

Malaya's Secret Police tells the story of the organisation, the personnel, the troubles and the ultimate triumph of Malaya's intelligence services. Former Special Branch officer Leon Comber provides information inaccessible to most researchers, including comprehensive charts and a wealth of details, especially on personalities. Together these provide a unique insight into the world of intelligence. This book reminds us that generating good counterinsurgency intelligence took time—years not months—careful experimentation, and painstaking acquisition of knowledge of the country and its people, culture and languages.

—Karl Hack, History Lecturer, Open University, UK, Co-editor of *Dialogues with Chin Peng: new views on the Malayan Communist Party* (2004).

Leon Comber's admirable study of the vital role played by the Malayan Special Branch in the Malayan Emergency will undoubtedly become recommended reading for anyone interested in counterinsurgency intelligence. It could well provide, too, the framework for the use of intelligence in counterinsurgency operations in other parts of the world such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Dr Comber is well qualified to write it as aside from being a specialist in South East Asian affairs, he served as a Chinese-speaking Special Branch officer in the Emergency.

—Dr Leong Chee Woh, former Malayan Special Branch officer (1953–84), retired Deputy Director of Operations, Malaysian Special Branch, Royal Malaysian Police.

Other books by Leon Comber

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MALAYA'S SECRET POLICE
1945–60



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MALAYA'S SECRET POLICE 1945–60

The Role of the Special Branch in
the Malayan Emergency

Leon Comber



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To Jack Barlow, MBE, BEM, CPM (1919–2002)
trusted colleague, wise counsellor, loyal friend

About the Author

Dr Leon Comber is an Honorary Research Fellow at Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, Melbourne, specializing in Asian studies. He speaks Malay, Chinese (Cantonese and *putonghua*) and Hindi. His interest in Malay(si)an affairs extends over half a century and dates from the time he landed on the west coast of Malaya in September 1945, after the Japanese surrender, as a Major in the Indian Army. Thereafter, he served for several years as a Chinese-speaking officer in the Special Branch of the Malayan Police dealing with political and security intelligence. He subsequently had a distinguished career in book publishing.

Foreword

by Anthony Short

*Author of *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya 1948–60**

Leon Comber knows how Special Branch works, knows what happened during the Emergency, what went right and what went wrong. He knows because he was there from the beginning and because he has studied, collected, collated and assessed his material for a large part of his life.

This is a profile of what has been the most successful intelligence agency in Southeast Asia for almost sixty years. For those used nowadays in Britain and America to the subordination of intelligence to political purposes, it all seems rather old-fashioned; a view of intelligence as it was and as it was intended to be. Piece the evidence together. If you don't know, don't pretend that you do. Let the professionals get on with their job and don't tell them what to do or how to do it.

Conventional wisdom now on the Malayan 'Emergency'—an equally conventional expression for a largely communist insurrection that lasted for twelve years—is that intelligence was the key that locked counterinsurgency in place. Or, more precisely, intelligence was what eventually turned a largely unknown and alien force into numbers, names, locations and capabilities of a recognisable and credible enemy order-of-battle. Before and without that, the army would struggle and sweat all over the country in the hope of generating their own intelligence, the police would offer themselves in their unarmed vehicles as targets in a shooting gallery, and civilians, mostly Chinese, would suffer by far the heaviest casualties.

To begin with, in 1948, post-war intelligence in the shape of the Malayan Security Service was undoubtedly looking the wrong way and had little idea of an impending Malayan–Chinese insurrection. Hardly surprising, suggests Dr Comber, when they were fifty per cent under strength, and only a dozen or so British police officers were able to carry on a simple conversation in Chinese. For the next year or so it was an open question whether the police or the army were in charge of counterinsurgency. Intelligence, which was not always shared, quite often just disappeared and was seldom of immediate operational use. Not until 1950 did the late, great General Briggs produce his master plan in which army, police and civil affairs were totally integrated and in which intelligence began to be recognised as being of supreme importance.

So much, in general terms, is fairly well known. Leon Comber's outstanding contribution is to embed intelligence in what is, in effect, an additional history of the Emergency, and to show us how Special Branch achieved its pre-eminent position. Changing shape from time-to-time and with one or two unsuccessful initiatives—such as an independent Police Intelligence Bureau—there are some surprising additions to what is, in any case, far more than an administrative history. Arthur Young, as Commissioner of Police, took the major step of separating Special Branch from the CID, but more than one view from below suggests that he didn't really understand the Malayan situation. Templer, as High Commissioner and Director of Operations, at least toyed with the idea of putting Special Branch and the entire police force under army control. A Director of Intelligence suggested a joint plan to penetrate the Malayan Communist Party leadership in Malaya and Singapore. Surprising, really, considering how different they were, but perhaps a mark of the desperation felt that Chin Peng and the Central Committee were impermeable almost to the end of the Emergency.

