned a major part of our peasant associations during the period of peace following the Japanese surrender’. Cited in Hanrahan, *The Communist Struggle in Malaya*, p.58.

was ill-prepared. But its options were few: it was either the jail or the jungle. None of these developments was determined or shaped by factors external to Malaya. This is significant in the light of contemporary and historiographical judgements about Soviet ‘instructions’ to revolt remitted via the Calcutta conferences of February-March 1948. It is to this international dimension that we now turn.

Cominform, Calcutta and Sharkey

Although it is an overstatement that the MCP had ‘little, if any, connexion with the outside world’,⁶⁷ the Party was on the periphery of the international communist movement. The records of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), for example - particularly its Political Committee and Executive Committee - contain only fleeting, almost incidental, references to ‘The Situation in Malaya’.⁶⁸ This paucity of contact - surprising, given Malaya’s importance to British imperialism - also was evident in the discussions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), a Party more geographically proximate.⁶⁹ Despite its comparative isolation, however, we can assume that the MCP was fully aware of Andrei Zhdanov’s widely-distributed keynote speech to the inaugural conference of the Cominform, held in the small town of Szklarska Poremba, Poland, in September 1947.⁷⁰ The most famous thesis of his report was that the world was divided into ‘two camps’: a peace-loving, progressive camp led by the Soviet Union, and a war-mongering, imperialist camp led by the United States.⁷¹ Zhdanov had

⁶⁷ Joseph Frankel, ‘Soviet Policy in South East Asia’, in Max Beloff, *Soviet Policy in the Far East*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p.230. Furthermore, Frankel adds, until the Emergency ‘the Soviet press virtually ignored Malaya, devoting to it only casual communiqués’.

⁶⁸ CPGB Archives, Labour History and Archive Centre, Manchester, CP/CENT/EC/01. Similarly Malaya rarely featured in the international section (written by the Indian-born CPGB theoretician Palme Dutt) of *News and Views*. Short (*The Communist Insurrection in Malaya*, p.44) likewise refers to the ‘lukewarm interest of the British Communist Party in Malayan affairs’ in 1947.

⁶⁹ Records of the CPA, Mitchell Library, Sydney, ML MSS 5021. In the post-war period the CPA was far more concerned, regionally, with the Indonesian struggle for independence in the Dutch East Indies.

⁷⁰ The speech was printed in the first issue of a Cominform publication, *For a Lasting Peace, For a People’s Democracy!* The Australian Communist Party, *inter alia*, received several thousand copies free of charge either in late 1947 or early 1948. Personal conversation with Bernie Taft, director of Marx House (1947-51), 3 March 2001. (Marx House was the educational ‘branch’ of the CPA; Taft was later Victorian State Secretary and joint National Secretary of the CPA during the Party’s embrace of Euro-communism.)

⁷¹ The words ‘two camps’ were missing from the drafts of Zhdanov’s speech (contained in his personal archive in Moscow). It seems that Stalin, notorious for vetting speeches even (or especially) of leading CPSU ideologues and Politbureau members like Zhdanov, introduced this concept in the final version. Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev*, (Cambridge, Ma.:Harvard University Press, 1996), p.133.

Europe, not Asia in his sights. The underlying intention was to give the ‘required rigidity to the future structure of the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe’;⁷² his speech said much about Yugoslavia and little about the colonies. Nevertheless, it signalled the beginning of an aggressive hard-line approach faithfully adopted by most western communist parties. This approach, reminiscent of the Comintern’s ‘class-against-class’ period in 1929-32, lasted until the early 1950s. It was doctrinaire in analysis, unrealistic in expectations, self-delusory and, ultimately, self-defeating. It also formed part of the backdrop to Calcutta.

