

THE MALAYAN EMERGENCY

The Malayan Emergency of 1948–1960 has been scrutinised for ‘lessons’ about how to win counterinsurgencies from the Vietnam War to twenty-first century Afghanistan. This book brings our understanding of the conflict up to date by interweaving government and insurgent accounts and looking at how they played out at local level. Drawing on oral history, recent memoirs and declassified archival material from the UK and Asia, Karl Hack offers a comprehensive, multi-perspective account of the Malayan Emergency and its impact on Malaysia. He sheds new light on questions about terror and violence against civilians, how insurgency and decolonisation interacted and how revolution was defeated. He considers how government policies such as pressurising villagers, resettlement and winning ‘hearts and minds’ can be judged from the perspective of insurgents and civilians. This timely book is the first truly multi-perspective and in-depth study of anti-colonial resistance and counterinsurgency in the Malayan Emergency.

KARL HACK is Professor of History at The Open University, having previously taught for over a decade at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University. His previous books include *Dialogues with Chin Peng: New Light on the Malayan Emergency* (2004), and *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore* (2012).

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THE MALAYAN EMERGENCY

Revolution and Counterinsurgency at the End
of Empire

KARL HACK

The Open University, Milton Keynes



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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book weaves together government (often meaning British or British-controlled), insurgent (notably MCP leadership) and local perspectives. A major motivating force for this is that many pre-existing histories tend towards one-hand clapping. Though they give the ‘other’ side some space, they do not construct a coherent overview from its perspective, still less use that to assess how counterinsurgency policies impacted. It is my contention that such histories may (indeed do) tend towards navel-gazing. Their line of reasoning is that British (or MCP) policy was A; there is a correlation with B; therefore, A caused B. But as every good social science student knows, correlation does not equal causation; chronological intimacy does not necessarily establish a causative link. To establish such a link, we need to know how policies and actions landed with the other side. So, for instance, what do the communist documents say about their responses to pressure, counter-terror, resettlement and propaganda? More than that, we need to go beyond the protagonists and see how their policies played out among ordinary people in places such as the village of Sungei Jeloh near Kajang and areas such as Sungei Siput. A second motivating force has therefore been to make some of these places more three-dimensional, so that they are not just dropped in, but exist in their proper context, and reappear at different times and campaign phases. Hence, for instance, the Sungei Siput area, north Johore and the area around Kajang–Brogā–Semenyih reoccur at different times, and local places’ interrelationships will be made clear. This sense of ‘Malayan’ geography will be crucial in showing interrelationships between places and events, and so to understanding the bigger story. Finally, I have tried to inject some sense of the passion, local flavour and colour back into the story by directly addressing people’s perceptions and the traumatic nature of events.

This approach reflects my fear that many accounts deaden and distance the corporeality of what was a colourful, bloody, impassioned and traumatic history; in a way, they mislead us. That said, I have avoided using images of corpses, because I am acutely aware that the available archives abound in images of fallen insurgents but assiduously avoid images of dead (and for the most part even injured) counter-insurgents. This book briefly touches on why there was an official tendency to display corpses, and on the unofficial and

widespread tendency of security forces to photograph them (sometimes disturbingly displayed like the spoils of a hunt). It also expands on previous explanations for the nature and origins of government violence against civilians that was prominent in 1948, and in a more indirect and structural way in 1949, before tailing off.

This attempt to reach communist and local as well as British perspectives has been aided by the explosion in insurgent oral history, biographies and memoirs since the turn of the new century. I have employed a wide range of oral history, memoir, biography and autobiography, literature, poetry and archival material from across the world, especially from the UK, Malaysia, Singapore and Australia. I have in addition talked to people from all sides, including ex-Special Branch officers and administrators, ‘Malayans’ who lived through events and insurgents up to Chin Peng, as the ex-secretary-general of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). For Special Branch and some of the people it targeted, correspondence with Leon Comber over more than two decades was provocative and informative. For the MCP side, C. C. Chin, with whom I co-edited *Dialogues with Chin Peng*, has been crucial for insight, documents and comments, again over several decades. I also owe a specific debt to Anthony Reid, who invited me to the 1999 dialogues with Chin Peng, to chair an oral history session with the latter. Then there are lawyers and solicitors in Malaysia, including Dato’ Firoz Hussein and Dato’ Quek Ngee Meng, whose assistance with documents and information has been invaluable.