In the meantime, from hundreds and thousands of pieces, the jigsaw puzzle of intelligence was taking shape. Techniques were refined, procedures standardised, MI5 and MI6 officers, including a future director, flit in and out, and the army provided Special Branch with military intelligence officers. But for the most part, once they have got their bearings, Special Branch were doing it themselves. Scores of Chinese inspectors were examining documents and defectors. One in five Malayan Police officers was working for the Special Branch.

Putting together this formidable organisation was a remarkable achievement. Putting together this notable account is equally remarkable. In their anxiety to broadcast their surmises and speculations on the latest intelligence failure or success, it is astonishing nowadays how many purported experts just don't know what they are talking about. This alone makes this book such a shining exception.

This is how the Special Branch and a Special Branch officer should work. By contrast, in another part of Johore, early on in the Emergency, an army raid on the huts of some luckless peasant farmers revealed a framed portrait. The flashlight was rather dim, but the conclusion immediate. 'Mao Zedong. Definitely. Communists. Round them up.' Actually, it was Sun Yat Sen. Sorry about that. And a pity Special Branch hadn't been there.

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Map of Malaya 1948



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The Malayan Emergency: a war that lasted 12 years

The Malayan Emergency was a name given by the British colonial government to the uprising of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) which lasted from 1948 to 1960. The objective of the CPM was to establish a Communist People's Democratic Republic of Malaya. In all but name, it was a War remarkable for the fiercely-fought counterinsurgency operations fought in the Malayan jungle between the government security forces and the CPM's guerrilla army, the Malayan National Liberation Army. The jungle fighting was waged concurrently with the political struggle for the hearts and minds of the Malayan people. Coming so soon after the end of the Second World War, the Emergency had wide-reaching effects and shook the country to its very foundations. Throughout the campaign, the Malayan Police played a vital part and, indeed, paid heavily for it as the police suffered more casualties (killed and wounded) than any of the other security forces.

The intelligence branch of the Malayan Police, the Special Branch, was recognised by the government as its supreme intelligence organisation. It was tasked with providing the government with political and security intelligence and made responsible, too, for providing the army with operational intelligence on which counterinsurgency operations could be mounted.

This is the story of the critical part played by the Special Branch in waging the intelligence war against the Communist Party of Malaya, which led to its defeat in July 1960 and the withdrawal of the remnants of its greatly-shattered forces into southern Thailand.

chapter one

The nature of the Malayan Emergency

The historiography of the Malayan Emergency (1948–60), and what has been called the ‘shooting war’, has already been well-covered in the literature, but the role of secret intelligence and the Malayan Police Special Branch in the armed struggle against the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) and its military wing, the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA), has hitherto been largely neglected.¹ In this book, the focus is on the Special Branch, the main intelligence agency of the Malayan government. Of course, there have been several emergencies in the history of Malaya since the end of the Second World War. The present study is focused exclusively on the First Emergency of 1948–60, at a time that tested the capacities of both the British colonial government and the local Malayan government after independence in 1957. Already, at the conclusion of that first Emergency, there was evidence of ongoing communist opposition, which led to what has been called the ‘Second Emergency’, but that subject is beyond the scope of this book.

Although intelligence studies have come under the academic scrutiny of Western historians and political scientists, who have come to regard intelligence and political surveillance as a critical feature of modern state and society, similar studies have not emerged in the Asian context. This book attempts to make good this deficiency. It deals with the role of the Special Branch in the Emergency and argues that successful intelligence gathering was a crucial feature not only of British colonial rule in Malaya, but also of the independent Malayan government that took over from the British in 1957. There is little doubt from the evidence presented in the following chapters that without the political and military intelligence provided by the Special Branch, it would not have been possible for the Malayan authorities to defeat the CPM’s armed uprising and bring the Emergency to a successful conclusion in 1960. The expertise and operational intelligence provided by the Special Branch was critical. The central purpose of this account is to examine the organisation, training, *modus operandi* and role of the Special Branch and its predecessor, the Malayan Security Service, from the return

of British colonial power to Malaya at the end of the Second World War (1945) until the end of the Emergency (1960).