It is difficult to determine with any precision how far the two Calcutta conferences acted as transmission belts of the Cominform ‘two camp’ doctrine to Southeast Asia. Undoubtedly the new militant line was espoused. Colonial regimes sustained by the French, Dutch and British were slotted into the pro-imperialist camp; the united front was jettisoned; neutral nationalism and all forms of class collaboration were denounced; and anti-colonial struggles were henceforward to be led exclusively by communists. Only the first conference – that organised jointly by the World Federation of Democratic Youth and the International Union of Students – was attended by the Malay delegation, and that delegation consisted of only one relatively junior cadre, Li Siong, president of the Malayan New Democratic Youth League, a MCP ‘front’ organisation.⁷³ He was chosen, apparently, because of his good command of English but he was an ineffective intermediary for the Cominform: he did not arrive back in Singapore until 22 March 1948, after the crucial 4th Plenum of the MCP.⁷⁴ The sole systematic analysis of this conference argues that

The main point made by the conference – that there could be no compromise in the struggle against imperialism – could have lead easily to the conclusion that the

⁷² Ibid. See ch.4 (‘Zhdanov and the Origins of the Eastern Bloc’) for an illuminating discussion of the genesis of the Cominform.

⁷³ Thus, the delegation did not consist of, as Barber loosely claims, ‘Communist Party chiefs’. Noel Barber, *The War of the Running Dogs: How Malaya Defeated the Communist Guerillas, 1948-60*, (London: Collins, 1971), p.34. It has been suggested that the MCP sent only one delegate due to ‘lack of funds’. Ian Morrison, ‘The Communist Uprising in Malaya’, p.282. This is probably correct since, as noted above, Loi Tek’s departure had plunged the Party into penury.

⁷⁴ After Calcutta, he attended a congress in Rangoon sponsored by the Burmese Communist Party. The 4th Plenum of the MCP is discussed below.

only remaining path was that of armed struggle...[T]he militant tone displayed by the Calcutta Conference may well have given encouragement and added prestige to the more extreme elements among the Southeast Asian Communists. Later...they could look on the conference's declarations as an ideological justification for their decisions to try the way of violence.⁷⁵

But conclusions drawn and justifications provided must be delineated from causal connections. Despite the virtual simultaneity and alleged synchronicity of insurrection in Burma, Malaya, Indonesia and the Philippines, the impact of Calcutta was highly differential. It had most relevance to the Burmese delegates and least effect on the 'most unsympathetic', non-communist Philippine delegation.⁷⁶ McVey emphasises the absence of any documentary evidence of the promulgation or passing of secret instructions at the conference, the unsuitability of such a broad-based conference for the transmission of highly confidential instructions, and the existence of internal conditions, before Calcutta, that fostered insurrectionary inclinations within Southeast Asian communist parties. She concludes:

The opportunity and incentive for Communist rebellion were already present in the countries where revolt occurred. It thus does not seem likely that the two-camp message lit the revolutionary spark in Southeast Asia, though it may well have added extra tinder which caused it to burn into flame.⁷⁷

In relation to Malaya, therefore, it would appear that by March 1948 the MCP was cognisant of, and perhaps fortified by, both the Zhdanov line and the revolutionary fires burning in neighbouring countries, especially China and Indo-China. But there is little evidence that its strategies were dictated by the CPSU or by any external directive; that – as Brimmell alleges – 'Moscow's instructions were adopted'.⁷⁸ Rather, there was a *conjunction* between international trends and domestic pressures. The lessons from outside were consistent with developments from within; they fitted in with Malayan facts. But what of that external emissary, L.L. Sharkey?

⁷⁵ Ruth T. McVey, *The Calcutta Conference and the Southeast Asian Uprisings*, (New York: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project Interim Report Series, 1958), p.16.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, pp.20, 23. McVey suggests (p.21) that the two-camp thesis was adopted by the Burmese communists 'well before' the Calcutta conference.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p.24.

⁷⁸ Brimmell, *A Short History*, p.19.

Once again there is no extant documentary evidence indicating the nature of the secret discussions Sharkey conducted with the leadership of the MCP during his two week 'stopover' in Singapore on his way home to Sydney after attending both Calcutta conferences.⁷⁹ Certainly Lance Sharkey, far more so than his counterpart in London, Harry Pollitt, found the tough, doctrinaire line very congenial.⁸⁰ His politics were as hard as granite: he was a Stalinist. And certainly the Moscow-trained, Comintern-installed Sharkey, general secretary of the CPA since 1929, carried immense authority.⁸¹ But ideological elucidation and verbal encouragement of anti-colonial struggle is not the same as carrying instructions 'on behalf of Stalin'.⁸² If Chin Peng himself, fifty years after the event, is a reliable source, the role of Sharkey must be downplayed. He recently acknowledged that Sharkey influenced the tactics of the MCP, but insisted, unequivocally, that he had not shaped or determined their strategy.⁸³ It would appear, then, that Sharkey gave advice, clarification and his imprimatur but left the question of a Malayan uprising to local decision.⁸⁴ If so, one of the central props of the conspiracy theory collapses. This theory presupposes outside orchestration and denies local agency:

