

*Doomed from the Start: a New Perspective on the  
Malayan Insurgency*

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## ***Chapter 1: Introduction***

The Malayan Emergency has had a massive impact on a world that is generally ignorant of its very occurrence. For twelve years, the United Kingdom fought a jungle war against communist insurgents in Southeast Asia. At first glance, the similarities to an American experience have seemed so great that the Emergency has been referred to as the “British Vietnam”. However, there is at least one important difference: the British won. This difference has made the Emergency a topic of intense interest for military and political historians. With the proliferation of guerrilla conflicts in the second half of the century, researchers have attempted to mine the Malayan Emergency for examples of successful counterinsurgency tactics. Thus the British have been complimented for their propaganda, military organization and leadership during the Emergency; each author attempting to prove the value of a particular factor to the British victory. All of these studies have, however, been flawed. Each author has been guilty of defective logic because each makes the assumption that it was the actions of the British that lead to the defeat of the Communist insurgency. This view is borrowed from the historians who first documented the story of the Emergency, before and immediately after the conflict’s conclusion.

The earliest biographers of the Malayan Emergency were men who had directly experienced the conflict. Robert Thompson was a military administrator during the insurrection; Richard Clutterbuck was a Brigadier General in the British Army; Edgar O’Balance was a war correspondent. Harry Miller actually named his first book *Menace in Malaya* and dedicated his second to men and women who “outwitted the communist army.”<sup>1</sup> Each author was British and, whether because of bias or misconception, gave credit to the British for winning the war. To this day, these authors have generally defined any conversation about the Emergency.

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Miller, *Jungle War in Malaya: the Campaign against Communism 1948-60*. (Bristol: Bristol Typesetting Co. Ltd., 1972).

The world would have to wait more than 40 years, long after the insurgents emerged from the jungle, to hear a different opinion. Writing in 2003, the man who led the failed revolution as Secretary General of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) finally responded to the assertions of that had gone unopposed for half a century. Chin Peng took it upon himself to dismiss the idea that the British had achieved victory through greater strategy or leadership. Surprisingly, he assigned responsibility for the rebellion's defeat to himself and the CPM in general. It was his failures—and the failures of those around him—that led to the revolution's collapse. His argument weaves a tale of political mistakes and military ineptitude that leaves communist revolutionary theories unblemished, perhaps intentionally. The CPM's defeat should not be seen as a victory over Maoist theories, he insists, but instead the result of his own shortcomings. This opinion is also shared by the journal, *A War to Win*, a self proclaimed Marxist-Leninist-Maoist publication. In light of this new argument, it has become much more difficult to confidently assign responsibility for the Emergency's outcome. The question that remains: was it British proficiency or Communists' ineptitude that caused the rebellion to fail?

This question can be answered, but only by revealing a third variable to the equation. Neither the British nor the CPM deserve responsibility for the end of the insurrection. A close examination of the history of the Emergency shows instead that, although opportunities existed previously, the outcome of the rebellion was decided in the years leading up to the start of hostilities and in the first days of conflict. There was no brilliant strategy that won the war for the British, nor was there a catastrophic decision that doomed the CPM. The revolution's failure was inevitable just days after it started, if not earlier.

Skeptics will no doubt question this logic. How can it be argued that events could never have produced a different result? How can impossibility ever be proven? In truth, it cannot. Of

course, scenarios can be imagined in which the communist movement would be successful. It was theoretically *possible* that the British would flee Malaya at the first sign of casualties and hand over the government to Chin Peng. However, such scenarios were so unlikely that they can be dismissed as at least statistically impossible. Yet, it is not the intention of this work to get bogged down in discussions of what could have been. Instead, I will focus on the circumstances as they actually were. A picture will be painted, one aspect at a time, which portrays to the reader the many conditions that opposed revolution in 1948. Piece by piece, we will assemble each of these dooming factors that, together, made the communist rebellion an inevitable failure.

While there is not much chance that my conclusions will end the debate over who won or lost the Emergency, I hope they will provide a caution to those comparativists who seek to learn from the Malayan experience and apply it to other conflicts. The Malayan Emergency was a unique event, full of remarkable occurrences and intrigues. Attempting to apply its history to the world outside the peninsula is a risky enterprise.

The following pages will first introduce the background for the Emergency itself by outlining the history of Communism in Malaya. In relating this chronology, Chapter 2 describes the opportunities for revolution that existed prior to the Emergency but were never explored. The setting established, Chapter 3 relates the events that lead to the Emergency Declaration and the immediate aftermath, setting the stage for the rest of the paper. With this backdrop in place, we are ready to give an account of the many factors that doomed the CPM to failure.

Chapter 4 describes the racial divide in Malaya that prejudiced the Malay majority against the guerrilla movement. Chapter 5 displays the devastating losses in leadership that the Communists sustained and could never overcome. In Chapter 6, an overview of economic circumstances demonstrates Malaya's infertile ground for revolution. Examining the logistical

and geographical challenges of guerrilla warfare in Malaya, Chapters 7 and 8 discuss the inevitable shortcomings that lead to military and political defeat. Chapter 9 focuses on the communists' inability to restrain the counterproductive attacks that undermined their popular support. Propaganda is discussed in Chapters 10 and 11. The former relates the Communists' lack of communication with the masses, while the latter discusses the bias of the media back in Britain.

With the evidence laid out, Chapter 12 begins the process of drawing the individual strands of proof together. In this chapter, I discuss the historiography of the Emergency in the context of the information that has been related. Finally, Chapter 13 proposes the true lessons to be learned from the Malayan Emergency and attempts to devise a new legacy for this misunderstood episode in human history.

## ***Chapter 2: Opportunities Lost***

The Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) was officially formed in the waning days of April, 1930. Local leaders convened outside a small town in Negri Sembilan, along with delegates from China and Vietnam. Included in the gathering was Ho Chi Minh, who Chin Peng recalls in his memoirs. The Party initially concentrated its efforts on organizing unions in Malaya's larger cities.<sup>2</sup> The CPM's first decade was not a happy time, as we will see; the communist organization was rocked by betrayal and constant hounding by the authorities. Due to these difficulties, the CPM would cease activities for years at a time during the Thirties. Unfortunately, the following decade would only see increased danger for the Party. Yet, despite these enervating events, we will see that there were at least two very real opportunities for a successful revolution before the CPM embarked on their doomed insurrection in 1948.

On December 8 1941, the Japanese invaded the peninsula. Landing on Malaya's northeastern coast, they quickly maneuvered their units south towards Singapore. Skirmishes with British troops only delayed the inevitable. On January 31, the remaining Commonwealth forces fled across the Straits of Johore to make their last stand on the island city. There, British troops defended the beaches for two weeks, until overwhelming firepower and flagging morale forced them to capitulate.<sup>3</sup>

During the ensuing four years of annexation, the CPM would try its hand at guerrilla operations. Before the Japanese victory was secured, the Communist Party established the Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA).<sup>4</sup> Theoretically assisted in planning and supplied by clandestine British agents, the MPAJA was, in reality, left on its own to harass the

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<sup>2</sup> Chin Peng, *My Side of History*. (Singapore: Media Masters Pte. Ltd., 2003), 57.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>4</sup> Chin Peng, 67; Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: the Lessons of Malaya and Veitnam*. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1966), 14.

invaders. British support took until February 1, 1945 to materialize.<sup>5</sup> In the intervening time, the communists were the only resistive force challenging the Japanese.<sup>6</sup>

The CPM's struggle against the occupying forces would cost it dearly. The Kempetai, the Japanese Military Police, waged a brutal campaign against the MPAJA and its supporters. Supplemented by information from at least one key spy, the Kempetai inflicted especially debilitating losses upon the CPM's leadership. Such casualties impaired the MPAJA's effectiveness, but the communists fought on. While it never threatened to precipitate withdrawal, the guerrilla campaign against the Japanese clearly inspired and informed the subsequent conflict.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Japanese Surrender and British Reinvasion: Opportunity 1***

As the tide of World War II began to turn against the Axis, the CPM made plans for its resurgence. From their communications with British operatives, the Communists learned of the Allies' preparations to liberate Malaya. Her Majesty's Government was eager to reincorporate its most profitable colony but was anxious about the strength of Japanese defenses. The British requested that the MPAJA's support the invasion by sabotaging the roads and railways supporting the Japanese supply lines.<sup>8</sup> The Communists accepted the assignment in return for weapons and equipment, but they maintained entirely independent objectives from those of the British.

In the Allied invasion, the CPM saw a golden opportunity. As the British battled the entrenched Japanese, control over Malaya would temporarily be in doubt. In this period of political uncertainty, the Communists would move to fill the vacuum. The moment the invasion

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<sup>5</sup> Chin Peng, 113.

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya 1948-1960*. (New York: Crane, Russak & Co., Inc., 1975), 23.

<sup>8</sup> Chin Peng, 114.



began, MPAJA units would be ordered to ignore their promises to the British and seize as much territory as possible. By the time the Japanese were defeated, the CPM hoped to have secured enough of a power base to enable them to confront the exhausted invasion force.<sup>9</sup> It was a bold strategy, but it would never be implemented. On August 15<sup>th</sup>, Emperor Hirohito announced Japan's surrender.

Japanese capitulation caught the CPM completely off-guard. The Communists had assumed that Japan would not yield until an Allied flag was forcibly installed in Tokyo.<sup>10</sup> The collapse of Japanese defenses on Malaya allowed the British to retake the Peninsula with minimal resistance and invalidated all of the CPM's careful preparation. Before they could seize any territory, the British had reestablished their authority.

Despite this setback, the initial period of British return probably represented the CPM's best opportunity for revolution. The Communists were not the only group unhappy with Malaya's newest rulers. The formation of an Asian alliance against the white colonists was a real possibility that could have seen the CPM leading a larger, better armed force than they ever would during the Emergency. Such a coalition would have been tenuous, of course. We will see however, that, compared to the odds of success during the emergency, even this unlikely alliance of three adversaries would have had a better chance at defeating the British.

Two groups were disgruntled or scared enough to offer their assistance to the CPM. The first was remaining Japanese troops on the peninsula. Like many military leaders in Tokyo, the Japanese commanders in Malaya were vehemently unhappy with the decision to surrender. Faced with the prospect of becoming prisoners of war, they hoped instead to carry on fighting

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<sup>9</sup> Chin Peng, 111-112.

<sup>10</sup> Chin Peng, 112, 118; Edgar O'Ballance, *Malaya: the Communist Insurgent War, 1948-1960*. (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1966), 60; Gene Hanrahan, *The Communist Struggle in Malaya*. (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1954), 49.

the British, even if it meant joining an old enemy. It was less than a day after Emperor Hirohito's proclamation that envoys from multiple Japanese commanders contacted the CPM with offers of assistance. Chin Peng recalls that "whole battalions of Japanese had signaled their willingness to come over to our side and bring with them huge supplies of weapons and ammunition."<sup>11</sup>

Simultaneously, another unexpected Malayan group proffered its allegiance to the CPM. Members of the Giyu Gun or Volunteer Army, Malays who had been working with the Japanese, also found themselves in need of a new ally against the British. The Japanese had promised these Malays independence, and in return, the volunteers had labored and fought for the occupiers. The return of the British threatened the Giyu Gun with punishments similar to those given to the Japanese and so they, too, looked to the CPM for leadership in a renewed battle against the British.<sup>12</sup>

All told, the CPM stood to incorporate thousands of men and massive stores of weapons into their campaign. For a 5,000-man guerrilla force, this expansion would have multiplied their power and effectiveness immensely.<sup>13</sup> The rank and file Communists overwhelmingly supported this amalgamation, and yet no alliances were ever made. At the last moment, the Secretary General of the CPM vetoed the unions and pulled the Party back from uniting with the Japanese and Malays against the British.

The Communists missed perhaps their best opportunity when they decided not to accept these offers and challenge the returning British for dominance. For a brief moment, the CPM had the opportunity to expand their military power and political support to levels far beyond what they would ever approach during the Emergency. Unions with Japanese troops and Malay

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<sup>11</sup> Chin Peng, 123.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 126.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 125.

nationalists could have provided a force large enough to challenge the colonialists. Just as important, their political influence was at its apex. In interior areas, the Communists were widely given credit for the victory over the Japanese.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the British were slow to reassert their authority over the Peninsula. For a few weeks, the CPM was the only organized political force remaining in Malaya.<sup>15</sup> Had they taken advantage of the situation, the communists might have managed to take Kuala Lumpur and install a government of their own. At the very least, they would have garnered a much stronger negotiating position in the subsequent talks with the British. Of course, the odds that an alliance against the British would have lasted were small and confronting them might have proved suicidal. However, even this remote probability was much higher than CPM's chances of success during the Emergency.

***Post-war Depression and British Incompetence: Opportunity 2***

Once the decision not to resist the reinvasion was made, the window for confrontation with the British seemed to have passed. Japanese troops and their Malay supporters fled the peninsula or were captured. A new governing body, the British Military Administration (BMA), was erected to oversee Malaya's return to dependence. The BMA refused to recognize the CPM and did its best to outlaw and destroy any piece of socialist propaganda.<sup>16</sup> Despite this dismal beginning, the post-war, pre-emergency period was one of political substantial growth and promise for the communists. Before its end, this period would see the CPM's second opportunity for revolution arrive and then vanish.

Reminiscing in his memoir, *My Side of History*, Chin Peng points to the three years following World War II as the years in which the Party was at its strongest. Two reasons that he cites for this peak were the corruption and incompetence of the BMA. He charges the temporary

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<sup>14</sup> Hanrahan, 49.

<sup>15</sup> Hanrahan, 49; O'Ballance 62.