Others whose comments, practical assistance and intellectual succour have helped include Lee Kam Hing, Huw Bennett, Marc Opper, Tan Teng Phee (with his superb book on squatters), Stewart West (on the Suffolks), Chris Hale and my former research students Ng Ngee Seng and Tom Probert. Roger Nixon and Dr Liz Evans provided crucial additional archival research. Jeff Leng ably assisted with maps, and I am very grateful to The Open University and my colleagues in History for allowing me time, without which this work could not have been finished.

I also want to thank those who generously shared their own or their relatives’ papers and memories and knowledge, including Miles Templer for access to his father’s private papers. Ken Guest shared his father’s papers with me, and the late Guy Madoc was generous in correspondence. Others whose correspondence illuminated the time and specific events include ex-Malayan police officers Mike Brodie and David Brent.

Finally, thank you to Wong Tai Chee for help with Chinese names, places and visits and, above all, to my colleague, collaborator and friend Kevin Blackburn at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. We have taught and written books together, talked to ex-comrades at Nilai memorial to the MCP’s ‘9-1’ or September 1942 martyrs, visited the museum and cemetery at Bukit Kepong and Sagil New Village and much more. That shared experience carries forward into this book.

Except where otherwise labelled, documentary sources come from the National Archives, Kew Gardens, London. Photographs from the Arkib Negara Malaysia are reproduced by the kind permission of that archive. To all who have assisted, I am grateful, particularly so to: the National Archives of Singapore, the United Kingdom and the United States; the National Libraries of Singapore, Scotland and Australia; Rhodes House, Oxford (now relocated in the Weston Library of the Bodleian). I am also grateful to the library of The Open University, the archives at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies of Singapore (for the wonderful H. S. Lee and Tan Cheng Lock Papers), Durham University (for the Malcolm MacDonald Papers) and the Gurkha Museum in Winchester. I am particularly indebted to archivists and staff at the Arkib Negara Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur for going beyond the call of duty to assist me, and to the National University of Singapore (NUS) library and its special Singapore/Malaysia collection. Thanks also go to the Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives at King's College London and the Army Flying Museum at Middle Wallop in Hampshire for permission to use images and files.

For newspapers, many have been referred to in hard copy, but an additional resource needs mentioning. The National Library of Singapore's online archive of Singapore newspapers allows the researcher to consult historical newspapers of the era from their laptop. When used together with memoirs and biographies, this makes it possible to stitch together the story of events and places, and how they interrelate, in ways seldom attempted in previous histories of the Emergency.

Despite my attempt to use the widest possible selection of sources, mistakes (and, given the many errors, confusions and disagreements in the existing literature and documents, some are all but inevitable) are my responsibility alone.

NOTE ON THE TEXT: LANGUAGE, TERMINOLOGY AND MEASURES

This book focusses on Malaya and Singapore of the 1940s and 1950s, so the spelling and transliteration used at the time has generally been preferred, with modern and alternative forms given in brackets where confusion might otherwise arise. For Malayan Chinese names, the family name is given first. For insurgents, the most common nom de guerre or party name is sometimes favoured, rather than the original. Hence Chin Peng not Ong Boon Hua. Where it might help readers, I give the person's original name afterwards in brackets. I also sometimes give the more modern form in brackets or notes, and aliases after the sign @. I make a particular effort to do this where recent books use a more modern transliteration. Hence I write about Liew Kon Kim (as rendered in documents and press at the time), but note alternatives in brackets (Liu Guan Jin @ Zhao Hua). That is, his name has recently been transliterated in more modern form, and he had the alias Zhao Hua.