⁷⁹ However, one former communist and member of the CPA Victorian State Executive, Cecil Sharpley, wrote: 'Sharkey told us, too, how he had been commissioned by the Cominform representatives at the Indian Congress to convey decisions to the Malayan Communists'. Cecil Sharpley, *The Great Delusion: The Autobiography of an Ex-Communist Leader*, (London: William Heinemann, 1952), p.111. Yet Sharpley is a highly unreliable source and his book full of errors and inconsistencies. He defected from the CPA in April 1949, sold his 'revelations' to the Melbourne *Herald*, precipitated a Royal Commission into Communism (1949-50) - which largely exonerated the Party from his allegations - and collaborated closely with the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, one of whose officers 'ghost' wrote this autobiography. See PRO FO 1110/211, 'Communism in Australia', E.J. Williams, High Commissioner for the UK in Australia, to Foreign Office, 29 November 1949.

⁸⁰ Relations between the CPA and CPGB were acrimonious from the beginning of 1948, the latter being publicly attacked by the CPA Central Committee Secretariat for its 'right wing deviationism' and class collaboration. See *World News and Views*, 7 August 1948, pp.332-4.

⁸¹ See Stuart Macintyre, *The Communist Party of Australia: from Origins to Illegality* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), pp.169, 286. Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds*, p.60, incorrectly describes Sharkey as 'valuable'. See Macintyre, p.361, for a description of his 'leaden' oratory.

⁸² Gerald de Cruz, 'Correspondence', p.125. De Cruz, a high-ranking member of the MCP, later an apostate, incorrectly calls Sharkey 'Len' but recalls him 'dotting the i's and crossing the t's of the decisions arrived at by the [Calcutta] Conference'. *Ibid.*

⁸³ The occasion was a two-day conference at the Australian National University in Canberra in February 1999. See *The Australian*, 15 March 1999, p.13.

⁸⁴ This is supported by Thompson and Adloff, *The Left Wing in Southeast Asia*, p.154. Sharkey made no secret of his long-standing interest in Malaya; see his forward to Walter Blaschke, *Freedom for Malaya*, (Sydney: Current Book Distributors, [1947]).

the MCP was ordered into the jungle as part of an Asian revolutionary strategy developed in Moscow, set in motion at Calcutta, and dictated by Sharkey in Singapore.

Countdown to insurrection?

Even allowing for the absence of external direction in the events of mid-1948, was there nevertheless a clearly-formulated plan for revolt? Were the murders at Sungei Siput part of this plan? And was there a point at which the MCP decided on insurrection? The received wisdom suggests there was. Hanrahan asserts that once the 'strategic doctrines and tactical directives [were] laid out', the MCP began 'their plan of chaos'.⁸⁵ Pye refers to 'a coordinated plan'; O'Ballance to a 'mapped out programme'; Miller to a 'blueprint for victory'; Brimmell to a 'fateful decision'; McLane to a 'plan of struggle'; Clutterbuck to 'launching the armed struggle'; Jackson to a 'carefully orchestrated' offensive; and Purcell to 'central planning and direction' by 'a Central Bureau in close touch with the Central Executive Committee'.⁸⁶ These judgements were therefore consistent with MacDonald's 'sober statement of fact', cited earlier, that the 'present terrorist outbreak' was 'part of a deliberate plan' to stage revolution and capture government.⁸⁷ The accepted interpretation in Malayan Emergency historiography, therefore, assumes centralised planning and coordinated decision-making. Interestingly, one of the few observers in Malaya, who was more circumspect and sceptical than those to whom he spoke, was the US Consul, William Blue. Separating conjecture from confirmation, he wrote that he had 'as yet seen no documentary proof that the present campaign against the Government is "Communist-inspired" as the [British] authorities describe it'.⁸⁸

The 'documentary proof', when alluded to in the Malayan Emergency literature, is usually the three resolutions of the 4th Plenum of the Central Committee of the MCP

⁸⁵ Hanrahan, *The Communist Struggle in Malaya*, p.65.