<sup>16</sup> Hanrahan, 55; O'Ballance, 63.

British government with both outright corruption and poor economic policies that led directly to depression. While such assertions may be largely retroactive propaganda, the retired guerrilla leader correctly identifies the BMA's unpopularity which gave the Communists an opportunity for revolution.

The Second World War had disrupted Malaya's complex contractual labor system and left the nation in a severe recession. The immediate post-war period was characterized by hunger, inflation and poverty which attacked both urban and rural workers.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, the economic policies of the BMA only served to hamper the nation's recovery and foment discontent. Upon consolidating control of the country, one of the BMA's first initiatives was to outlaw the Japanese scrip that had been imposed on Malaya. While this action—which specifically targeted the CPM's finances—was somewhat successful at hindering the communists, it had the larger effect of bankrupting thousands of individuals and businesses that had been forced to rely on the occupier's currency.<sup>18</sup> Further damage was done when the BMA granted regional monopolies to food distributors. Malaya is a nation that imports a majority of its food. When these traders raised the prices on rice, they caused a rash of hunger-driven protests. Such mistakes exacerbated the already growing anger with the BMA's ineptitude. This incompetence may have been due to the youth of the British administrators. Richard Clutterbuck points out that many of the experienced colonial officers had died in Japanese prison camps or returned to Great Britain. As a result, many of the new administrators had no experience at all.<sup>19</sup>

The British Military Administration furthered alienated the public when it attempted to force a new government, the Malayan Union, on an unwilling populace. The Union was, in fact,

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<sup>17</sup> Short, 28.

<sup>18</sup> Hanrahan, 55; Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare: the Malayan Emergency 1948-1960*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 13.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Clutterbuck, *The Long Long War: Counterinsurgency in Malaya and Vietnam*. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1966), 24; Stubbs, 12.

a much more democratic and inclusive system which was relatively attractive on its own merits. However, politics and timing could not have been worse for the new government. The Union set a course for an independent Malaya with democratically-elected state governments that would eventually take precedence over British rule. In the meantime, however, it attempted to reconcile a new policy of almost universal suffrage with continued Colonial dominance. Malays, historically privileged above the other races, were enraged by the new citizenship granted to millions of Chinese and Indian immigrants. Their sultans were further insulted knowing they stood to lose the political power to regional legislatures. Thus, the Malay population, previously the strongest supporters of the British, adamantly boycotted the new government for the entirety of its existence. The Chinese, on the other hand, were generally unimpressed with their new citizenship. As long as the British continued to hold the reins, their opinions would remain meaningless.<sup>20</sup>

Not surprisingly, during this nadir in British popularity, the Communist Party was experiencing its highest levels of influence. Focusing its efforts on urban workers, the CPM had consolidated its labor presence in 1946 in the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions (PMFTU). In only a year, this conglomerate controlled over 200 unions and 75% of unionized workers in the Malayan Union. Through their dominance of Malayan labor, the communists defied British rule and rallied political support. Organizing almost daily strikes and protests, the CPM further emphasized its influence with a national *hartal*—a 24-hour general strike—that saw over 100,000 workers refuse to go to work on January 29, 1946. They shut down ports, left rubber estates unmanned and cost the British millions in lost productivity. The CPM had, perhaps, missed an opportunity when it decided not to confront the British militarily, but now

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<sup>20</sup> Chin Peng, 161; Clutterbuck, 23-24; O'Ballance, 68.

their legitimate agitation for workers rights was gaining them new popularity in the cities, plantations and mines.<sup>21</sup>

As politically disparaging as the strikes were, the BMA's mismanaged response to the agitation only exacerbated their unpopularity. The seemingly knee-jerk reaction to worker agitation was force. Strike-breakers were hired by plantation and mine owners to suppress union action. When demonstrations expanded further, the British reacted by calling in army units to disperse the protestors. Few readers will be surprised by the result. Time after time, confrontations between strikers and the military inevitably ignited riots, violence and murder. For each demonstrator slain, British authority was called further into question.<sup>22</sup>

The CPM once again had an opportunity to make a serious bid for control of Malaya, but this time through a completely different path. Whereas the first opportunity had been military, the second was political and relatively peaceful. With their political capital rising against the backdrop of continuous British blunders, the Communists had for the first time found a nationally-appealing message. Had they continued peacefully advocating for labor rights and an end to British monopolies, they might have gained a legitimate political position from which to fight for independence. Instead, they would respond to British brutality with overreactions of their own.

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<sup>21</sup> Chin Peng, 196-197; Hanrahan, 58; O'Ballance, 69.

<sup>22</sup> Chin Peng, 142, 158; Short, 91.

### *Chapter 3: Emergency Declared*

As so often happens in tense situations, the initiation of preventative violence by one side incites the other to escalate the bloodshed. In response to the oppressive strikebreaking methods used by British planters and the government, the Central Committee of the CPM made a fateful decision. The capitalists were breaking the rules of fairness and negotiation; in the existing political atmosphere, the Party's objectives could not be attained legally. At a Central Committee meeting in Singapore, they issued a directive that gave state committees the authority to order and carry out the elimination of "all strikebreakers and all contractors using thugs for this purpose."<sup>23</sup> The command was made to send a message to the British: the workers would not be bullied into silence. Unfortunately, the government had an altogether different interpretation.

The state committees responded immediately to the Singapore directive with surge of violence in June, 1948. Estate managers and foremen were murdered, along with Chinese Nationalist (Kuomintang) leaders who the CPM identified as supporting their oppressors. When three English managers were captured and summarily executed on plantations in the Sungei Siput area on June 16th, the British apparently decided that more severe action was needed. Less than twenty four hours later, the government declared a State of Emergency in Perak and Johore which soon expanded to the entire peninsula.<sup>24</sup>

Historians have for decades interpreted this wave of attacks as a declaration of hostilities, long premeditated by the CPM. Such was the ferocity and effectiveness of the skirmishes that historians, like the security forces, assumed that they were planned by the Central Committee as the first act of their revolution. Gene Harahan and Edgar O'Ballance, writing in during and

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<sup>23</sup> Chin Peng, 205.

<sup>24</sup> Short, 92-93.

immediately after the end of the Emergency both saw the June attacks as part of a calculated strategy.<sup>25</sup> Writing a decade later, Anthony Short was the first to back away from the idea that Sungei Siput constituted the climax of a grand scheme. “The insurrection began at half-cock”, he explains, because some components of the Communist organization were unprepared for confrontation.<sup>26</sup> Richard Stubbs, writing in 1989, was one of the first historians to realize that the CPM was taken by complete surprise by the Declaration, which is now a historical consensus.<sup>27</sup> However, even Stubbs, who comes closer to the truth than his predecessors, still fails to understand the unforeseen and utter disaster that Sungei Siput was for the communist cause.

Hanrahan and O’Ballance were not completely wrong when they argued that the CPM had a master plan for revolution. They correctly point out that the Central Committee had formally put in place preparations for armed conflict by March, 1948. What they fail to understand, however, is that the CPM’s designs hinged on at least eight years of training and organization before commencing their struggle.<sup>28</sup> It was towards this distant deadline that the state committees had only just begun their preparations when the Emergency was declared. Even their worst-case contingency plans, measures to be taken if the British should begin a sudden suppressive action, assumed that such action could only begin in the fall. The one action they had taken was to agree that, in the event of full-scale hostilities, the next months’ Central Committee meeting would be moved deep into the jungle in the province of Johore.<sup>29</sup> Each of the June attacks was the product of autonomous state committee action; most of the targets were worthy of elimination by the standards articulated by Chin Peng and the Central Committee, but

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<sup>25</sup> Hanrahan, 60; O’Ballance, 76

<sup>26</sup> Short, 96.

<sup>27</sup> Stubbs, 61.

<sup>28</sup> Chin Peng, 193.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 208.



they had not picked or coordinated any of them. They were the result of what Chin Peng calls an “over-enthusiasm for revenge,” which he regrets was unforeseen by the Committee.<sup>30</sup> To suggest that the June attacks constituted the communists’ well-planned declaration of war could not be further from the truth. They were not a product of calculations but the unintended consequence of miscalculations.

If one needs further proof that the events at Sungei Siput were not planned by the Central Committee, one need only look at the location of Chin Peng when the Emergency began. The CPM’s Secretary General was visiting a mine owner named Tong Ching near the town of Kampar. He was there asking the wealthy miner for financial support as his comrades performed their fateful attacks just 40 miles north. Chin Peng, completely unaware of any impending trouble, waited patiently as his host betrayed him to the authorities. As the British Army lorries approached his bungalow, the sole leader of the Malayan Communists was forced to abandon his passport and clothing to run headlong into the night. He only barely escaped capture with some quick thinking, good fortune and help from an old servant woman who hid him as the police searched.<sup>31</sup> If the Sungei Siput attacks had been predetermined and planned as the CPM’s opening salvo, why would the communist leader be in such an exposed position?

Despite Chin Peng’s escape, the attacks that triggered the Emergency Declaration still proved to be unmitigated catastrophes for the CPM. The Communists’ lack of preparation for war was immediately belied by the flurry of setbacks and mistakes that followed. Chin Peng refers to the events of June 16 as “the very worst possible scenario I could have envisaged.”<sup>32</sup>

The CPM had been counting on using the summer months to organize guerrilla units and turn them into battle-ready fighters. Only after three more months of training and preparation

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 222.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 218.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 212.

did Chin Peng expect that any of his units would be ready to go on the final offensive. When the Emergency Declaration forced the guerrillas' hand, it made intensive training impossible. Units were forced to learn through experience alone. The Communist's training deficit, partially caused by the sudden Emergency Declaration, would haunt it throughout the struggle.<sup>33</sup>

Almost as damaging was the loss of the CPM's most important propaganda tool. The police raided the communist daily newspaper, the *Min Sheng Pau* (Voice of the People), and removed the precious equipment. The CPM had planned to make the newspaper their clandestine connection to the masses in Kuala Lumpur should their communist cadres be forced to retreat.<sup>34</sup> As will be discussed in chapter 10, the CPM would be perpetually tormented by its inability to communicate with the masses which made political victory almost impossible. The loss of the *Min Sheng Pau* played a major role in the political failure of the communist rebellion.

As debilitating as the loss of the newspaper and time for training was to the Communists's cause, the most damaging legacy of the Emergency Declaration was the CPM's disorganized reaction. The Central Committee and other important leaders immediately went into hiding in the jungle. With only the most basic contingency plans set in place, the regional communist cadres were left on their own to organize their retreat. The revolutionary plans which the Malaysians were appropriating from Mao had never been finalized or implemented. Thus, the CPM became split into nine insurgencies that were, for all intents and purposes, independent. Like the Central Committee members, the communist state committees reacted to the Emergency Declaration by fleeing to safety in the jungles of the peninsula. This instinctual withdrawal

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 225.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid, 221.

would save communist lives but at the expense of severing much of their movements' connection to the unions and the masses.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, at the end of June, 1948, the CPM would find itself in a less than enviable position. The Central Committee was in hiding, as were the state committees, and it would take months to reestablish useful communication between Chin Peng and his deputies. The regional commanders had little sense of the overall mission; for the remainder of 1948 there would be little political or military coordination. In the meantime, a state of chaos would persist in Malaya; the Secretary General could only watch in horror as his guerrillas carried out a campaign of arbitrary violence. In their flight to the jungle, the CPM had separated itself from its union support and also from its best sources of food and supplies. Their propaganda machine was practically nonexistent, and there was no favorable press to convince the masses. Worse still, the Malay majority was racially and traditionally predisposed against them, and the economic circumstances worked heavily against the CPM. Furthermore, in this decisive time, the ranks of the communist leadership had been decimated by poor fortune and betrayal. The outlook was not simply grim; it was insurmountable.

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<sup>35</sup> Chin Peng, 226; Stubbs, 62.

#### ***Chapter 4: Racial Cleavages***

Communism is not a racially-oriented ideology. Marxism-Leninism is founded on the political consequences of struggles between different classes and does not discriminate, or even distinguish, between ethnicities. In the context of the communist revolution in Malaya, however, race played a leading role. Ignoring the racial elements of the Malayan Emergency would be akin to ignoring the Soviet Union in a discussion of World War II. The peninsula's peculiar brand of multiculturalism influenced every facet of the communist struggle. I choose to discuss it at this juncture because of its dual nature in this text. Race is both an essential element of the background of the Emergency and one of the most powerful arguments that the CPM was doomed to failure from the start.