For Malay spellings, the resulting differences are small. This book uses Johore not Johor, Trengganu not Terengganu, Negeri rather than Negeri and so on. Where place names have changed, I use the form contemporary to the events described. Where one might write plural by repetition, for instance, menteri menteri besar, I simply write menteri besars.

Where there are differences over names, I prefer the version favoured by a person or organisation themselves. Hence Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) rather than Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA), the latter reflecting government eagerness at the time to avoid using the more obvious 'people's' or 'national', the former being Chin Peng's preference. More generally, my approach means keeping Kuomintang (KMT) not Guomintang (GMD). For place names in China I will sometimes give the modern form afterwards.

Then there is the more political question of whose terminology to use. What 'voice' should an author deploy, given terms were loaded with assumptions that shaped how people acted? My approach is dictated by how I see civil conflict. This can only be assessed for causation and holistically by being willing to switch from one perspective and voice to another as needed.

NOTE ON THE TEXT: LANGUAGE, TERMINOLOGY AND MEASURES XV

Terms used were not just matters of form. They were *causative*, shaping people's realities, beliefs and actions. To accommodate this, I switch voices frequently. My authorial 'voice' is neutral. A member of the security forces would be killed by an insurgent, or vice versa. When giving a pro-government perspective, it makes sense to talk of a 'bandit' or 'terrorist' being eliminated (the latter term encompassing kills, captures and surrenders). The government mandated 'bandit' as the official term in November 1948, and Communist Terrorist (CT) in 1952. When talking from the insurgent perspective, it may make sense to talk of a fighter self-sacrificing or dying a heroic death in service of the Anti-British Malayan Liberation War. This book flits between narratives, with the additional benefit that this allows the impact of each side's actions to be judged partly through the eyes of its enemy.

I could be accused, in using insurgent voices and documents, of trying to speak for others. But this is only so in the same way that historians habitually 'speak for' those whose documents or other historical traces they use. In both cases, a degree of empathetic voicing is likely to bring us closer to, rather than further away from, the past. No doubt where it results in anachronism or error it will provoke fertile correction.

Weights and Measures

- 1 tahl (tael): 1/16 of a kati or 1 1/3 ounces (approximately 37.8 grams)
- 1 kati (katty or katy): about 1 1/3 pounds (approximately 604.8 grams)
- 1 picul (pikul): 100 kati or about 133 1/3 pounds (60.48 kilograms)
- \$1 (Malayan dollar): 2 shillings and 4 pence (£1 = roughly \$8.57)
- £1 (UK pound) in 1952: approximately £29.42 in 2020 (www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator)

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-------------|---|
| 101STS | The Special Operation Executive's 101 Special Training School operated in Singapore from 1941 to 1942. It prepared Malaysians, including Kuomintang (KMT) and Malayan Communist Party (MCP) supporters, for stay-behind guerrilla work |
| AMCJA | All Malayan Council of Joint Action (earlier 'Pan Malayan'), formed December 1946. A coalition including MIC, the broad-based Malayan Democratic Union (MDU) and MCP-affiliated individuals and organisations such as the MPAJA Ex-Comrades Association and PMFTU |
| ANM | Arkib Negara Malaysia (National Archives of Malaysia at Kuala Lumpur) |
| ARO | assistant resettlement officer |
| ASP | assistant superintendent of police |
| ASU | Area Security Unit |
| Basic Paper | Special Branch (SB) Paper on the History of the MCP up to 1950, by Federation and Singapore SBs and dated March 1950 |
| belukar | Also spelt blukar in some sources. Bush comprising small trees and sometimes dense undergrowth |
| BDCC(FE) | British Defence Coordinating Committee (Far East), including the commissioner-general (or the predecessor post) and the three Service CICs |
| BI | British Imperialist or Imperialists |
| BMA | British Military Administration (September 1945 to March 1946) |
| CEC | Central Executive Committee (also sometimes written Central Committee) |
| CEP | Captured Enemy Personnel |
| CC | Central Committee (also called the Central Executive Committee) |
| CIC | commander (or commanders)-in-chief |
| CIGS | chief of imperial general staff, the top army figure in the United Kingdom |
| CID | Criminal Investigation Branch of the police. From 1948 to 1952 Special Branch was in and under the control of CID, afterwards becoming a separate division |