⁸⁶ Pye, *Guerilla Communism in Malaya*, p.84; O'Ballance, *Malaya: The Communist Insurgent War*, p.76; Harry Miller, *Jungle War in Malaya: The Campaign against Communism, 1948-60*, (London: Arthur Baker, 1972), p.38; Brimmell, *A Short History*, p.19; McLane, *Soviet Strategies in Southeast Asia*, p.385; Clutterbuck, *Conflict and Violence*, p.167; Jackson, *The Malayan Emergency*, p. 13; Purcell, *Malaya: Communist or Free*, p.132.

⁸⁷ NARA RG59, 846E.00/7-948. Text transmitted to Department of State, 9 July 1948. See also PRO 371/116939, 'Note on the situation in Malaya', [p.1], 23 February 1955, for a similar viewpoint.

⁸⁸ NARA RG59, 846E.00/10-2448, Blue to Acheson, 24 October 1948, Confidential Dispatch No.44, 'Progress Made in Campaign Against Terrorism in the Federation', p.3.

which met in Singapore from 17-21 March. This was the meeting at which L.L. Sharkey spoke. One resolution emphasised the need to restore party discipline in the wake of the Loi Tek defection. The other two were more fundamental. The first stated that the fight for independence from British imperialism must ultimately take the form of a ‘people’s revolutionary war’; the second that the masses prepare themselves for ‘an uncompromising struggle for independence without regard to considerations of legality’.⁸⁹ The resolutions were about intentions: they emphasised the need to *prepare for*, not precipitate, rebellion. As Stubbs argues,

there was no clear-cut call to take up arms, move into the jungle, and initiate the armed struggle immediately. The intent of the decisions taken at the Fourth Plenary Session seems to have been to increase the type of pressure already being exerted on the Government. However, the message was obviously open to interpretation, and the resulting confusion says much about the inexperience and lack of discipline at the top and the impetuosity and lack of discipline in the lower ranks of the Party. The leadership found it impossible to co-ordinate their campaign and control the actions of the rank and file.⁹⁰

Thus, clarity, discipline and coordination, as well as an explicit revolutionary programme – normally the *sin qua non* of successful insurrection – were absent. The militancy of the 4th Plenum was less a turning point, as alleged, than a benchmark along an evolving path on which the MCP since 1947 had already trodden.⁹¹ In retrospect, it appears that the MCP anticipated a prolonged period of increasingly combative activity in which both legal and illegal tactics would be employed. The ruthlessness of British repression - first in outlawing the all-important PMFTU, then in introducing draconian State of Emergency regulations - was unexpected. Indeed, the timing of the Emergency took the MCP by surprise.⁹² Consequently, its plans to go underground were *ad hoc*, its retreat to the jungles panicky and its switch from urban to rural revolt confused. It caught its ‘front’ organisations off-balance and left them leaderless and isolated. In this sense, the decision

⁸⁹ Cited in McLane, *Soviet Strategies*, p.386. The author had access to unpublished translations of the 4th Plenum documents.

⁹⁰ Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds*, p.61.

⁹¹ In the vanguard was an increasingly ascendant militant wing and an increasingly restless rank and file disillusioned with the united front strategy. By 1948 those MCP leaders wary of armed struggle were starting to be marginalised.