This study also provides insights into how the colonial and Malayan authorities developed and refined the Special Branch so that it was able to play a vital part in defeating the attempt of the Communist Party of Malaya to overthrow the Malayan government by force and establish a Malayan People's Democratic Republic. More specifically, the research addresses the following issues:

- How did the Special Branch change over the course of the Emergency?
- What were the main agents of change?
- What part did the Special Branch play in bringing the Emergency to a successful conclusion?

As the Bibliography suggests, the methodology followed was to carry out primary research in official archives in England, Malaysia, Singapore and Australia, and conduct interviews or correspondence with retired former Malayan Special Branch officers and other government officers now living in England, Malaysia, Singapore and Australia. These had participated in the Malayan Emergency and were able to provide information germane to the study. The author also interviewed Chin Peng, Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Malaya, in Canberra in February 1999.

The author has been able to draw, too, on his own experiences as an officer in the Malayan Special Branch during the Emergency, though he has tried not to allow it to distort his view of the Malayan ecumene. The wide range of documents, interviews and other sources gathered for the analysis of the arguments in this book will hopefully demonstrate this point. Occasionally the author has used his own contemporaneous diaries and notebooks to document an observation that cannot be readily documented from other sources and which is referred to in the footnotes as 'author's notes'.

As biographical data is not easily available about the main 'agents of change' and other officers and personalities who played a part in the intelligence war, detailed footnotes have been provided whenever necessary to remedy this omission.

A study of this nature presents certain intrinsic problems. The subject is quite 'elusive' and it is difficult to obtain information about the Special

Branch and secret intelligence. Many of the official British, Malayan and Australian archives dealing with Special Branch activities remain closed in spite of the 30-year rule. This made it difficult to gain access to classified documents. However, in some cases these barriers could be circumvented, as copies of classified documents have sometimes been placed on 'open' archival files, where they have evidently been allowed to remain without attracting the attention of officials responsible for weeding out sensitive information.

The main contribution of this study is to present an analytical account of the Special Branch in the context of the Malayan Emergency and an understanding of the dynamics of the Special Branch during what has come to be accepted as a critical period in Malaya's history. Without the input of the Special Branch, it is quite likely that the conflict may have dragged on inconclusively for much longer and, even then, perhaps may have ended less favourably for the British and Malayan authorities, just as it did for the Americans in Vietnam in their struggle against the North Vietnamese Army and the *Viet Cong*.

At the beginning of the Emergency, the Special Branch was not ready to take over responsibility for intelligence at short notice from its predecessor, the Malayan Security Service, nor was it organised in those early days to provide the army with the right sort of operational intelligence on which successful counterinsurgency operations could be mounted. However, the situation improved rapidly when the retraining and restructuring of the Special Branch (as described in later chapters of this book) began to show results. From 1950 onwards, professional training in intelligence methods and techniques became available for the first time in the Special Branch/Criminal Investigation Department (CID) Training Schools in Kuala Lumpur and in courses arranged in London by MI5 and the London Metropolitan Police Special Branch.² In the latter years of the Emergency, the Special Branch Training School assumed greater importance as a regional training centre and it earned for itself a reputation outside Malaya as a centre of excellence for the training of intelligence officers. Aside from local Malayan officers, intelligence officers attended courses from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries and as far afield as Hong Kong and Australia.

The lessons learned from the Malayan Emergency, applying the three-pronged approach of a combined police, army and civil government offensive, waged concurrently with a campaign to win the hearts and minds of the people, were later followed successfully by the British in

Kenya, Rhodesia and Cyprus.³ They were tried, too, in Vietnam by the British Advisory Mission (BRIAM) headed by Robert GK Thompson (later Sir Robert), the Permanent Secretary of Defence in Malaya during the later stages of the Emergency, who was invited by the South Vietnamese government and its ally, the United States, to share the Malayan experiences.⁴ The fact they were not successful in Vietnam was not due to any flaw in the Malayan plan but that the intelligence structure of the two countries was very different. There was not, for instance, a unified intelligence service in South Vietnam, such as the Special Branch in Malaya, but a multitude of intelligence agencies, often competing with each other for intelligence. The British colonial authorities in Malaya had the advantage, too, of being in charge of the administration of the country, whereas the Americans in South Vietnam were not in the same position, and had to work through a notoriously corrupt and inefficient local administration.