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

xvii

| | |
|---------------|---|
| CIS | Combined Intelligence Staff |
| C/O | commanding officer |
| CO | Colonial Office, or for archival files Co |
| COS | chiefs of staff in the UK (the CIGS, the chief of air staff and the chief of naval staff) |
| CPM | Communist Party of Malaya, acronym for MCP that became common after the end of the first Malayan Emergency |
| CPO | chief police officer of a contingent (state), comprising three to five police circles |
| CRO | Commonwealth Relations Office |
| CT | Communist Terrorist (official Federation of Malaya designation of a member of insurgent organisations from 1952) |
| DC | detention camp |
| DO | district officer |
| ExCo | Executive Council |
| EIS | Emergency Information Service |
| ERs | Emergency Regulations |
| Farelf | Far East Land Forces |
| GOC | general officer commanding |
| G/R | Gurkha Rifles |
| HQ | headquarters |
| ISEAS | Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore |
| IWM | Imperial War Museum |
| JIC | Joint Intelligence Committee |
| <i>JICH</i> | <i>Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History</i> |
| <i>JMBRAS</i> | <i>Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society</i> |
| <i>JSEAS</i> | <i>Journal of Southeast Asian Studies</i> |
| KOYLI | King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry |
| Lt | lieutenant |
| MCA | Malayan Chinese Association |
| MIC | Malayan Indian Congress |
| MCP | Malayan Communist Party (later written CPM) |
| MCS | Malayan Civil Service, the small, top cadre of civil servants |
| MFU | Malayan Film Unit |
| MNLA | Malayan National Liberation Army. The official name for the insurgent army from February 1949. The British translation at the time was Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA) |
| MNP | Malay Nationalist Party, or Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM) |
| MPAJA | Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army, the MCP-led wartime guerrilla force |
| MR | Malay Regiment |
| MRLA | see MNLA |
| MSGF | main-strength guerrilla force |

| | |
|--------|--|
| NUS | National University of Singapore |
| NV | New Village |
| OAG | officer administering government (that is, standing in for the high commissioner or governor) |
| OCPD | officer in charge of a police district (comprising five to ten police stations) |
| OIC | officer in charge |
| OSPC | officer superintending a police circle (comprising up to three or more police districts) |
| PMFTU | Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions |
| PRC | People's Republic of China |
| PUTERA | Pusat Tenaga Ra'ayat ('Centre of People's Power'), a coalition of Malay parties including the MNP and others. Formed February 1947 |
| PIR | Political Intelligence Report |
| RIDA | Rural and Industrial Development Authority |
| RO | resettlement officer |
| SEP | surrendered enemy personnel |
| SB | Special Branch |
| SCs | Special Constables |
| SCM | MCP State Committee member |
| SF | security forces |
| Sitrep | situation report |
| SOVF | Special Operations Volunteer Force |
| SSCO | secretary of state for the colonies |
| TOLs | Temporary Occupation Licences |
| UMNO | United Malays National Organisation |
| WIS | Weekly Intelligence Summary |

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Malaya in the 1940s to 1950s

Source: Karl Hack. This map uses 1950s–1960s spellings.

'Narrative of the Campaign', adapted from the Director of Operation's 1957 Report

NARRATIVE OF THE CAMPAIGN

The course of the campaign over the past nine years . . .