Malaya was undeniably a multicultural nation but of an entirely different sort than one is used to reading about. While the United States has boasted of its melting pot society, mid-nineteenth century Malaya dwarfed our claims to diversity. America has a white majority that constitutes three fourths of the total population, whereas the Malay majority in Malaya barely accounted for fifty percent of the total population. Almost half of the populace did not have Malay ancestry. Chinese immigrant comprised the bulk of this minority, numbering almost two million of the five million people living in the nation. In addition, less than half a million Indians and a much smaller number of British and aborigines made up the rest of the population.<sup>36</sup>

While the racial identity of Malaya was a mixture without any dominant ingredients, the nation was hardly a paragon of heterogeneity. The massive Chinese and Indian immigrant populations were largely first or second generation. They had been brought to the peninsula as

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<sup>36</sup> Department of State, *Malaya: Trouble Spot in Southeast Asia*, Division of Publications: Washington D.C. 1953. See also Clutterbuck, 19; Short, 254.

manual laborers to work in the tin mines and rubber plantations. They generally retained their original national identities, religions and traditions, lived in separate communities and rarely interacted with outsiders.<sup>37</sup>

Historical descriptions of the racial environment in Malaya have frequently been tainted with the racial assumptions of the authors themselves. Both O'Ballance and Clutterbuck suggest that the Malays were a lazy and self-satisfied people whose inability to handle arduous tasks made it necessary to import labor. Malays allegedly accepted British rule out of a natural docility that left them with little interest in politics. Clutterbuck goes even farther to suggest that their Muslim religion was responsible for their lack of ambition. The Chinese, on the other hand, are described as a naturally industrious people along the lines of the "coolie" stereotype. This predisposition toward hard work is credited by O'Ballance and Clutterbuck for the rapid success of some Chinese businessmen in Malaya. While the bases for these assertions are founded in racial stereotypes, Short confirms that they do illustrate the general positions of the races. Malays worked as fishermen, farmers and policemen; they owned most of the land outside of the British estates. Educated Malays also populated the civil service. The Chinese—and to a similar, though lesser extent, the Indians—were urban laborers in British factories as well as rural workers on rubber plantations and mines. Those of their ranks who had lived in Malaya for multiple generations and learned English could ascend the social ladder as professionals, clerks and business owners. Finally, there was the British elite who ruled Malaya. This European minority not only ran the country, holding all of the important government offices, but every major business as well. They formed a powerful top tier of society, affecting the fates of all those below them.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> O'Ballance, 27.

<sup>38</sup> Clutterbuck, 20-21; O'Ballance, 27; Short, 255.

Inequalities between the ethnic groups were also prevalent in the political system of Malaya. British policies traditionally allowed the Malay Sultans broad powers over the population. By contrast, Chinese and Indians were denied citizenship because of their allegiance to a foreign nation. As many immigrant laborers truly did see Malaya as a temporary place to make money, this inequality did not immediately create a problem. However, politics became more racially charged with the advent of the Malayan Union. As the British attempted to transfer power from the Sultans to newly-minted Chinese citizens, the Malay majority cried foul.<sup>39</sup>

The results of these separate cultures, divided by unequal rights and employment, was an unbridgeable river of distrust and dislike between Malays and Chinese. Birthed into this environment in April, 1930, the CPM inherited its nation's divisions. The Party founders acknowledged that Malays were generally resistant to their ideology and emphasis was, therefore, placed on recruiting Chinese to the cause.<sup>40</sup> This resulted in a movement almost entirely populated by one race. Historical estimates postulate that 90% or more of the members of the CPM were Chinese.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, these members—and the organization in general—were far more devoted to their ancestral nation than they were to Malaya.<sup>42</sup> Chin Peng's first interactions with communism were in school discussions of the civil war in China.<sup>43</sup> He confirms that up until two years before the Emergency, his principal allegiance was to China, which he repeatedly refers to as “the motherland.”<sup>44</sup> With an almost exclusively Chinese membership and goals that basically ignored Malaya, the CPM was naturally limited to the

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<sup>39</sup> Clutterbuck, 24.

<sup>40</sup> O'Ballance, 21.

<sup>41</sup> Short, 19; Thompson, 19.

<sup>42</sup> O'Ballance, 22.

<sup>43</sup> Chin Peng, 43.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 45 & 133.

support of other Chinese on the Peninsula. Ideological or material support from Malay communities was practically nonexistent.<sup>45</sup> With its racially unbalanced structure and objectives, the CPM was restricted in its abilities from the outset. It was inevitably limited by the divided society that created it.

If this situation, present for decades before the Emergency, was not troubling enough, ensuing events would proceed to further prejudice Malays against the CPM. The invasion of the Peninsula by the Japanese might have caused the divided nation to put aside racial differences and form a single resistance movement, but it was not to be. Far from uniting the oppressed Malaysians against a common foe, the Japanese played upon racial resentment to further divide the nation. The Japanese exploited anti-Chinese resentment by forming a Malay police force to defend against the overwhelmingly Chinese MPAJA guerrillas.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, the occupation government did its best to increase racial tensions by encouraging Malays to view the Chinese as “immigrant bandits disrupting the Malay homeland.”<sup>47</sup> To further this stereotype, the Japanese devised schemes such as the one described by Chin Peng.

Japanese troops, disguised as AJA [anti-Japanese Army] guerrillas, went into a mosque in Johore and slaughtered a pig. This immediately inflamed Malay sentiments and they turned on the local Chinese villagers.

The result was mob violence, pitting enraged Malays against helpless Chinese squatters. When the embattled Chinese cried out to their communist kin for protection, the MPAJA had little choice but to defend their principal supporters. Thus, the Communist found themselves slaughtering incensed crowds of machete-wielding Malays. Over 1,000 people would die in

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<sup>45</sup> Clutterbuck, 26; Department of State, 9; O'Ballance, 20; Short, 77.

<sup>46</sup> O'Ballance, 43; Hanrahan, 50.

<sup>47</sup> Clutterbuck, 21.

widespread riots, which did not cease until Malay leaders intervened. Naturally, the Communists were blamed for the bloodshed.<sup>48</sup>

A pattern of deep-seated, sometimes violent racial antagonism had been established that was beyond the ability of the Communists to repair. Attempts were made, of course, but these did nothing to increase Malay support for the CPM. The Party initially tried to overcome the racial divide by reforming itself in 1946, two years before the Emergency. Recognizing that their pro-China platform contradicted their stated demands for Malayan independence, the Central Committee officially commanded members to reorient their allegiance to Malaya. The fact that such a directive was even necessary displays the problems the Party faced in appealing to Malays. Even after the command, older members maintained that such an order betrayed their original goals and the Party should continue to concentrate on assisting China.<sup>49</sup> Considering that it was not until 1946 that the CPM began propagating its ideology as pro-Malaya, can it be surprising that the Malay majority did not respond their message? Months before the Emergency Declaration, the CPM would attempt to increase its appeal by allying with Malay and Indian parties. Evidence indicates that some headway was actually made with the most left-leaning Malay party. This progress came to nothing, however, with the start of the Emergency.<sup>50</sup>

When it finally arrived, guerrilla warfare did nothing but further cement the already irreparable racial divide. The lines of war were drawn on undeniably racial lines. The major combatants: Chinese guerrillas and Malay police who were trained and subsidized by the British. As will be discussed in Chapter 9, the British proved too formidable a force for the insurgent army to target consistently. Instead, the guerrillas fought against their proxy, the Malay security forces. Every dead Malay policeman only served to further poison the Malay majority against

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<sup>48</sup> Chin Peng, 127.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 164.

<sup>50</sup> Hanrahan, 65; O'Ballance, 81.



the CPM.<sup>51</sup> In a final act of desperation, Chin Peng attempted a propaganda campaign to rebrand the revolution as a multi-cultural front against the British. He renamed his army the Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA) to appeal to Indians and Malays. The centerpiece of this effort was a prominent, all-Malay guerrilla unit that Chin Peng hoped would give evidence of broad national support behind the Party. By 1949, he had been sufficiently successful at recruiting to assemble a Malay “Regiment” 300 strong. His hopes were dashed, however, during the first test of the Malays’ loyalties. Attacked by a band of Kuomintang bandits less than a fifth their number, the regiment was immediately routed. Afterwards, many of the Malay guerrillas deserted. After this unsuccessful experiment, the communists would forgo any further attempts to make themselves a multiracial fighting force.<sup>52</sup>

The racial divide in Malaya was far too great for the CPM to have any hope of uniting the nation against the British. Violence between Chinese and Malays that could not be quelled destroyed the Communists’ ability to appeal to half of the total population. Even the British, with their far superior resources and access to community leaders, failed utterly in their attempts to assuage racial belligerence.<sup>53</sup> For the CPM, who could not seriously hope to beat the British with their military alone, the only plausible avenue to victory was through overwhelming political support. With half of Malaya diametrically opposed to them before and during the Emergency, this avenue was never open.

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<sup>51</sup> Short, 157.

<sup>52</sup> Chin Peng, 263-265; O’Ballance, 100; Short, 210.

<sup>53</sup> Short, 158.

### *Chapter 5: Leadership deficits*

History has shown the folly of those who belittle youthful causes. Students and other young adults have often provided the motivation for upheaval and rebellion, but rarely without help. For all its potential energy, vernal vigor is most effective when guided by cooler heads. The combination of youthful enthusiasm with the supervision of experienced leaders is indeed one of the most explosive mixtures in the history of civilization. The Malayan Communists sought to make use of this recipe in their revolution but, by the time the conflict began in earnest, they had been deprived of one of the necessary ingredients. Youthful fervor the CPM had in abundance—students were one its main sources of recruits—but the party lacked experienced leaders. The Party suffered from a history of betrayal and misfortune; during its 18-year existence, its command structure had been beheaded time and time again. By the end of July, 1948, this legacy of party decapitation had effectively crippled the CPM. Its political and military efforts were doomed by the reality that many of the movement's greatest leaders were already dead.

The CPM was only a year old when a paralyzing betrayal almost killed the newborn movement. In 1930, a French agent of the Comintern named Joseph Ducroux was sent to report on the progress of his Malayan comrades. After scarcely more than a month on the peninsula, he was arrested in Singapore by British authorities, to whom he quickly made a full confession. He apparently provided an impressive overview of communist organizations in East and Southeast Asia because successful anti-communist raids commenced in China, Hong Kong and Malaya. Among those imprisoned overseas was Ho Chi Minh, who was visiting the Far Eastern Bureau in Hong Kong. Out of perhaps 20 CPM leaders in Malaya, 14 were captured by police, along with

many important documents. It would take more than a year for the Party to even start renewing operations after the debilitating betrayal of Ducroux.<sup>54</sup>

Over the next ten years, the CPM's misfortune did not abate. Six secretaries general were captured by the British Special Branch between 1930 and 1935<sup>55</sup>. Of these, five were deported to China and the nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek, where their fate was most likely not a happy one. In 1937, a renewed effort by British authorities netted a further 20 communist leaders, all of whom were summarily banished from Malaya.<sup>56</sup> These losses were, of course, catastrophic for the CPM, depriving the young party of desperately-needed leadership. In the long run, however, losses were not the worst feature of the 1930s for the CPM. An infamous addition would prove to be even more damaging.

The story of Lai Te is one of the more interesting plotlines in the Malayan narrative. Secretary General of the CPM for almost a decade, this double and then triple agent committed one of the most impressive and—for the Party—disastrous acts of espionage in the history of the shadowy profession.

The early narrative of the life of Lai Te, who was known by at least five different aliases, is not entirely agreed upon by historians. What is clear is that he was originally from Vietnam, where he was a member of moderate rank in the communist movement during the early part of his life.<sup>57</sup> At some point in the late 20s or early 30s, he was arrested by French Intelligence, who used him to spy on the Communist movement. He was, apparently, quite successful in this occupation, until his betrayal was somehow uncovered. The French Intelligence then transferred

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<sup>54</sup> Hanrahan, 12-13; O'Ballance, 23-24.

<sup>55</sup> Chin Peng, 57.

<sup>56</sup> Hanrahan, 25.

<sup>57</sup> Chin Peng, 58; O'Ballance, 29.

Lai Te to the Singapore Special Branch, who inserted him on the island around 1932.<sup>58</sup> As a dock worker in Singapore's busy port, Lai Te joined a local union and then the Communist Party. As senior party members were conveniently removed by a rash of police raids, Lai Te quickly increased his rank and authority. Such opportune disasters became a pattern in the communist ranks; a pattern that Lai Te rode to greater power.<sup>59</sup> By 1938, he was the highest ranking member of the Central Committee, able to influence communist policy throughout the peninsula.<sup>60</sup>

Having committed this incredibly successful act of espionage, Lai Te did not immediately subvert the Party. By all accounts, he led the CPM with cunning and skill. According to Gene Hanrahan, Lai Te's brilliant leadership helped the Party to first weather police action and then expand its influence and numbers.<sup>61</sup> Edgar O'Ballance credits the Vietnamese immigrant for restructuring the CPM framework for more efficient organization and propaganda.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Lai Te gained a level of reverence from rank and file communists that bordered on worship.<sup>63</sup> As an ideologue, Lai Te was a moderate. He restrained those who advocated armed resistance while promoting a relatively conservative path of incremental industrial and government subversion. Clandestinely, however, throughout his decade-long reign, Lai Te used his covert contacts to remove any potential sources of competition among the senior members of the CPM. Literally hundreds of CPM leaders would be killed as a result of Lai Te's betrayal.

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<sup>58</sup> Chin Peng 58; Short, 39.

<sup>59</sup> Short, 40.

<sup>60</sup> Chin Peng, 58.

<sup>61</sup> Hanrahan, 25.

<sup>62</sup> O'Ballance, 30.

<sup>63</sup> Chin Peng, 59.

A complete chronology of all of Lai Te's treacheries is still impossible to discern; relating just the duplicities that are known would require every page in this work. We will only discuss the most destructive of Lai Te's individual acts of betrayal but, bear in mind, that such acts were a common occurrence throughout his tenure as Secretary General.

When the Japanese conquered the Malayan Peninsula, Lai Te was cut off from his British superiors. Yet, the ever resourceful agent forged a new relationship to supplement his power and ensure his security under the new authorities. A month after the invasion, the Secretary General was arrested by the Kempetai, the Japanese military police in charge of suppressing native resistance. During the interrogation, Lai Te revealed his true identity and made a deal to save his life. He regularly provided the Kempetai with detailed accounts of Party operations and plans. He also gave them targets for arrest and murder.<sup>64</sup>

Lai Te consummated his new association in his usual manner just weeks after the Japanese conquered Singapore by once again betraying his communist colleagues. A series of police raids devastated the communist presence on the island. Among the captured was Huang Chen, the CPM's second highest official and the most likely successor to Lai Te. Huang Chen, whose moving rhetoric Chin Peng cites as causing his communist conversion, was eventually executed by his captors.<sup>65</sup> Huang Chen's successor at the number two post, Chai Ke Ming, would also be arrested and executed two years later when his traveling plans were betrayed to the Kempetai.<sup>66</sup> Despite the seemingly obvious clues, Chin Peng and other CPM members were merely grateful that their Secretary General, who lived comfortably and openly, had not been targeted; they failed to connect his security with his treachery.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Chin Peng, 82.