⁹² For example, prominent MCP union organisers, including Balan (a member of the Central Executive), Kurup and Krishnamurthi, were arrested as they were preparing to go underground.

to mobilise for guerrilla warfare was accelerated by, and partly in response to, the severity of government action during May and June. To suggest carefully-planned strategy, coordinated by a highly centralised party structure is mistaken. There is, indeed, strong evidence to suggest that the murders of the three European planters at Sungei Siput on 16 June were not authorised or sanctioned by the MCP leadership, but carried out by a local communist guerrilla unit acting on its own initiative.⁹³

The inchoate character of the insurgency was confirmed by British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia, Malcolm MacDonald. MacDonald had been perhaps the strongest and most persuasive voice behind the British Cabinet's earlier decision to outlaw the MCP in July. On 14 October, he briefed a top secret meeting of the Russia Committee in London. His assessment, unintentionally, questions the veracity of the accepted historical judgement as well as providing us with a revealing insight into the MCP's weaknesses. He stated that the communists in Malaya

had failed because they had not been extreme enough. Murder on a larger scale and sabotage of railways, mines and broadcasting stations might have been very successful ...[But] the Communists were, in fact, amateurs drawn from the ranks of unskilled Chinese bandits (not Moscow-trained revolutionaries) and had not possessed the determination required to carry out such an ambitious plan...They had never been able to set up a central control of the insurrection...[A]rms and ammunition were running short and there were no fresh supplies of ammunition or recruits reaching the insurgents from outside the country.⁹⁴

Mac Donald believed that had British military operations occurred in open country rather than the jungle, 'six weeks would have been sufficient' to defeat the uprising. Whilst he did not provide the Committee with any timeline for success, the tenor of his remarks conveyed optimism: 'at present British forces were engaged in exterminating them [the MCP] in isolated groups'.⁹⁵

⁹³ See Ian Morrison, 'The Communist Uprising in Malaya', p.285. Similarly, Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds*, p.61, refers to 'lower level cadres' taking matters 'into their own hands'. According to Chin Peng, the murders were a 'mistake'. Interview with John Davis, who commanded the British mission (Force 136) with the MCP during WW2. Cited in Clutterbuck, *Conflict and Violence*, p.168.

⁹⁴ PRO FO 1110/33, Minutes of meeting of Russia Committee, 14 October 1948.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Conclusion

Six weeks, of course, stretched into twelve years. Despite their various internal problems, their lack of external assistance,⁹⁶ and their half-cocked slide into armed struggle, the MCP insurgents were able to develop a base, drawing on residual support from non-Kuomintang sections of the Chinese rural population, from which to conduct guerrilla operations. As the US acting Secretary of State noted at the end of 1948: 'In Malaya, the British with up to 50,000 troops under arms have been able to eliminate only about 500 guerrillas, this in the course of an eight months campaign'.⁹⁷ The inability to 'eliminate' the guerrilla force continued to cause frustration in London. In March 1950 the Minister of Defence informed the Prime Minister how 'very disturbed' he was by the 'grave' situation in Malaya.⁹⁸ In May 1950 the Cabinet Malaya Committee was told to expect 'for a very considerable time...a rapid recrudescence of terrorist activity' and of 'the danger of relaxing security precautions and of prematurely withdrawing troops'.⁹⁹ Indeed, anxiety and aggravation became intense after the insurgents ambushed and assassinated the British High Commissioner, Sir Henry Gurney, in October 1951. And that month saw the highest security force casualties since 1949. A 1957 internal report was therefore quite accurate when it stated: 'There is no doubt that in the first two years of its activities the CTO [Communist Terrorist Organisation] was a very real threat to the security and economic recovery of Malaya after the war'.¹⁰⁰

But the forces were not evenly matched. From 1949 the Attlee and Churchill administrations authorised immense increases in expenditure, military personnel and American weaponry. In 1950, the Secretary of State for War declared: 'I do not believe

⁹⁶ As a joint Colonial Office-Foreign Office memorandum in December 1949 noted, 'The Chinese Communist Government must be distinguished from the Communist terrorist movement in Malaya, and it should not be suggested that the latter receives any aid from the [former]'. PRO CO 537/6089, no. 17, 'Attitude to be adopted toward communism in Malaya and China'. However, news filtering through to Malaya from China throughout 1949 was, undoubtedly, a source of encouragement. Chinese communist forces took Beijing in January 1949, Nanjing in April and Shanghai in May. Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949.

⁹⁷ *FRUS*, 761.00/12-1748, 1948(6), p.615, cable, 30 December 1948.

⁹⁸ PRO CAB 21/2510, no. 1A, Shinwell to Atlee, 27 March 1950. Shinwell successfully pushed for the creation of a Cabinet Malaya Committee, which met regularly throughout 1950.