24. The fluctuations of fortune during these nine years fell roughly into four periods:

- (a) June 1948–October 1949. The Communist attempt to seize power by violence and revolution was held and the CTs [Communist Terrorists, a term introduced in 1952] withdrew into the jungle to reorganise for a prolonged war.
- (b) October 1949–August 1951. The CTs took the offensive to seize power encouraged by Communist success all over Asia. A Director of Operations (Sir Harold Briggs) was appointed to coordinate civil and military measures [in April 1950], both of which were showing some serious weaknesses. By 1951 violence had reached its peak, but eliminations also began to increase as SF [Security Force] methods improved.
- (c) August 1951–July 1954. The Briggs Plan matured, bringing the dispersed Chinese population under control, and the CTs became less aggressive in the face of large numbers of eliminations. In February 1952, General (now Field Marshal) Sir Gerald Templer, was appointed as High Commissioner and Director of Operations with full power over all civil and military resources. The CTs lost over half their strength and SF and Civilian casualties declined to less than one seventh of the 1951 peak. The back of the revolt was broken.
- (d) July 1954–August 1957. The crisis being over, the posts of High Commissioner and Director of Operations were again separated. CT strength dwindled steadily, as did incidents, contacts and casualties on both sides. Malayan political leaders gradually took over control in preparation for Independence.

Source: Air20/10377, Director of Operations (Lt.-Gen. Sir Roger Bower), 'Review of the Emergency in Malaya from June 1948 to August 1957', 12 Sep. 1957. Henceforth 'DOO Report 1957'.

Government figures for casualties up to 31 July 1960

| | Killed | Wounded | Captured | Surrendered | Missing | Eliminations | Total |
|------------------------------|--------|---------|----------|-------------|---------|--------------|-------|
| Civilians | 2,473 | 1,385 | | | 810 | | 4,668 |
| Security Forces | 1,865 | 2,560 | | | | | 4,425 |
| Total of Civilians and | 4,338 | 3,945 | | | 810 | | 9,093 |

(cont.)

| | Killed | Wounded | Captured | Surrendered | Missing | Eliminations | Total |
|-----------------|--------|---------|----------|-------------|---------|--------------|--------|
| Security Forces | | | | | | | |
| Insurgents | 6,711 | | 1,289 | 2,704 | | | 10,704 |
| or CTs | (63%) | | (12%) | (25%) | | | (100%) |
| Total for | 11,049 | | | | 810 | | |
| All Types | | | | | | | |

1. In 1952 the government redesignated insurgents (formerly called bandits or communist bandits) as 'Communist Terrorists' (CTs), and other organised supporters as part of the broader 'CTO' (Communist Terrorist Organisation).
2. Eliminations excluded insurgent 'wounded' as they might still be operational. Wounded figures for insurgents are excluded here as they only exist for some years and are estimates.
3. Figures in brackets are approximate percentages for each type of CT elimination (kills, captures and surrenders) up to 31 July 1960.
4. The last three years saw very high 'surrender' rates and some induced captures were reclassified. The rates for kills/captures/surrenders up to 31 August 1957 are therefore more representative of most of the campaign, at 67%/13%/20% (DOO Report 1957, 6, paras. 17–18).
5. After 1960 action was concentrated on and near the border area and casualties were light. ANM1997/0014263W, Psychological Warfare Monthly Reports, No. 195, December 1968. Appendix A, 'Statistics for December 1968' shows ninety-five eliminations from 1 July 1960 to December 1968 (fifty-eight SEP, nineteen captures, eighteen kills).
6. 'Missing' civilians are assumed dead. When added to those verified dead, that would give figures of 3,283 civilian and 11,859 total deaths.

Note: See Appendix 1 for more detail, including a breakdown of security force casualties between services and police. The police had more deaths than the army (1,346 versus 519), reflecting greater numbers and vulnerability.

Source: Compiled and tabulated from Richard Clutterbuck, *Conflict and Violence in Singapore and Malaysia* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1984), 188–9, figure 15; Anthony Short, *In Pursuit of the Mountain Rats: The Communist Insurrection in Malaya* (Singapore: Cultured Lotus Press, 2000 [originally printed in 1975 as *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya 1948–1960* by London's Frederick Muller Ltd.]), 507–508; and DOO Report 1957, 6, paras. 17–18.

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