<sup>65</sup> Chin Peng, 81; Clutterbuck, 17.

<sup>66</sup> Chin Peng, 88.

<sup>67</sup> Chin Peng, 76; Clutterbuck, 17.

A year later, Lai Te would complete his most successful act of duplicity, which historians now refer to as the Batu Caves Massacre. Lai Te organized a meeting of top national and state committee members along with military leaders from the MPAJA, to be held on September 1, 1942. On the day of the conference, the Communists assembled but were informed that their leader's travels had been delayed. Arriving in his stead were multiple battalions of Japanese troops who surrounded the guerrillas. Very few Communists escaped the ensuing firefight; most were captured or killed attempting to break through the Japanese encirclement.<sup>68</sup>

In this manner, Lai Te systematically removed other important Communists until he had obtained complete and utter control over the Central Politburo.<sup>69</sup> With this power, it is no longer surprising that he was able to single-handedly overrule CPM members who advocated armed conflict. He continued to restrain the Communists until 1947, when he was finally ousted by two young officers who would become the leaders of the following insurgency.<sup>70</sup> Chin Peng and Yeung Kuo, who had been suspicious of their leader for months, finally voiced their misgivings after the Secretary General's abrupt order for the state committees to send him the location of each of their weapons caches. This command, which violated a number of security ordinances, was the tipping point in their case against Lai Te.<sup>71</sup> Before he could be brought to justice, however, the spy fled Malaya with \$2 million in Party funds. He had apparently arranged to meet a Special Branch officer in Bangkok who would arrange his escape. He never made it. He was tracked down and murdered by Thai Communists working on behalf of the CPM.<sup>72</sup>

Lai Te's duplicity was responsible for many damaging attacks made by the British Special Branch and the Kempetai, but these were not the only leadership setbacks that occurred

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<sup>68</sup> Chin Peng, 79-80; Hanrahan, 38-39; O'Ballance, 29; Short, 22.

<sup>69</sup> Chin Peng, 84; O'Ballance 72.

<sup>70</sup> Chin Peng, 169.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 181

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 190.

before the Emergency was declared. The MPAJA's struggle with the invaders cost many lives. Hanrahan suggests that as many as a third of all guerrillas were killed, although this figure has been called into doubt, by Anthony Short.<sup>73</sup> However, many soldiers were killed or deported after capture during the conflict. These losses would cripple the CPM's fight against the British less than a decade later. Too many guerrillas and communist leaders who had gained experience fighting the Japanese did not survive the battles and betrayals of the resistance.

One final, but immensely important loss will be discussed here. This death occurred in the first weeks following the commencement of the Emergency but it would cripple the CPM for all the long years to follow. I refer to demise of Liew Yao. This man was the CPM's greatest military mind and best tactical commander. He had more strategic experience than any other guerrilla, having held the position of Chairman of the Central Military Committee of the MPAJA. It was he who had devised the guerrillas' grand strategy, incorporating Mao's theories into a Malayan framework.<sup>74</sup> The CPM's third-in-command and acknowledged military expert died in a police raid exactly one month after the Emergency was declared.<sup>75</sup> After his death, the guerrilla army would display a distinct deficit of tactical proficiency and a lack of a coherent national military strategy. At least one historian has suggested that Liew Yao might have been able to overcome the difficult circumstances to prevent these problems.<sup>76</sup> What is clear is that after his death, the communist guerrillas lost much of their effectiveness.<sup>77</sup>

All this information has been presented to display the dire lack of communist leadership remaining just one month into the Emergency. This trend, which began just a year after the birth of the Party, haunted it until conflict had commenced and their fate was sealed. Its effects

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<sup>73</sup> Harahan, 35 as cited in Short, 22.

<sup>74</sup> O'Ballance, 79.

<sup>75</sup> Chin Peng, 228; Hanrahan, 65.

<sup>76</sup> O'Ballance, 172.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 86.

include the election of Chin Peng to the office of Secretary General at the young age of twenty three.<sup>78</sup> He and many other junior members were prematurely called upon to lead the CPM due to a dearth of wiser veterans in the ranks. While many of them, like Chin Peng, may have executed their offices with skill and intelligence, the overall effect was a political and military movement that lacked experience and expertise.<sup>79</sup> This fact—irrevocable after just a month of fighting—contributed heavily to the inevitable defeat of the CPM.

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<sup>78</sup> Chin Peng, 29.

<sup>79</sup> Hanrahan, 68.



### *Chapter 6: The Economy of Malaya*

In almost every society on Earth, economic wellbeing proves to be one of the best indicators of contentment. Governments are generally judged and graded for their maintenance of a healthy environment for economic growth. Failure almost always leads to decreased political support, even when the causes of depression are external. These rules were not absent in Malaya, where a fluctuating economy brought new power to the CPM but ultimately worked against the revolution.

Malaya was, historically, quite a prosperous colony. The Peninsula's land was fertile. Rice, sugar cane, maize and tapioca all thrived in the tropical environment. For Malays especially, who often owned their own land, harvests provided ample victuals to feed a family and live comfortably. O'Ballance speculates that this prosperity likely contributed to Malay apathy towards communist recruitment. As was discussed in Chapter 4, racial factors probably played a larger role in Malay indifference, but the economic circumstances certainly did nothing to help the communist cause.<sup>80</sup>

During the Japanese occupation, the people of Malaya got their first taste of hunger. As the British had retreated down the Peninsula, they had initiated a scorched earth policy that destroyed bridges and railways.<sup>81</sup> Once the British were gone, the invaders quickly seized all of the peninsula's most valuable resources: its tin, rubber and rice. As a result, rice production fell by a third as farmers refused to grow crops at full capacity. Meanwhile, the unemployed were put to work in the fields or building railroads in Thailand and Burma. Without a political outlet

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<sup>80</sup> O'Ballance, 20, 27.

<sup>81</sup> Stubbs, 16.

to vent their frustration, the population's resentment simmered, waiting for the end of Japanese rule.<sup>82</sup>

The return of British governance did not immediately end the economic woes of Malaya. In fact, the inept British Military Administration at times retarded the country's recovery, earning the ire of much of the population. The BMA's first action was to declare the Japanese occupation currency worthless. While this certainly had the intended consequence of reducing the CPM's bank balances, it was more effective at turning much of the nation into beggars overnight. The majority of workers had been given little choice but to use the Japanese scrip; many lost all of their savings in one night.<sup>83</sup> As the British continued an ineffective recovery campaign, mass resentment with the government proliferated. Chin Peng recalls,

Food supplies dwindled and prices soared. Crime rates surged, policing activities floundered and corruption rampaged. Not surprisingly, the people became increasingly embittered towards the returning colonials. Soon, Malaya was a cauldron of simmering discontent.<sup>84</sup>

This internal outrage would translate into increased power for the CPM. During the years following the British return, the Communists would organize a spectacularly defiant labor movement and see their membership expand to its highest levels. However, these years of political plenty would not last long. As 1947 came to a close, the Malayan economy was back on its feet. Tin and rubber exports were increasing, and prosperity was returning to the peninsula just as the Emergency began.<sup>85</sup>

While growing contentment was not helpful to the CPM, the economic boom that arrived with the Korean War was simply disastrous. The advent of hostilities on the Korean Peninsula sent demand for rubber and tin through the roof in 1950. The price of tin doubled, while the

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>83</sup> Hanrahan, 55.

<sup>84</sup> Chin Peng, 135.

<sup>85</sup> O'Ballance, 74; Stubbs, 107.

price of rubber more than tripled.<sup>86</sup> These increases were detrimental to the CPM in two ways. First, the taxes filled the coffers of the British authorities, paying for large portions of the counterinsurgency effort. This relieved the High Commissioner from the necessity of perpetually asking London for more resources and removed much of the war's burden from the taxpayers' shoulders.<sup>87</sup> More importantly, the boom rapidly increased profits for tin mines and rubber estates, which produced significant wage hikes for laborers and undercut CPM recruitment drastically.<sup>88</sup> As sociologist James Scott explains, the willingness of peasants to join a revolutionary movement is directly correlated to a resentment of increased economic abuse. Specifically, he finds that peasants are generally only sensitive to new increases in exploitation that they view as out of line with traditional mistreatment.<sup>89</sup> Malaya was far from such a situation at the start of the Emergency and the tin and rubber boom only served to further this distance.

The British Government had never been an especially exploitative body, particularly with regards to taxation. Throughout the colony's history, the principal source of revenue had been export taxes. The high value and quantity of tin and rubber made it largely unnecessary to tax food production or income.<sup>90</sup> Thus, while peasants may have been exploited by their employers or local officials, they had little reason to resent the national government's taxation. When the boom occurred, it only lessened the government's need to tax the masses. Malaya during the Korean War embodied the exact opposite of what James Scott would have called a ready environment for rebellion.

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<sup>86</sup> Short, 347.

<sup>87</sup> Department of State. *Malaya: A New Independent Nation*. Far Eastern Series 77, Publication 6714. (Washington D.C.: Public Services Division, 1958), 17; Stubbs, 108.

<sup>88</sup> Stubbs, 114.

<sup>89</sup> Scott, James C. *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 193.

<sup>90</sup> *The Establishment of Custom Unions in the Malay Peninsula*, Royal Malaysian Customs. Accessed 6 January 2009. <[http://www.customs.gov.my/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=77&Itemid=156](http://www.customs.gov.my/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=77&Itemid=156)>

The newfound wealth wreaked havoc on the CPM. As the standard of living increased across the country, fewer and fewer could be convinced that they should leave such comfort and begin a hard life of violence and deprivation in the jungle. Whereas the Communists had made it their initial goal to simultaneously undermine the economy and recruit increased support, they found themselves in 1950 with government surpluses and evaporating recruitment.<sup>91</sup> They were desperate for the peasant support that Mao told them was central to their cause, but were thwarted by indifference caused by improved economic circumstances.<sup>92</sup>

Additionally, Malaya's economy worked against the CPM because it was simply too profitable for the British to relinquish. In 1950, Malaya was producing the most revenue of any colony in the commonwealth.<sup>93</sup> And, as much of its exports went to the United States, Malaya was Britain's largest single source of American dollars.<sup>94</sup> In the 1950s, when the United Kingdom's financial difficulties were growing larger by the minute, it would have been near-suicidal for the power to abandon its most profitable holding. Whereas Vietnam had very little impact on America's economy, Malaya was simply too important to lose.

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<sup>91</sup> Hanrahan, 126.

<sup>92</sup> Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*. Translated by Samuel B. Griffith. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1961). 44.

<sup>93</sup> Department of State. *Malaya: A New Independent Nation*, 16.

<sup>94</sup> Short, 347.

### ***Chapter 7: For Want of Weapons***

Recall Mao Tse-tung's famous dictum: "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." This statement describes the very nature of guerrilla warfare and was ultimately telling for the Malayan Emergency. Of course, it is true that battles are not necessarily decided in favor of the side with more guns. However, it is also true that when the disparity in armaments between combatants reaches a certain level, the outcome of combat can be readily and accurately predicted. It was just such a situation of gross disparity in which the CPM found itself. The Communists entered the Emergency with very limited supplies of firearms, and, to make matters worse, circumstances denied them the ability to gather greater munitions. Without the necessary weapons to allow military success, the CPM's guerrilla campaigns were inevitably doomed.

Before the Emergency Declaration, one of the CPM's highest priorities had been the procurement of weapons. Rifles, pistols, machine guns and even swords were hidden in caches, large and small, across the country. They stored these weapons, not just for guerrilla combat, but for their ultimate goal of establishing a regular army once the masses had been sufficiently converted.<sup>95</sup> Most of these weapons were Japanese in origin and had been abandoned when the occupiers fled the Peninsula, although the CPM had also received a significant number of newer British weapons via airdrops during WWII.<sup>96</sup> The exact number of weapons stored by the Communists is not agreed upon by historians, however, estimates point to close to 10,000 individual guns.

Despite this early success in gathering arms, the Communists' gains were negated by the time the Emergency began. First, the CPM's stores were halved when the British confiscated

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<sup>95</sup> Malayan Communist Party, *Strategic Problems of the Malayan Revolutionary War*. Issued December 1948. (Assault Press). 1950, 61. Quoted in Hanrahan, 111.

<sup>96</sup> Chin Peng, 118; Hanrahan, 49; Thompson, 14.

4,000-5,000 firearms from the Anti-Japanese Army upon returning to Malaya.<sup>97</sup> Three years later, just months before the Declaration, five major caches of weapons were raided and seized by security forces. Betrayed by the guards assigned to protect these vital munitions, the CPM lost some 2,000 guns that would soon be desperately needed.<sup>98</sup> After these subtractions, the Communists entered the conflict with only approximately 3,000 weapons. Additionally, these firearms were almost entirely older models. Some were obsolete by the time the Emergency began; by the end almost all were. Furthermore, ammunition was scarce and what bullets the guerrillas could find did not necessarily match the guns they had. Thus, at the start of the Emergency, the CPM did not possess enough firearms to arm all of their guerrillas, forcing many to rely upon knives, swords and spears. Worse still, the guerrillas who did receive a gun could never be sure that their weapons would work or that they would be able to find bullets to fire. When the Emergency began, the communist insurrection was at a serious disadvantage due to its lack of weapons.