These matters are well brought out in a confidential unpublished paper prepared by Jack Barlow, who was a senior Special Branch officer in Malaya during the Emergency and subsequently a member of the British police team sent to Saigon in the 1960s to help train the South Vietnamese police.⁵ A summary of the paper is given below. The points that Barlow brings out highlight, too, many of the strengths of the Malayan Special Branch that will be analysed in detail later in this study.

- In Malaya, the collection, collation and dissemination of intelligence was unified under the Special Branch, and the Special Branch, the army, and the civil administration worked closely together as a team. (This was the 'three-pronged approach' referred to above.) In Vietnam, however, 'there was an extraordinary multiplication of intelligence organisations, and an almost total lack of mutual trust or co-ordination' with little central direction.
- In Malaya, unlike South Vietnam, every communist guerrilla who surrendered (surrendered enemy personnel, SEP) or was captured (captured enemy personnel, CEP) was treated as a most valuable source of operational intelligence. Every inducement was offered to him to cooperate with government forces. All surrendered and captured guerrillas were thoroughly debriefed and, in some cases, employed on jungle operations against their erstwhile comrades as part of the Special Operations Volunteer Force (SOVF).⁶

- The Malayan Special Branch put to use immediately intelligence obtained from surrendered and captured guerrillas and, wherever possible, used them to take part in 'Q' jungle operations.⁷
- The British controlled the Special Branch, the armed forces and the civil service, and many senior British officers remained in post and continued to work for the independent Malayan government after 1957.
- British Special Branch officers were required to speak Malay, as were all Malayan Police officers, and some spoke Chinese too. It helped that, for the most part, Chinese, Malay and Indian government employees spoke English. In Vietnam, the Americans were not in control of the civil service and Barlow said that he 'never met a Vietnamese-speaking American'. Moreover, only a small minority of Americans were fluent in French, which was a second language for many middle-aged Vietnamese. English-speaking Vietnamese were 'very thin on the ground' and, when available, were eagerly sought after as interpreters.
- The administration of South Vietnam was in a chaotic state and had not recovered from the departure of the French. Unlike Malaya, corruption was widespread, involving both South Vietnamese and American civilian contractors.
- As far as external aid was concerned, Malaya was almost 'hermetically sealed off', whereas in South Vietnam, arms and ammunition were freely available from the north via the 'Ho Chi Minh Trail'.

Though this study deals primarily with the Malayan Special Branch and the security situation in peninsular Malaya, mention has been made *en passant* of the Singapore Special Branch and communist activities in Singapore, where they have a bearing on the main counterinsurgency operations that took place in Malaya.⁸ While communist activities in urban Singapore were of serious concern to the local Singapore authorities, it was recognised they were quite different in intensity, scale and ferocity from the internecine jungle war taking place in peninsular Malaya.⁹ As Francis Starner points out, there was some justification for considering the communist movement in peninsular Malaya as separate from communist activities on the island of Singapore.¹⁰ In conversations with the author in Canberra in February 1999, Chin Peng, Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Malaya, did not seem to place much weight on the activities of the communist Singapore Town Committee in the overall context of the Malayan insurgency. This is borne out in the scant attention that he paid to Singapore in his autobiography, *Alias Chin Peng: My Side of History*.¹¹

Table 1: Communist terrorist, police, army and civilian casualties (1948-60)

Total C'Ts eliminated	1948	1949	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	Total
Killed	374	619	648	1079	1155	959	723	420	307	240	153	21	13	6711
Captured	263	337	147	121	123	73	51	54	52	32	22	8	6	1289
Surrendered	56	251	147	201	257	372	211	249	134	209	502	86	29	2704
(a) Sub-total	693	1207	942	1401	1535	1404	985	723	493	481	677	115	48	10704
SFs killed														
Police	89	164	314	380	207	58	53	47	25	5	3	1	—	1346
Army	60	65	79	124	56	34	34	32	22	6	7	—	—	519
(b) Sub-total	149	229	393	504	263	92	87	79	47	11	10	1	—	1865
Civilians														
Killed	315	334	646	533	343	85	97	62	30	22	3	3	—	2473
Missing	90	160	106	135	131	43	57	57	26	2	—	3	—	810
(c) Sub-total	405	494	752	668	474	128	154	119	56	24	3	6	—	3283
Wounded														
Police	119	170	321	454	278	53	89	60	32	11	6	8	—	1601
Army	92	77	175	237	123	64	65	43	47	22	13	1	—	959
Civilians	149	200	409	356	158	15	31	24	36	7	—	—	—	1385
(d) Sub-total	360	447	905	1047	559	132	185	127	115	40	19	9	—	3945
Grand total	1607	2377	2992	3620	2831	1756	1411	1048	711	556	709	131	48	19797

Legend: CTs = Communist Terrorists, SFs = Security Forces

Source: Adapted from Despatch no. 14, Top Secret. High Commissioner for the United Kingdom, Kuala Lumpur, to Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, London, 5 November 1960 & *Arkib Negara Malaysia*, Misc. 16, *Emergency Statistics for the Federation of Malaya since 1948*.