⁹⁹ PRO CAB 21/1681, MAL C(50)23, Appendix, para. 28, 24 May 1950.

¹⁰⁰ NAA A452/2, 1968/4248, 'Review of the Emergency in Malaya from June 1948 to August 1957 by the Director of Operations, Malaya' (Secret), p.7.

that the Army alone, as such, can finish them off. In order to finish them off we have got to have a large military effort...and an equally large police and administrative and political effort'.¹⁰¹ So the counter-insurgency employed a range of strategies and fought on a number of fronts. Three examples will suffice. First, a 'hearts and minds' campaign, adapted to local conditions, was initiated by General Sir Gerald Templer, the British High Commissioner from February 1952.¹⁰² It cut the umbilical cord between the MCP and their sources of food, recruitment and intelligence. By isolating the insurgents from their support base, their vulnerability to the military operations of the security forces was increased. Second, major 'population control' was undertaken: over 50,000 Chinese 'squatters' were relocated, nearly 450 'New Villages' were created, and mass deportations of detainees undertaken. Third, aerial warfare was refined: 'safe conduct' passes accompanied by seductive promises of monetary rewards were dropped to encourage or accelerate defections. Aerial drops of millions of 'strategic' leaflets, including handwritten letters, together with photographs, from surrendered guerrillas, were used in conjunction with 'voice-aircraft' to personalise propaganda¹⁰³ (see attached documents). Also dropped were 1000 lb bombs, chemical defoliants and napalm on or near jungle camps, usually by the Royal Australian Air Force.¹⁰⁴ And, of course, air power provided mobility and conquered distance: troops could be delivered, supplied, evacuated and relocated against insurgents who had retreated into deep, mountainous jungle.¹⁰⁵ Fourth, an efficient, synchronised intelligence apparatus was developed: the Special Branch was restructured and given a large budget to pay informers, and sophisticated 'black' propaganda and 'psyops' were coordinated by MI6 and the

¹⁰¹ PRO CAB 21/1681, MAL C950021, Memorandum from John Strachey to Malaya Committee, 'The military situation in Malaya', 17 June 1950.

¹⁰² Templer invented and popularised the term, 'hearts and minds' which, fifteen years later, he referred to as 'that nauseating phrase'. *Straits Times*, 27 March 1968, cited in Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds*, p.1. See John Coates, *Suppressing Insurgency: An Analysis of the Malayan Emergency, 1948-1954*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), ch.5 for a detailed discussion of Templer's impact.

¹⁰³ See Clutterbuck, *The Long, Long War*, ch.12; Kumar Ramakrishna, 'Content, Credibility and Context: Propaganda, Government Surrender Policy and the Malayan Communist Terrorist Mass Surrenders of 1958', *Intelligence and National Security*, 14(4), 1999, pp.242-66.

¹⁰⁴ See PRO CAB 129/48, C(51)59, Cabinet memorandum, 21 December 1951, Appendix V11, 'Chemical defoliation'; *Age* (Melbourne), 23 November 1955.

¹⁰⁵ See Alan Hoe and Eric Morris, *Re-enter the SAS: The Special Air Service and the Malayan Emergency*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1994), pp. 118-33; Malcolm Postgate, *Operation Firedog: Air Support in the Malayan Emergency 1948-60*, (London: HMSO, 1992).

Information Research Department from Phoenix Park in Singapore.¹⁰⁶ The efficacy of each of these strategies in defeating the communist insurgency in Malaya continues to be a source of considerable debate.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, it is clear that their combined impact was profound. In 1955, Chin Peng offered, in vain, to negotiate a settlement; in 1958, the MCP demobilised, and in 1960 Chin Peng, still with a large price on his head, and a small nucleus regrouped near the Malay-Thai border where they hid, trained new cadres and carried out hit-and-run guerrilla attacks along the northern Malay peninsula for the next twenty five years. A final peace agreement was eventually signed on 2 December 1989.