However, this was one disadvantage that the Communists were capable of confronting—at least they thought they were capable. The CPM was schooled in guerrilla warfare by Mao, who asserted that units must supply themselves with weapons and ammunition captured from the enemy.<sup>99</sup> This instruction was seen time and time again in directives from the Central Committee. To capture weapons, these orders stated that it would be necessary to attack in numbers large enough to “annihilate” the opposing force.<sup>100</sup> This would allow guerrillas to sweep the battlefield for any and all useful equipment. Herein lies the crux of the insurgency’s

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<sup>97</sup> Chin Peng, 138; Clutterbuck, 22; Hanrahan, 51.

<sup>98</sup> Chin Peng, 225-226.

<sup>99</sup> Mao Tse-tung, 83.

<sup>100</sup> Malayan Communist Party, *Strategic Problems of the Malayan Revolutionary War*, 61. Quoted in Hanrahan, 111. Also Central Political Bureau Malayan Communist Party, *Supplementary Views of the Central Political Bureau on “Strategic Problems of the Malayan Revolutionary War”*. Issued November 12, 1949. (Assault Press), 1950, 85. Quoted in Hanrahan, 117. See also, Short, 212.

difficulty. The size of guerrilla units was limited by logistical and geographical facts that the CPM could not alter. They needed overwhelming numbers to completely destroy their targets but were unable to field units with the necessary strength.

These limits were initially imposed by the logistical difficulties involved in feeding large numbers of guerrillas. Rice is the dietary staple of Malaya; however, the country did not produce nearly enough of its own rice to feed the populace. Sixty percent of the rice consumed in Malaya had to be imported from nearby nations.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, food was not exactly plentiful on the Peninsula. Furthermore, Richard Clutterbuck points out that the Chinese model the CPM was following was based on a society where food is extraordinarily plentiful. Whereas Chinese peasants had little to lose in giving away a small portion of their harvest, rural Malaysians usually bought their rice with the wages they made in mines and plantations. Giving away their hard-earned and expensive food was a significant sacrifice for even the most sympathetic Malays.<sup>102</sup> Meanwhile, foraging food in the jungle was not a particularly useful alternative. Chin Peng laments that even when they were divided into small groups of 30 or less, guerrillas could only subsist off the jungle for a fortnight. To survive for longer, or expend their energy on an assault, guerrillas needed supplemental nourishment.<sup>103</sup>

For these reasons, supplying guerrilla units with food was an immediate, yet chronic problem that the CPM never fully addressed. Various schemes were attempted to find new sources of nutrition. Small clearings in the jungle were sown with maize and vegetables; however, these were often identified by British planes and bombed or raided.<sup>104</sup> The situation became so desperate that Chin Peng actually researched the nutritional value of rubber seeds. To

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<sup>101</sup> Department of State. *Malaya: Trouble Spot in Southeast Asia*, 5. Chin Peng has a similar realization in 1951, page 270.

<sup>102</sup> Clutterbuck, 45.

<sup>103</sup> Chin Peng, 267.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 292.

his disappointment, it was discovered that rubber seeds contain a toxic element that could not be removed.<sup>105</sup> The Secretary General's desperation underscores the severity of the CPM's food shortages. The Communists were unable to field anything close to the 200 guerrilla, company-sized units that were necessary to attack small targets like police stations.<sup>106</sup> They had no choice but to look for more creative ways to organize their forces.

The strategy that the CPM arrived at was called *Relative Dispersion*, a textbook example of a theory that worked perfectly until it was implemented. Whether the tactic was taken directly from Mao's example or was adapted for the Emergency, its roots were certainly in the Chinese resistance against Japan.<sup>107</sup> Relative Dispersion envisioned numerous, smaller units of guerrillas operating in one province that could consolidate instantly for assaults and then scatter.<sup>108</sup> In theory, this would allow the CPM to better distribute their logistical burden without sacrificing offensive strength. In practice, however, this tactic was dependent upon competent leadership, which was already in short supply—dividing into more units only exacerbated this problem. Moreover, the rapid amalgamation and dissipation of units required equally swift communication and transportation. Mobility and organization are fundamental to such lightning strikes, according to Mao. The MRLA had neither.

In the dichotomous environment of Malaya, transportation and communication were either very fast or very slow. For the British forces, which made full use of the nation's excellent roads, railways and communications infrastructure, troops and messages could traverse the peninsula at great speed.<sup>109</sup> For the MRLA, which dared not make use of the heavily patrolled

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 270.

<sup>106</sup> Chin Peng, 271; O'Ballance, 85.

<sup>107</sup> Mao Tse-tung, 46.

<sup>108</sup> Central Political Bureau Malayan Communist Party, *Supplementary Comments on the Disadvantageous Features of the Characteristics of the War*, 85. Quoted in Hanrahan, 118.

<sup>109</sup> Thompson, 18.



roadways, men and messages had to travel through the jungle. The Malayan jungle is immensely dense, as well as mountainous, such that a mile may take as much as four hours to walk.<sup>110</sup> Journeys through the jungle were not measured in days, but months and years.<sup>111</sup> The CPM had no radio transmitters and was forced to rely upon couriers for communication between units.<sup>112</sup> In this environment, a complicated system of organizing units was extremely difficult. Even when the CPM did manage to pull off a consolidated attack, success was far from assured. Frequently, a dozen or more trained policemen with superior weapons managed to rout the poorly armed and inexperienced guerrillas. And if gathering units wasn't difficult enough, instantly dispersing proved to be impossible. The British forces made use of their superior communications and transportation on several occasions to exact revenge on guerrillas units before they could scatter.<sup>113</sup> Relative Dispersion proved only to make the guerrillas more vulnerable to lightning attacks by the British.

By 1951, Chin Peng had come to understand the realities that we have just discussed. Every attempt made to utilize large-group tactics had utterly failed. The Central Committee had no choice but to cut its losses and so ordered the cessation of all large-group attacks.<sup>114</sup> Focus was shifted to hit-and-run attacks that could be carried out by units of twenty or thirty. Attacks on police stations were replaced by ambushes of one or two-person patrols.<sup>115</sup> Casualties were kept low, but the Communists were losing overall because they were unable to consistently recover weapons. According to their own directives, "to rout the enemy and wound a few,

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<sup>110</sup> Clutterbuck, 45.

<sup>111</sup> Chin Peng, 243.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 336.

<sup>113</sup> O'Ballance, 85.

<sup>114</sup> Chin Peng, 272.

<sup>115</sup> O'Ballance, 127

failing to capture his weapons, cannot be considered a true victory".<sup>116</sup> Yet this was the situation that their small-scale attacks perpetuated. Chin Peng himself acknowledges this predicament.

We had gained valuable experience in the art of luring the enemy into ambushes. Still, we had much to learn. We had been keen to stamp our mark on the fighting by annihilating British patrols. This objective largely eluded us. We achieved a limited number of kills *but we were never in a position to sweep the battlefield after the action and seize weapons and ammunition.* And to have been able to do this was vital to our continuing operation.<sup>117</sup>

The Central Committee had chosen the only route that offered survival, but in ending large-scale attacks, the Communists also lost their principal source of weapons. The results were immediate. In 1952, for the first time, the total number of weapons captured by the guerrillas was less than the year before. This trend would continue until the Emergency's end. From 1951 on, the British would recover 5,460 weapons compared to 1,194 captured by guerrillas.<sup>118</sup> These heavy losses simply could not be sustained by a small guerrilla force like the MRLA.

During the Emergency, it was widely assumed that the Malayan Communists were benefiting from the aid of their Chinese or Russian brethren. Hanrahan, writing in 1954, posited that Chinese reinforcements had traveled through Thailand or arrived by boat to stabilize the ailing rebellion.<sup>119</sup> However, he provides no evidence of such occurrences, and his assertion has been repudiated by Anthony Short.<sup>120</sup> The current consensus among historians is that encouragement was the only form of support provided to the CPM from abroad. Chin Peng is especially eager to emphasize this point, and his statements are confirmed by Robert Thompson.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Malayan Communist Party, *Strategic Problems of the Malayan Revolutionary War*, 61. Quoted in Hanrahan, 111.

<sup>117</sup> Chin Peng, 271. (italics added)

<sup>118</sup> Thompson, 40.

<sup>119</sup> Hanrahan, 67.

<sup>120</sup> Short, 317.

<sup>121</sup> Chin Peng, 351; Thompson, 108.

Why was it that Malaya received no support from China or Russia while Vietnam was heavily supplied?<sup>122</sup> Once again the answer is in the geography. As Thompson explains, the Malayan Communists were almost completely isolated by borders controlled by the British. Malaya shares only a 150-mile border with Thailand that was sealed off with little difficulty. The 1,000 miles of coastline that rim the rest of the country were easily patrolled by the British Navy. The coast—the locus of business and trade—was also the area dominated by security forces.<sup>123</sup> Troops or arms would have had to run an impossible gambit to reach the Peninsula. Furthermore, there is little reason to believe that the CPM's communication with the outside world was any faster than their internal communications. The Central Committee had sent a number of party members to serve as liaisons to the Communist Party of China, but these men were unable to efficiently pass information or requests. One of the few messages that Chin Peng ever received from his China delegation took months to arrive.<sup>124</sup> Chin Peng later described his contact with China as “intermittent and of no major consequence to the CPM.”<sup>125</sup>

“You can't fight without weapons” said the CPM Secretary General in his 2003 memoir. To a certain degree, this was what the Malayan Communists were attempting to do. They entered the Emergency with a depleted and obsolete supply of weapons and no hope of receiving weapons from abroad. Worse, circumstances forced them to abandon the use of large units and their only hope of supplying the revolution with weapons from their opponents. The result was a campaign that lost four weapons for every one they captured. In the face of such crippling deficits, produced by the geographical and logistical circumstances of Malaya, the CPM had no

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<sup>122</sup> Clutterbuck, 74.

<sup>123</sup> Thompson, 19.

<sup>124</sup> Chin Peng, 267. The lines of communication were so perilous that the 1,000 communiqué was memorized by the courier to prevent the actual document falling into enemy hands. Naturally, by the time he reached Chin Peng, he had forgotten large portions of the message.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 254.

hope of arming a regular army as their strategies intended. They could not even arm all of their guerrillas. Under such conditions, it barely mattered how many weapons the Communists had at the beginning of the Emergency. They were inevitably going to find themselves fighting a war without weapons.

### ***Chapter 8: Liberated Zones***

The Communists' problems did not end with a lack of weapons. The logistical and geographical dilemmas that plagued their arms procurement had other dismaying military effects. These circumstances also predetermined that the CPM would never be able to capture or defend a liberated zone in which a Communist government could be erected. This military deficiency constituted an insurmountable hurdle for the CPM's political campaign.

The establishment of liberated areas is a key component of guerrilla strategy. Mao made this abundantly clear in his 1937 publication, *Yu Chi Chan* (Guerrilla Warfare).

Ability to fight a war without a rear area is a fundamental characteristic of guerrilla action, but this does not mean that guerrillas can exist and function over long periods of time without the development of base areas.

The Chinese leader thus outlines the necessary evolution of a guerrilla movement. The insurrection may begin without territory to rely on for support, but they cannot maintain this status indefinitely. Rather, the guerrillas must soon establish base areas from which food and manpower can be procured.<sup>126</sup>

Mao's directives on this subject were well known to Chin Peng. As he formulated his grand strategy in 1948, the liberation of base areas was his primary military goal.<sup>127</sup> This priority was best summarized in a Central Committee directive stating "Without bases, it is impossible to wage a protracted, difficult and relentless revolutionary struggle."<sup>128</sup> With such a clear emphasis placed on the establishment of liberated areas, how was it that the guerrilla army never successfully captured any territory?

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<sup>126</sup> Mao Tse-tung, 108.

<sup>127</sup> Chin Peng, 231; Clutterbuck, 44; O'Ballance, 91; Short, 104.

<sup>128</sup> Malayan Communist Party, *Strategic Problems of the Malayan Revolutionary War*, 61. Quoted in Hanrahan, 114.

The Communists' difficulty was once again due to logistical and geographical circumstances far beyond their control. The simple fact was that Malaya was an inhospitable environment for a small guerrilla force to gain liberated zones.

Recalling the previous chapter's argument, we know that, due to lack of arms, the CPM was limited in the size of the units that it could sustain. This not only constituted an obstacle to weapon recovery, but to establishing liberated zones as well. Capturing even the smallest village required the concentration of large numbers of guerrillas to subdue the police while indoctrinating the villagers. As we have seen, under the conditions present in Malaya, such concentrations were quickly proven impossible to maintain. During the few instances in which such strength was mustered, geographical factors betrayed the guerrillas and exposed them to vicious reprisals from the security forces.

The difficulties imposed by the Malayan landscape are most clear when compared to the Chinese environment in which Maoism thrived. In *Yu Chi Chan*, the Chinese revolutionary leader describes how the characteristics of his homeland gave his movement its advantage. He states that bases could be erected almost anywhere because the Japanese did not have nearly enough troops to occupy all of their conquered territory. Furthermore, the population of China was so massive and scattered across the vast nation that the invaders stood no chance of severing the connection between the Party and the people. These geographical realities allowed Mao's guerrillas to occupy villages temporarily whenever the Japanese forces were absent. At such times the guerrillas would "educate" the locals, erect communist institutions and obtain supplies until Japanese forces returned to the area, at which point the guerrillas would promptly withdraw to wait for the occupiers to leave again. Over time, guerrilla governance converted enough villagers to transform some of these temporary bases into permanent loci of support. In such

provinces—which were chosen with care to be remote and easily defensible—popular support was converted into self-defense units as well as new guerrillas. These areas no longer needed to be abandoned but could be defended against the Japanese. Meanwhile, they provided the vital resources to further grow the movement. As the number of liberated zones increased, the ranks of Mao’s forces swelled, allowing the occupation of more and larger towns. Eventually, his army would become large enough to emerge from hiding and defeat the Japanese in conventional warfare. All of this success, it must be remembered, was made possible by the geography of China, where bases could be easily established among the vast rural population.<sup>129</sup>

As the reader is already well aware, circumstances in Malaya were vastly different and entirely less hospitable to the creation of liberated zones. In contrast to China’s gigantic population, Malaya contained little more than 10 million individuals. More importantly, whereas the former nation’s people were scattered throughout its vast territory, Malaya’s populace was densely packed along two coastlines. Along these coasts, and crisscrossing through center, roads and railways and rivers connected villages and towns to the urban centers. Even secluded rubber plantations had to be connected by roads so their product could be exported. So there were almost no populated areas on the Peninsula that could be considered remote, save the tiny aboriginal communities buried in the rainforest.<sup>130</sup> Also, recall from the previous chapter that Malaya contained a well-maintained communications infrastructure, of which the security forces took full advantage.<sup>131</sup>

This environment, the complete opposite of the situation present in China, made the seizure of liberated zones impossible. Malaya’s most remote villages were still too easily

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<sup>129</sup> Mao Tse-tung, 108-112.

<sup>130</sup> Clutterbuck, 19; O’Ballance, 37. See also, Department of State. *Malaya: A New Independent Nation*, 4.

<sup>131</sup> Central Political Bureau Malayan Communist Party, *Supplementary Views of the Central Political Bureau on “Strategic Problems of the Malayan Revolutionary War”*. Quoted in Hanrahan, 118.

accessible to the British forces. Whenever guerrillas emerged from hiding to attack a population center, the excellent lines of communication ensured that the British command was quickly informed. Well-established roads and railways then allowed reinforcements to traverse the small country in hours to confront the guerrillas, who had to choose between flight and almost certain defeat.<sup>132</sup> Instead of a nation too vast and inaccessible for an occupier to subdue, Chin Peng was faced with a small and easily navigable country where the enemy was able “to launch a sudden attack at any time and at any place.”<sup>133</sup>

The hopelessness of this situation is best displayed by the example of Gua Musang. Of all the CPM’s attempts at establishing a liberated zone, this was the only effort that achieved anything. Yet, even the promise shown in this singular instance came to nothing as the Communists’ gains were immediately dispelled.

Gua Musang is a town in the northern center of Malaya, in the Kelantan province. At the start of the Emergency, its populace was sympathetic to the communist cause and had strongly supported the Party during the anti-Japanese resistance. The town was identified early on by Chin Peng as a potential target for liberation and, in the summer of 1948, a heavy assault was planned. A 100-man force of guerrillas attacked Gua Musang on July 17 and managed to take the entire police force hostage. The CPM had liberated its first territory; however, celebrations would have to wait. British reinforcements arrived immediately and, after five days of intense fighting, the surviving guerrillas abandoned the town.<sup>134</sup> Not long after, the Central Committee would abandon the use of large guerrilla units and with it any hope of liberating another town. For the remainder of the Emergency, the Communists would never liberate another municipality. Gua Musang became their first and last liberated zone.

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<sup>132</sup> Hanrahan, 66.

<sup>133</sup> Malayan Communist Party, *Strategic Problems of the Malayan Revolutionary War*, 61. Quoted in Hanrahan, 115.

<sup>134</sup> Chin Peng, 232.



The CPM had won an initial victory, but it was the mobility of the security forces that decided the end result. The Communists might temporarily take control of territory, but their gains would inevitably be counteracted by overwhelming force that could arrive in a few hours. Contrast this with the Chinese model, where the guerrillas held towns for seasons at a time but still required years to educate the populace and convert it into a base area. With their “liberations” lasting for only a few days, the CPM had no chance of swaying the people to the cause.

As much as a lack of liberated territory presented a military and logistical dilemma to the CPM, its most damning effect was purely political. At its very root, any revolution must be considered a competition between two different governments, for the ideological support of each citizen. To win widespread approval, it is essential for the usurping government to demonstrate an ability to better administer to the people than its opponent. In China, temporary guerrilla control of remote towns and villages established their credentials as a competing source of government. Mao, recognizing the political significance of this governance, laid down specific guidelines for guerrilla governments.<sup>135</sup> By administering to the village, feeding and protecting its inhabitants, guerrillas could dispel the accusations of banditry and display the advantages of their dominance. Utterly denied the opportunity to erect a local government for more than a few days, the CPM had no chance to prove its governing ability and by doing so convince localities to switch their loyalty to the communist cause. This must be considered one of the Revolution’s most fundamental obstacles; one that the Communists never had a hope of overcoming.

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<sup>135</sup> Mao Tse-tung, 111.

### *Chapter 9: Counterproductive Attacks*

Mao's doctrine for revolutionary warfare gives the following responsibilities to guerrillas:

The guerrillas are to exterminate small forces of the enemy; to harass and weaken large forces; to attack enemy lines of communication...to force the enemy to disperse his strength.<sup>136</sup>

These are specifically military targets provided by the Chinese leader, and they are integral to his overall strategy for revolution. However, when the CPM undertook their insurrection, military targets were almost never attacked.<sup>137</sup> Instead, their usual opponent was the Federation Police or the Special Constabulary, which were almost entirely manned by Malays. Augmenting these operations were frequent actions aimed at civilians. The communists attacked the rubber and tin industries by burning workers huts, breaking machinery, destroying mines and slashing hundreds of thousands of rubber trees.<sup>138</sup> Civilians were frightened by the repeated sabotage of buses and trains, arson, robbery and murder.<sup>139</sup> At times, this violence was well-planned and executed to avoid civilian casualties, but often it appeared random and cruel, as when grenades were tossed into cinemas.<sup>140</sup> This type of violence was exactly the opposite of what Mao advocated; he argued that such attacks would only serve to politically undermine a revolution. Why then did the Malayan Communists, who were well schooled in Mao's theories, undertake this campaign of counterproductive assaults? Why weren't guerrillas who harassed civilians stopped? The answer is that the conditions on the ground at the start of the Emergency prevented the guerrillas

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<sup>136</sup> Mao Tse-tung, 53.

<sup>137</sup> Clutterbuck, 51; O'Ballance, 82. O'Ballance actually asserts that the MRLA never made an attack on British military forces. However, Clutterbuck suggests that a few assaults were made on armored vehicle convoys, sent to reinforce embattled police stations.

<sup>138</sup> Chin Peng, 281; O'Ballance, 83.

<sup>139</sup> Chin Peng, 283; Hanrahan, 68-69.

<sup>140</sup> Chin Peng, 214; Short, 100; Thompson, 25.

from attacking militarily-useful targets and so they channeled their violence towards those they were attempting to recruit.

On October 1, 1951, the Central Committee issued a review of their guerrillas' strategies and performance since the beginning of the Emergency. The primary revelation of this directive was to underline that the guerrilla campaign had been counterproductive.<sup>141</sup> It attempted to address the political disaster that had been caused by numerous attacks on economic and civilian targets. Yet, no revision—short of ceasing all guerrilla activities—could prevent these attacks because the underlying problem was founded in the preexisting situation in Malaya. A large portion of this difficulty was due to the size of guerrilla units which, as we earlier suggested, were limited by transportation and supply restrictions. The other obstacle was the CPM's communications dilemma, which left individual guerrilla units cut off from the Central Committee.

In Chapter 7, we discussed the geographical predicament that prevented the Malayan communists from forming units of more than a few dozen guerrillas. The military problems created by small units made the CPM's strategy with regards to weapons and liberated territory impossible, and for similar reasons, small units forced the Communists to carry out counterproductive attacks.

Mao dictated that guerrillas must only attack the most vulnerable parts of their enemy's defenses, using deception to further weaken the opposition.<sup>142</sup> The enemy forces are likely to be better trained and better equipped; therefore guerrillas should only attack from a position of relative strength, in numbers far greater than the target. However, in Chapter 7 it was shown that the guerrillas were forced to keep their army dispersed in many small units of 20-40 men,

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<sup>141</sup> Hanrahan, 73.

<sup>142</sup> Mao Tse-tung, 46.

roughly equal to the size of a British platoon. This meant that the guerrillas could not attack even the smallest British formation. The CPM was unable to attempt any significant offensive action against the regular military forces. Over the 12-year Emergency the guerrillas inflicted a pitiful 1,478 casualties to the British Expeditionary Force. In contrast, they inflicted 2,947 casualties to the Malay security forces and almost twice that number to civilians over the course of the Emergency.<sup>143</sup> Unfortunately for the CPM, even attacks on the Malay security units, who certainly could have been considered the enemy, were counterproductive. The fact that nearly all the skirmishes involved Chinese guerrillas fighting with Malay policemen only served to widen the racial divide that we discussed in Chapter 4. Occasionally, guerrillas would actually release surrendered Malay officers in an attempt to combat the appearance of a racial division.<sup>144</sup> No gesture of goodwill could change the fact, however, that the brunt of guerrilla attacks were borne by civilian victims, both Malays and Chinese.

Of course, an irrevocable inability to attack military targets does not necessarily explain the CPM's repeated campaign of violence against civilians. The reason such attacks occurred, and continued even after the Central Politburo condemned them, is rooted in the unalterable difficulty and complexity of communications between communist units.

Before we consider the state of guerrilla communications in Malaya, it will be useful to review Mao's recommendations for communications equipment and strategy. According to his revolutionary theories, every unit must have communication equipment of some sort.<sup>145</sup> More crucial, he says, is that every larger formation must be outfitted with a telephone or radio

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<sup>143</sup> O'Ballance, 177-178. This 1:2:4 ratio of military casualties to Malay security casualties to civilian casualties is, in fact, still deceptive. While the bulk of Malay and civilian casualties occurred during CPM attacks, the vast majority of British casualties came during British offensives and they were not due to communist initiatives.

<sup>144</sup> Clutterbuck, 48.

<sup>145</sup> Mao Tse-tung, 83.

equipment.<sup>146</sup> Mao makes these demands because organization is central to all of his guerrilla tactics. “Guerrilla activities, to be most effective, must be coordinated,” he argues, and he lays out dangers posed by an unorganized force.<sup>147</sup> He warns that a disorderly guerrilla unit will only give credence to those who call the revolutionaries bandits and terrorists. This warning would be shown to be especially prescient for the Malayan Emergency.

The CPM was inevitably unable to prevent its forces from engaging in counterproductive attacks because the poor state of communication in their army prevented the Central Committee from exercising control over individual units. Communication, a pillar of revolutionary strategy, was endlessly complicated by the CPM’s lack of communications equipment. In the months leading up to the Emergency, the CPM had purchased 10 portable military radios; however, the surprise declaration prevented them from transporting the equipment to Malaya.<sup>148</sup> Instead of equipping every unit with a radio, as Mao instructed, the guerrillas were unable to provide any of their units with a transmitter throughout the 12-year conflict.<sup>149</sup> The Communists were forced to forgo any modern system of communication and rely on 1000 year old tactics.

The only communication system left available to the Communists was a courier system. They relied on individual messengers to pass coded instructions from the Central Politburo to each unit. Without the use of automobiles or even horses, couriers could only make use of their own two feet to transport them from unit to unit. Yet, this ancient technique saw some updated tactics to ensure secrecy. Instead of providing couriers with the location of the guerrilla camps in their area—which often moved to avoid patrols anyway—the communists used a system of letter drop-boxes to pass information. Each courier was told the location of the letter boxes in

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>148</sup> Chin Peng, 335.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 278.

the district and the days he was to check it. Different couriers visited each letter box on different days to ensure that they never met each other.<sup>150</sup> Each message was coded; more to prevent the courier from reading it than anything else. While this system provided some desperately-needed security for their communications—one disloyal courier could do little more than give the location of a few empty boxes—it was also tortuously slow.<sup>151</sup> As noted earlier, Communists could not safely use the roads, much less the railroads that were concentrated in the West or even the few tracks that crossed the peninsula. These conduits were closely watched and check points increased the risk of arrest. Instead, the couriers often had to make the arduous trek through the dense Malayan jungle. It could easily take six months for an order from the Central Committee to travel from headquarters to the state committees to the district committees to the branch committees and finally to individual units.<sup>152</sup>

As a result of this inevitable impediment to communication, the Central Committee had almost no ability to supervise the actions of its guerrilla fighters. Units could not wait half a year for the Politburo to designate new targets for them. Regional political committees and local guerrilla commanders were given the responsibility for directing offensives.<sup>153</sup> Relinquishing this authority, even if it was the only logistically-sensible option, had immensely destructive consequences for the insurgency. Left to choose their own targets, local leaders ignored the political damage done by the attacks they authorized. At the start of the conflict, committees were emboldened by the headlines they made in the enemy newspaper.<sup>154</sup> Without more specific directions, they focused on the quotas assigned by the politburo recommending a certain number

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<sup>150</sup> Clutterbuck, 89; Short, 502.

<sup>151</sup> O'Ballance, 99.

<sup>152</sup> Clutterbuck, 90.

<sup>153</sup> Chin Peng, 205. Short, 350.