An unintended legacy of the Malayan Emergency was its role as a counter-insurgency model. British strategies attracted close attention from the Americans anxious to apply its supposed lessons to the worsening situation in Vietnam. US army officers attended the jungle-warfare training school in Johore; the ‘hearts and minds’ campaign was translated into that ugly euphemism, ‘pacification’; and ‘strategic hamlets’ dotted the South Vietnamese countryside in imitation of the Malayan ‘New Villages’. But the British had been conducting internal security operations very similar to counter-insurgency that stretched back through Palestine (1936-9) to the civil war in Ireland (1919-21) and, before then, the Boer War (1899-1902).¹⁰⁸ They developed not only methods for defeating insurgents, but principles from which those methods were drawn. It is arguable that the US had difficulty duplicating British strategy because it was unable or unwilling to learn patiently those principles based, as they were, on long experience. As Sir Robert Thompson, who served in Malaya throughout the Emergency and headed the British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam, noted: ‘many Americans made studies of the British

¹⁰⁶ See Richard J. Aldrich (ed.), *Espionage, security and intelligence in Britain, 1945-1970*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), documents 12.2 – 12.4, pp. 163-167; Brian Stewart, ‘Winning in Malaya: An Intelligence Success Story’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 14(4), 1999, pp.267-83; R.W. Komer, *The Malayan Emergency in Retrospect: Organization of a Successful Counterinsurgency Effort*, (Advanced Research Projects Agency, RAND: Santa Monica, Ca., 1972), pp. 69-75.

¹⁰⁷ See Karl Hack, ‘“Iron Claws on Malaya”: The Historiography of the Malayan Emergency’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 30(1), March 1999, pp.99-125. Hack focuses on Briggs’ resettlement policies and Templer’s ‘hearts and minds’ policies, not on the under-researched area of intelligence and covert propaganda operations.

¹⁰⁸ See Thomas R. Mockaitis, ‘Low-Intensity Conflict: The British Experience’, *Conflict Quarterly*, 13(1), Winter 1993, pp.7-16. The British army also suppressed insurgencies in Somaliland (1919), Iraq (1920) and Burma (1931). For the lessons it learnt from counterinsurgency in Palestine and applied in Malaya, see Neal M. Lever, *Counterinsurgency in Palestine and Malaya*, (Providence: Brown University, 1975 [Monographs on National Security]). Pp.1-29.

success during the Emergency in Malaya but these were largely superficial...It was never comprehended as a whole'.¹⁰⁹ Certainly the US had sent marines to suppress insurgents in the Philippines and several Caribbean and Central American countries (Cuba, Vera Cruz, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Honduras and Nicaragua) from 1898 to the mid 1930s. But, unlike the British efforts in Malaya, it rarely integrated political, psychological and socio-economic initiatives with a limited use of firepower in military operations. As Beckett suggests,

in the 1940s, the United States was no more interested in counter-insurgency than in the past. Twenty years later when the administration of John F. Kennedy wanted a modern counter-insurgency doctrine, little had changed and much had been forgotten.¹¹⁰

Metz provides one clue to this military amnesia: 'Rather than use the 1950s to hone their understanding of insurgency, policymakers and senior military leaders ignored the hard-earned wisdom of America's allies'.¹¹¹ It is possible, therefore, that military defeat in Vietnam was, at least in small measure, part of the price the US paid for standing aloof from the region when those murders in Sungei Siput in June 1948 made Britain so anxious to secure an American involvement.

¹⁰⁹ Robert Thompson, *No Exit From Vietnam*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), p.131. One RAND expert, who believed that 'much that was done in Malaya' should have been 'stressed more heavily in Vietnam', lamented in February 1972 that 'it is painful to read British critiques of U.S. performance in Vietnam in the light of Britain's own experience in Malaya.' R.W. Komer, *The Malayan Emergency in Retrospect: Organization of a Successful Counterinsurgency Effort*, p.82.

¹¹⁰ Ian Beckett, 'The United States Experience', in Ian F.W. Beckett (ed.), *The Roots of Counter-insurgency: Armies and Guerrilla Warfare, 1900-1945*, (London: Blandford, 1988), p.124.

¹¹¹ Steven Metz, *Counterinsurgency: Strategy and the Phoenix of American Capability*, (US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute [Carlisle Barracks, Pa.], 1995), p.6