<sup>154</sup> Chin Peng, 226

of each type of attack per month.<sup>155</sup> As the fighting continued, further operations were devised as guerrillas sought vengeance for lost comrades.<sup>156</sup> A cycle of escalating violence can be seen in this chaos, with guerrilla retribution inciting increased local resistance which in turn foments further guerrilla attacks. Through it all, the political significance of their assaults was completely disregarded. Thus, across the nation, guerrillas committed acts of violence that infuriated the masses and undermined their political appeal.

One such counterproductive attack mentioned in Chin Peng's memoirs is the assassination of David Chen, a school principal in Penang. Chin Peng is convinced that the district committee that authorized the murder was correct in its suspicion that Chen was a nationalist who discouraged his students from aiding the CPM. Yet, he still condemns the attack because the committee did not consider its political ramifications, which completely outweighed whatever damage the principal might have done to the Communists' cause.<sup>157</sup> Recall that the Emergency itself was instigated by the murders at Sungei Siput. The very killings that began the armed conflict are yet another example of an unsanctioned attack that ignored political consequences. It was the first attack—or perhaps just one of the first—of hundreds of politically irresponsible assaults that Chin Peng regrets not being able to stop.<sup>158</sup>

Taken together, the MRLA's inability to attack military units and its seeming affinity for civilian targets established a guerrilla campaign that accomplished very little militarily, while destroying the political appeal of the communist cause. While the CPM claimed that its enemy was the "British Imperialists," it was ordinary Malayan citizens who were forced to bear the

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<sup>155</sup> Clutterbuck, 51.

<sup>156</sup> Chin Peng, 222.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 311.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 222.

brunt of their attacks.<sup>159</sup> The attacks on rubber trees and tin mines deprived thousands of wage earners of their employment as sabotaged trains, power lines and water supplies inconvenienced and angered those it did not directly injure.<sup>160</sup> By the Communists' own admission, their activities antagonized the people, both Malays and Chinese, and made it "impossible to further consolidate the link between the Party and the masses."<sup>161</sup>

In the end, the inevitable failure of the CPM to prevent counterproductive attacks had precisely the effects that Mao predicts will result from an unorganized guerrilla campaign. The Chinese leader argues that uncoordinated guerrilla violence will only give credence to those who call the Communists "bandits" and dismisses them as criminals.<sup>162</sup> Many have used such terms, along with "terrorist" and worse, to describe the CPM, from the British who fought them to the historians who documented the Emergency. It is an label which the author of this essay believes they did not deserve, but that they nonetheless earned. The Malayan Communists were revolutionaries and soldiers, and in the course of their struggle some of their members committed misguided atrocities which deserve denunciation. However, these atrocities were not the objectives of the CPM leaders, but rather the unpreventable consequence of unfortunate circumstances. Furthermore, the CPM's attempts to stop such attacks, while unsuccessful, provides evidence that the goals of the Communists were not the campaign of terror that they initiated. The use of negative designations in British propaganda was to be expected, but their continued prevalence in the works of historians is a severe breach of objectivity. On the other hand, the pervasiveness of such negative terms in the historiography further underlines how much damage the guerrillas' attacks did to their cause.

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<sup>159</sup> Hanrahan 101.

<sup>160</sup> O'Ballance, 112-113; Stubbs, 62.

<sup>161</sup> Short, 319.

<sup>162</sup> Mao Tse-tung, 45.



The chain of logic behind this argument is not the simplest offered in this work, yet it is critical to my hypothesis and therefore merits review. Geography limited both the size of guerrilla units and their ability to communicate with their political leaders. Geography inevitably prevented the guerrillas from attempting serious attacks on British units. In the absence of radio equipment, geography also prevented them from exercising sufficient control over their units to stop them from attacking counterproductive targets. Thus, the CPM's unbalanced guerrilla campaign, which ignored political persuasion and embittered civilians, was a direct result of the geography of Malaya, as well as the CPM's lack of equipment when the Emergency began. No amount of inspired leadership could have changed these facts; therefore this major contribution to the CPM's political and military failure was inevitable and foreseeable just a month after the Emergency began.

### *Chapter 10: Inability to Communicate with the Masses*

In a revolutionary war, battles with guns and bombs are actually quite secondary to the battle for the support of the people. While historians and media figures frequently focus on skirmishes and ambushes, an insurrection's success inevitably hinges on the rebels' ability to win mass approval. Unsurprisingly, it was Mao Tse-tung who eloquently tied this theory into communist doctrine. In no uncertain terms, Mao asserted that military victory was worthless without political success. As the CPM purportedly based their revolution on Mao's doctrine, one would expect that it would pay heed to this central theme. Circumstances dictated, however, that politics and propaganda play a back seat to offense and survival. Unfortunately, for the CPM, its actions would have to speak for themselves. Lacking a propaganda campaign to sway Malay opinion, the CPM could never significantly expand its recruitment or present a realistic political threat to the British.

In *On Guerrilla Warfare*, Mao Tse-tung ascribes primary importance to the relationship between the guerrilla and the masses. "Because guerrilla warfare basically derives from the masses and is supported by them, it can neither exist nor flourish if it separates itself from their sympathies or cooperation."<sup>163</sup> This acute political awareness underlies all of Mao's theories, and it contributed greatly to the leader's success in China. He realized that guerrillas must strive with special determination to sway the masses because their reputation predisposes people to distrust. To counteract this image and win this essential support, Mao emphasized an all-encompassing propaganda campaign to be carried out by every member of the revolution. Discipline and deference was stressed to guerrillas, committee members or lowly messengers; all Communists had to play a second role as educators of the people.<sup>164</sup> It was this example that the

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<sup>163</sup> Mao Tse-tung, 44.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, 45-46.

CPM set out to follow. Their complete inability to follow Mao's strictures contributed greatly to their inevitable political failure.

While the CPM survived the police state imposed on Malaya after the Emergency Declaration with few losses in personnel, the political aftermath of those first few days was nothing short of a catastrophe. The cost in equipment alone may have been enough to foretell failure. In the days following the declaration, the Communists lost access to their most important propaganda tool. When the *Min Sheng Pau* newspaper was shut down, the CPM lost its only tool for mass persuasion. The paper had been with them through the Japanese occupation and the Malayan Union. A newspaper gives voice to the arguments of an ideology and marshals the populace to the cause. The *Min Sheng Pau* had been integral in this capacity during the anti-Japanese resistance, as well as the union campaign.<sup>165</sup> From their hideouts in the jungle, the CPM could find no replacement for the lost paper. The communists were also denied use of the radio, the other prevalent tool for mass propaganda. While the CPM had multiple radio receivers, they lacked the transmitters necessary to broadcast information to the public.<sup>166</sup> Chin Peng had attempted to purchase 10 transmitters on the black market just before the Emergency was declared. These low-power models would not have been able to reach very far, but they still would have constituted a crucial asset for communicating with the masses. As it happened, the transmitters actually reached Singapore, but the CPM was never able to retrieve them. Days after they arrived on the peninsula, the Emergency was declared, and the bridges connecting to Johore became an impossible barrier for the contraband to cross. These developments effectively severed the CPM's most efficient connections to the people. Consider the fact that Mao instructs the revolutionary to outfit each guerrilla unit with both a radio

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<sup>165</sup> Chin Peng, 221; Hanrahan, 39.

<sup>166</sup> Chin Peng, 221.

transmitter and a printing press. The Chinese leader considered this equipment just as important as medical supplies and ammunition. The CPM's complete lack of transmitters and printing equipment would have dumbfounded Mao, and it displays the grim circumstances that the Communists faced. Without the ability to disseminate propaganda en masse, Chin Peng would be forced rely on face-to-face recruitment of supporters and guerrillas.

This alternative form of propagandizing would prove inadequate, at best. So much of the communist infrastructure had fled to the jungle at the start of the Emergency that there were too few agents left to communicate their message to the people. The Central Committee attempted to address this problem a year and a half later when it issued a directive instructing the Party "not to isolate itself from the masses...by going too deep into the jungle."<sup>167</sup> One directive could not fix the gaping hole in their political campaign, however. The Central Committee would continue its attempts to instill political awareness in their members with successive orders and proclamations. But it would take years for such orders to reach the units and be implemented. Even Chin Peng admits that it was not until 1953 that his units began acting with any political intelligence.<sup>168</sup> Unfortunately, after five years the CPM had already destroyed its popular appeal.

The Communists had attempted to replace face-to-face organizing with an intermediary group of sympathizers called the *Min Yuen*. This organization had been created during the Japanese occupation as a reserve of ideologically-inclined young men and women who provided logistical support and replacement guerrillas to the main fighting force. No less a figure than Chin Peng had been in charge of erecting the *Min Yuen*, which at the time was referred to as the Anti-Japanese Union.<sup>169</sup> In the conflict against the British, the *Min Yuen* had been intended to play an even broader role as the primary educator of the public. They were given lectures by

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<sup>167</sup> Short, 207.

<sup>168</sup> Chin Peng, 315.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 78.

political commissars on how to best convince and recruit supporters.<sup>170</sup> Yet, once again, the CPM's intentions would be disrupted by the timing of the Emergency Declaration. Chin Peng remarks in his memoirs that the unexpected declaration totally disrupted his efforts to prepare the *Min Yuen* for combat. It had been his hope that at the start of hostilities, both the military and civilian arms of the rebellion would have sufficient strength in numbers and resources to sustain them through prolonged combat. When he was forced to go into hiding in June, 1948, neither of these goals had been met.<sup>171</sup> The result was that the guerrillas were forced to rely almost entirely on the *Min Yuen* for food and other supplies. However, the civilian force was not nearly numerous enough to supply food and carry out a propaganda campaign. They had no choice but to focus on the immediate problem of sustenance and set propaganda aside. In the absence of political persuasion, gaining supplies willingly from the masses would become more and more of a problem, and the *Min Yuen* would be forced to rely on violence and intimidation to reach their quotas. Thus, a cycle was created in which a few instances of violence made finding eager supporters more difficult and necessitated further reliance on terror tactics.<sup>172</sup>

An additional propaganda problem that faced the CPM was its total lack of a political face for their movement. While historians have ignored this aspect of the Emergency, I believe that it may have played an important role in ensuring the Communist's defeat. The most successful communist revolutions have been led by such tremendous personalities as Fidel Castro, Mao Tse-tung, Ho Chi Minh and Vladimir Lenin. These inspiring, charismatic figures provided their movements with additional support and loyalty long before victory was assured. When the actions of subordinates could have alienated the public, their visible leadership prevented individuals from blaming the movement as a whole. Contrast such examples with the

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid, 273.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, 222.

<sup>172</sup> Chin Peng, 284; O'Ballance, 92-93.

Malayan communist leader, Chin Peng. The Secretary General of the CPM was barely known to the rank and file of the Communist Party. To the Malayan public, he was a nameless, faceless entity for more than three years after the Emergency Declaration. Chin Peng was only unmasked in September, 1951 when the British put a massive price on his head.<sup>173</sup> Even then he remained a shadowy figure; the photo that ran in the newspapers was five years old and almost completely unrecognizable.<sup>174</sup> Without a liberated area where he could be shielded from British attacks, he could never reveal himself to the public. During his tenure at the reigns of the CPM, Chin Peng gave no speeches or even attempted to communicate directly with the people.

Thus, the masses were left to judge the revolution's merits in an environment almost completely devoid of any communist propaganda. Without any positive stimuli, they could only base their opinion on the CPM's actions. As was established in Chapter 9, the guerrilla offensive was massively counterproductive, creating the image of Communists as terrorists and bandits. And, since there was no popular face of the Party, the masses could not be blamed for associating the CPM with its guerrillas and *Min Yuen* members who too often seemed more like criminals than revolutionaries.

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<sup>173</sup> Chin Peng, 273.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, 300.

### *Chapter 11: Media Coverage*

One final piece of the puzzle should be discussed before the book is closed on the Malayan Emergency. We have already established that the communist movement was fatally hamstrung by racial divides, leadership deficits, economic circumstances, as well as military and political disadvantages. Yet, one small glimmer of hope may be imagined that could have led to at least, partial victory. Regardless of how hopeless the situation on the Peninsula might have been, a pessimistic mindset across the globe in the United Kingdom could theoretically have brought British involvement to an end. As was witnessed in the conclusion of the Vietnam War, protests at home can contribute significantly to convincing democratic leaders to end an intervention. Malaya was not Vietnam, however. There were two major differences that made it highly unlikely that the British public would be incited to oppose the war.

According to the Museum of Broadcast Communications, Vietnam was the “television war.” It was the first major conflict to be widely covered by the medium, with nightly newscasts showing new footage almost every night. Unprecedented images from the frontlines were for the first time a common sight to Americans. While historians disagree as to the extent that television influenced the anti-war movement, we can agree that the coverage of the war contributed to the protest movement to at least some degree. President Diem, of South Vietnam, is often quoted saying, “this war can only be lost by the American press.”<sup>175</sup>

This tool for victory was not available to the CPM, however. Earlier conflicts, such as the Korean War and the Malayan Emergency, occurred before television technology and distribution had progressed sufficiently to make regular coverage possible.<sup>176</sup> The Emergency was covered mainly by newspaper articles and radio broadcasts that by their very nature

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<sup>175</sup> Thompson, 100.

<sup>176</sup> Daniel Hallin, *Vietnam on Television*, the Museum of Broadcast Communications. Accessed January 10 2009 <<http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/V/htmlV/vietnamonte/vietnamonte.htm>>

distanced the public from the actual fighting. Such news mediums were also easily biased by the government, especially when reporting to the British public. Indeed, evidence points to a significant amount of censorship in the coverage of the Emergency. Whether this was simply the necessary delay of confidential information described by Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Robert Thompson or the “white-washing” alleged by Chin Peng is hard to discern.<sup>177</sup> More objective authors, such as Anthony Short, have noted that the British news services sometimes manipulated the more brutal tales to cast a better light on their forces and defame the CPM.<sup>178</sup> What can be determined is that the information that reached the British Isles was, at least, occasionally slanted and always less evocative than the coverage of the Vietnam War.

The result of this media reality was that there was little hope of souring the British public’s view of the war through images and stories of brutality. The one notable story that did arrive uncensored on British shores had practically no effect on the public, much to Chin Peng’s chagrin. In late April, 1952, the communist newspaper, *the Daily Worker*, ran a series of photographs of British soldiers holding the severed heads of dead guerrillas. Yet, even after repudiating claims that the photos were mere propaganda, even after the British government confirmed their authenticity, the British public was not shocked. Whether they believed General Templer’s excuse that decapitation was necessary to identify the dead, or like the major newspapers, they ignored the entire story, the British public proved immune to the horrific images. As Chin Peng laments, “What today can only be judged as the most ghastly visual images of the Emergency were relegated to bottom drawers.”<sup>179</sup>

With the most provocative images receiving no attention and the most engaging stories stripped of intrigue, the tool of media persuasion was effectively denied to the CPM. They had

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<sup>177</sup> Chin Peng, 241; Thompson, 100.

<sup>178</sup> Short, 168-169.

<sup>179</sup> Chin Peng, 307.



no hope of rallying protesters to combat the war effort through evocative exposures of British excesses.

None of this is to suggest that, had the Emergency taken place ten years later, television would have been much more successful at inciting opposition. Such speculation is beyond the scope of this discussion. What has been established, however, is that in the media environment of Britain in the 1940s and 50s, the CPM had no hope at all of fomenting hostility to the Emergency.

### *Chapter 12: Historiographical Significance*

Since the conclusion of the Emergency in 1960, many authors have used the British counterinsurgency effort as a model for successful anti-guerrilla campaigns. These writers attempt to break the conflict down in order to empirically analyze the factors that contributed to the Communists' defeat. The obvious objective is to learn what lessons from the Malayan struggle can be applied to new insurgencies. In this manner, historians have lauded the British's psychological operations, their military flexibility, their administrator's independence and their use of small, mobile units. In light of the evidence that this text has unearthed, however, the true significance of these arguments is called into question. If the Malayan Emergency's outcome was never in doubt there are no longer any causal links between these authors' factors and victory. Each author is therefore wrong to assert that a specific British strategy or organization deserves credit for the CPM's defeat. Due to the insurmountable obstacles posed by the factors and conditions which we have already discussed, the communist revolution in Malaya was always going to fail.

The British psychological warfare program is an example of an aspect that has received a large share of the credit for victory. Richard Stubbs places a particular emphasis on the "hearts and minds" strategy of propaganda and bribery carried out by the British. He suggests that the British won the war by convincing the populace to deny support to the Communists, while using rewards and manipulative propaganda to incite guerrillas to surrender.<sup>180</sup> More recently, however, studies of greater depth by Kumar Ramakrishna have suggested that psychological warfare's contribution was that it shortened the length of the war, not that it actually prevented the CPM from prevailing. Ramakrishna notes that the consequential segment of the conflict

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<sup>180</sup> Stubbs, 184.

ended in 1954, years before the psychological campaign produced any results.<sup>181</sup> Furthermore, my study shows that the Malayan Emergency had no real chance of success; the propaganda campaign's only effect was to bring the conflict to a close more rapidly than it would have otherwise. This is not an inconsequential effect, but neither is it as vital as Richard Stubbs believed.

Inevitably, the factors praised by other authors fall into the same trap. John Nagl argues that the British succeeded because they learned from their mistakes and quickly adapted to the intricacies of the Malayan situation. David Ucko focuses on the small unit tactics that the British counterinsurgency pioneered in the Fifties. Meanwhile, Walter Ladwig asserts that Britain's success was rooted in the Malayan High Commissioner's independence from Whitehall. In this extraordinarily interesting article in *Military Review*, Ladwig suggests that British officials on the Peninsula had a remarkably free hand in carrying out their counterinsurgency—in contrast to the micro-managed American generals in Vietnam—which allowed them to effectively deal with the insurgency. These arguments are all compelling, however, each is flawed because each assumes that there was still a war left to win when these strategies were initiated.

I will present one final piece of proof that the Malayan Communists faced insurmountable impediments to their dreams of revolution. Throughout the course of the Emergency, even when scholars point out that the counterinsurgency was failing completely, the CPM never came close to mounting a serious political or military challenge to the British.

During the first three years of the war, the British effort was unorganized, undersupplied and politically insensitive. Chin Peng and Anthony Short both provide evidence that the British Administration was frequently in disarray before 1952. Two High Commissioners would resign

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<sup>181</sup> Ramakrishna, Kumar. 'Bribing the Reds to Give Up': Rewards Policy in the Malayan Emergency. *War in History* vol. 9, no. 3. (2002), 332.

before a suitable figure could be found.<sup>182</sup> Meanwhile, Short reveals that “for the first three or five years of the Emergency there were insufficient forces at the government’s disposal.”<sup>183</sup>

Robert Thompson bemoans the early counterinsurgent tactics which achieved “no lasting results.”<sup>184</sup> Furthermore, during this time the British forces committed numerous acts of brutality and murder that undermined their benign propaganda image.<sup>185</sup>

Why was it that during this period of British incompetence and disorganization the CPM never took advantage of its opponent’s weakness? The answer is, by now, clear. The Communists were prevented from taking advantage of British ineptitude because of the circumstances and conditions that we have discussed. It did not matter that the Security Forces were undermanned; the guerrilla army did not possess sufficient weapons or large enough units to attack military targets. It did not matter that the Colonial Government was occasionally in chaos; the CPM was almost completely deprived of leadership for the entire Emergency. Even the ineffective and brutal tactics of the Security Forces were insignificant. Whatever excesses occurred could not be publicized because the CPM had no mass propaganda equipment and, in any case, British massacres paled in comparison to the counterproductive terror campaign that the CPM had no ability to prevent its members from conducting.

The Communists’ two great achievements actually serve to reinforce this assertion. The first was the CPM’s momentary liberation of Gua Musang. This singular occasion of guerrilla success constituted the only liberated zone that the Communists ever held. More lasting than their success, however, was the unavoidable conclusion that defending liberated territories was impossible.

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<sup>182</sup> Chin Peng, 235, 295; Short, 306.

<sup>183</sup> Short, 149. See also, Short, 114, 135, 231.

<sup>184</sup> Thompson, 117.

<sup>185</sup> Short, 161-162, 166-167. See also, Chin Peng, 239.

The second achievement was the assassination of High Commissioner Henry Gurney in 1951. While the ambush of his motorcade on Pahang road shocked the British Administration and temporarily froze the counterinsurgency effort, the manner in which Gurney died actually displays the fundamental obstacles confronting the CPM. He was shot during a random attack by guerrillas who had no idea who was inside the vehicle. After killing the High Commissioner, however, the Communists were unable to subdue his entire escort and they were forced to withdraw without recovering any weapons. This is just one prolific example from the hundreds of assaults that ultimately failed because the guerrillas were unable to field large enough units to annihilate the opposing force.

Even during the three years in which the British Forces were in political and military disarray, the Communist Revolution never presented a real challenge to the colonial government. The CPM's greatest achievements were more significant for their ultimate failure than for anything they accomplished. They showcase the overwhelming obstacles that the Communists had no chance of overcoming.

With this understanding in place, it should be clear that the failure of the Malayan Emergency was not a repudiation of Mao's theories as Edgar O'Ballance believed.<sup>186</sup> Malaya's history should not be used as an example of how to combat a communist uprising because the CPM was unable to apply the Chinese leader's guidelines in the Malayan environment that was so severely inhospitable to their revolution. Suggesting that the British counterinsurgency proved the method for beating Maoist counterinsurgencies is akin to asserting that the 1939 German blitzkrieg of Poland displayed the best method for defeating mounted cavalry. In such an unbalanced situation, strategy and tactics barely matter. In Malaya, the CPM was at such an

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<sup>186</sup> O'Ballance, 139.

outrageous disadvantage that the strategies of the British were of little consequence. The Communists were always going to lose.

### ***Chapter 13: Conclusion***

In 1952, the Emergency reached a turning point. The end of the conflict was still almost a decade away, however, the outcome was no longer in doubt. It had taken four years of dismal failure, but the Communists finally understood that they were hopelessly outmatched. In its own appraisal of the situation, the Central Committee stated that “A military victory for the CPM...was out of the question.”<sup>187</sup> A limited guerrilla campaign would be maintained by withdrawing to the Thai border, but Chin Peng’s dream of confronting the British in regular combat was dashed.

Five years later, in 1957, the Secretary General would emerge from the jungle for the famous Baling talks, only to disappear again when the talks failed.<sup>188</sup> The CPM would conduct sporadic attacks over the next three years that Chin Peng explains were meant to “serve notice to Kuala Lumpur that the CPM must still be considered a serious threat.”<sup>189</sup> All aspirations of liberated territory and mass uprisings had vanished. The CPM’s political program had been completely undercut by the British announcement that Malaya would gain independence with national elections in 1959. Guerrilla morale vanished almost overnight. With the British already on the way out there was little motivation to risk their lives in further attacks. Thus, more than 1,500 guerrillas would either desert or surrender in 1958. As the election year approached, Chin Peng ordered his remaining guerrillas—just 350 survivors—to disperse and end their attacks.<sup>190</sup> Independence, to this day called *Merdeka* in Malaysia, gave power to a British-supported, Malayan leader named Tunku Abdul Rahman who promptly declared the end of the

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<sup>187</sup> Chin Peng, 354.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, 390.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid, 392.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid, 405.

Emergency.<sup>191</sup> Chin Peng was left with little choice but to flee to China to lobby Deng Xiaoping for support for another attempt at revolution.

Having reached the end of this historical narrative, what should be the legacy of the Malayan Emergency, if it is not to be a classic example of counterinsurgency success?

For the British, Malaya should still be considered a challenge that was—eventually—met. After a period of inefficiency and ineptitude, the Security Forces pioneered many excellent strategies that hastened the end of the fighting. One such laudable strategy was their use of their air force. Instead of relying on bombers as offensive weapons—as counterinsurgencies are so apt to do—the British mainly used their air force to supply jungle units and drop leaflets.<sup>192</sup> The Security Forces should also be complimented for their innovative food policies, implemented in 1951, which decreased the CPM's already insufficient food supply. Similarly, the British simultaneous decision to transport Chinese squatters to guarded New Villages exacerbated the CPM's inability to communicate with the masses.<sup>193</sup>

These initiatives were groundbreaking and successful and they deserve the admiration that they have garnered. More recent counterinsurgencies cannot be blamed for attempting to apply these strategies, but they should not do so under the impression that a restrained air force or the creation of New Villages turned the tide of the Malayan Emergency. The Emergency was lost as soon as it began.

For Chin Peng and other communists, blaming failure on the mistakes made by the CPM is no more correct than exalting the British. Surely the Malayan Communists made mistakes, many of them. However, their greatest mistake was to embark on the ill-fated campaign at the time they did. They did not correctly identify the domestic and international situation, and when

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<sup>191</sup> Short, 495.

<sup>192</sup> O'Ballance, 133; Thompson, 107.

<sup>193</sup> Chin Peng, 278; O'Ballance, 121; Thompson, 121-122.



they gambled their fate the game was so weighted against them that no amount of luck could lead to victory. Both politically and militarily, the Communists could not compete, they could only lose.

### *Appendix A: Names and Titles*

The historiography of the Malayan Emergency contains a multitude of spellings and titles for the same individuals and organizations. These variances generally occurred when English-speaking authors attempted to translate Chinese words. This already confusing situation is not helped by the frequent use of aliases for communist figures. In order to make this work as clear as possible I have chosen to use the identifications provided by Chin Peng in his memoir, *My Side of History*.

I have chosen to rely upon this work because it is by far the most comprehensive discussion of the Malayan Emergency. Chin Peng's involvement in the Emergency goes far beyond that of other historians. Additionally, taking into account his intimate knowledge of all the individuals and organizations involved whose Chinese names are in dispute, he should be considered the authority on all identifications.

While his relationship to the Emergency makes it reasonable to suspect a bias in his narrative, I see little motivation for Chin Peng to misrepresent the names of his companions or the titles of communist organizations. Despite this suspicion, I have attempted to corroborate the aliases that the Secretary General provides with other works whenever possible. In any event, an occasional incorrect title would endanger my arguments far less than the confusion caused by ambiguity.

***Appendix B: Bias***

Considering the slanted natures of the sources used, readers may wonder how this text can be considered objective. After examining the many historical accounts of the Malayan Emergency, I will admit freely that the historiography of this event has been deeply influenced by bias. I do believe, however, that the process used to erect and reinforce my argument eliminated and accounted for such biases and produced a sound thesis.

I began my research by reviewing all the narratives and histories of the Malayan Emergency available. I sped through these accounts quickly, recording only my impressions of their general arguments and the biases that I discerned. Having gained a basic sense of the historiography, I set my sights on devising an objective narrative of the events before and after the Emergency Declaration. As a base for this timeline, I relied on Chin Peng's *My Side of History*, which has a very thorough account of the Emergency. Realizing, of course, that his memoir was likely to be highly biased, I weighed his descriptions against other, less comprehensive texts. Some of these works were themselves quite biased—generally in the opposite direction—so whenever their interpretations aligned with Chin Peng's it could be trusted that his descriptions were reliable. In this manner I built a narrative of relevant and confirmable events which, I believe, support my thesis.

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