Table 1 provides details of the casualties suffered over the twelve years of the Emergency by the communist terrorists (CTs) and the security forces (SFs), consisting of police and army units, and the appalling losses suffered by the civilian population. It depicts clearly the seriousness of the situation in Malaya between 1948 and 1960 and the casualties that resulted from the fierce fighting that took place. The casualty figures underscore the important part played by the police in the struggle against the communist insurgents and indicate, too, that the police suffered more casualties, both killed and wounded, than the army did, a matter that is not generally appreciated. However, what is more extraordinary is that the total number of civilians killed and missing (3283)—and ‘missing’ in this context must mean that they had perished—far exceeds the combined total of police and army killed (1865). The number of civilians wounded (1385), too, is far more than the number of army wounded (959) and only slightly fewer than the number of police wounded (1601). This could not have boded well for the communists, who asserted throughout they were fighting for the freedom of the people from British colonial rule and claimed to act as their champions.

The inter-relationship between the Special Branch and the army in the early days of the Emergency was not always as close as it should have been. However, it improved enormously from 1952 onwards when British army military intelligence officers (MIOs) were attached to the Special Branch to provide a channel for the effective transmission of Special Branch operational intelligence to the army. Military intelligence officers did not collect intelligence themselves and, in every case, they worked under the Special Branch unit to which they were attached, as will be elaborated later in this study. They did not operate their own intelligence network. In the words of Richard Clutterbuck (who served as a colonel on the Director of Operations staff during the Emergency and was later to become one of the recognised leading British authorities on terrorism):

There is no doubt the soundest (and, in the end, the cheapest) investment against Communist insurgency in any country is a strong, handpicked and well-paid intelligence organisation [Special Branch] backed up by the funds to offer good rewards.¹²

Professor Peter Edwards, the official historian of Australia’s role in the Malayan and Vietnam conflicts, echoed Clutterbuck’s views and commented in his study of the Malayan Emergency that ‘the most important weapon in counter-insurgency was [Special Branch] intelligence’.¹³

The Special Branch obtained intelligence from several sources. The most common was human intelligence, commonly referred to in the intelligence community as HUMINT. The traditional sources of human intelligence are informers and agents, and the evidence indicates that surrendered and captured guerrillas provided the most valuable sources of Special Branch information. As discussed in this study, the Special Branch's success in exploiting and 'turning' surrendered (and sometimes captured) guerrillas to co-operate with the security forces and go straight back into the jungle to attack their erstwhile comrades-in-arms or induce them to surrender, played a critical part in the intelligence war. It enabled the security forces to inflict casualties on the guerrillas and, more importantly, it led to the mass defections referred to later, and incorporated in Table 1, that led ultimately to the collapse of the communist uprising.

As Harry Miller has recorded, many surrendered guerrillas 'showed utter single-mindedness about trailing and killing their former comrades'.¹⁴ It is extremely difficult to provide a satisfactory explanation for their action in betraying their comrades and becoming traitors to their cause, but perhaps Professor Lucien W Pye came closest to it in his book, *Guerrilla Communism in Malaya*, which he wrote after spending several months on the ground in Malaya in 1954 interviewing surrendered guerrillas. During the several weeks he spent at Johore Contingent Special Branch headquarters as part of his stay, he occupied a desk in the room adjoining the author's room. In interviewing surrendered guerrillas, he had the advantage of being able to speak to them in Chinese and he did not have to rely on interpreters, which would have imposed another layer of understanding about what they said, especially as the Chinese language is rich in 'political terms' and the indirect expression of personal opinion. As Pye explained:

Almost immediately after surrender, the SEPs [surrendered enemy personnel] sought to take on all the attitudes that they considered appropriate to their new role. They quickly adopted what amounted to an entirely new political vocabulary, readily repeated government propaganda views while trying to drop all traces of Communist terminology. They were not only generally prepared to cooperate with the authorities but usually eager to lead patrols back into the jungle to attack their former comrades. Even when this meant killing people with whom they had lived and worked for many years, they were not troubled by the prospect, since their break with the party had been a personal one. They no longer had any ties with those in the party; they had to establish new ones with those in the government.¹⁵

In order that the Malayan Special Branch may be seen in the round and against the background of the period, it has been necessary in various chapters to touch on the organisation and structure of the uniformed branch of the police. Although attempts were made from time to time to separate the Special Branch from the police and form a separate and independent intelligence organisation, it should not be overlooked that the Special Branch constituted a department of the police throughout the Emergency and the Head of the Special Branch reported directly to the Commissioner of Police. It has also been thought necessary to examine the organisation and structure of the Special Branch's main adversary, the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) and its military arm, the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA).

The aims of the CPM in Malaya and in Singapore were identical; that is, the overthrow of the British colonial power and the establishment of a Communist People's Democratic Republic of Malaya. However, their tactics were not identical on account of the different political, economic and social patterns of the two territories.¹⁶ The 'Maoist' strategy adopted in Malaya by Chin Peng, the CPM's Secretary-General, aimed to work inwards from the jungle, establish liberated areas from which to dominate populated areas, create a reign of terror among government officials, rubber planters and tin miners, disrupt the economy, and finally undertake a countrywide offensive, leading to the defeat of government forces.¹⁷ On the other hand, the 'Leninist' strategy adopted in urban Singapore aimed to undermine and seize control of open organisations, such as the labour movement, Chinese schools, cultural organisations and later even the People's Action Party (PAP) when it came to power in June 1959, without actually resorting to guerrilla warfare.¹⁸

Communist activities in Singapore, unlike those in peninsular Malaya, formed part of a communist-controlled 'National Open Front' strategy, and although no MNLA units were deployed there, the communists did on occasion resort to 'strong-arm' tactics and political assassinations.¹⁹ The CPM's Singapore Town Committee reported nominally to the South Malayan Bureau in Johore, which in turn remained in courier contact with the CPM's Central Committee in Pahang before the Committee withdrew to southern Thailand; but, generally speaking, the CPM in Singapore was largely autonomous.²⁰ The CPM's policy for Singapore throughout the Malayan Emergency was aptly summed up in a communist document written in April 1957 and recovered by the Singapore Special Branch, which was quoted in the *Singapore Annual Report* for that year:

Our fundamental policy is to remain under cover and act with dexterity and caution while we conserve our strength. Our basic strategy is to expand and consolidated the patriotic National United Front in order to mobilise the strength of the whole people.²¹

In 1950, the Singapore Special Branch effectively broke up the CPM's Town Committee and arrested most of its members.²² A few of them managed to evade the police net and flee to the comparative safety of the Rhio Islands in Indonesian waters south of Singapore, where, according to Chin Peng, they formed a small working committee. While not very effective, it at least enabled them to keep in touch with events in Singapore and even, on occasions, to infiltrate back into Singapore to carry out assignments.²³

The term 'Emergency' was a euphemism used by the British government for what was to all intents and purposes an all-out war between the Communist Party of Malaya and the British colonial government in Malaya, although the insurgency continued after Malaya attained independence from the British in 1957. It was adopted in order that the London commercial insurance rates on which the Malayan commerce and industry relied (and which, until 1957, determined the prosperity of trade within the British Empire) would not be adversely affected, as they would have been if the conflict had been described as a 'war'.²⁴ The CPM, however, did not have any such reservations and has always referred to it as a 'war', namely, the 'Anti-British National Liberation War'.²⁵

The establishment of a Malayan People's Democratic Republic was, in fact, from very early on, the avowed aim of the Communist Party of Malaya and constituted one of the main points of the CPM's revolutionary program for Malaya formulated at the Third Congress of the CPM in 1932.²⁶ It was the first point of the CPM's 'Nine Anti-Japanese Principles' promulgated during the Japanese occupation of Malaya in February 1943.²⁷ But details of what exactly the CPM had in mind to achieve its objective did not emerge until a year after the Emergency started, when the Malayan Special Branch captured in June 1949 a copy of the clandestine communist newspaper *Zhen Bao* (*True News*), which devoted a whole article to the CPM's political plans under the heading: 'The Outline of the Malayan People's Democratic Republic'. These included the expropriation of the property of British 'imperialists' in Malaya, the nationalisation of monopolistic capital, the guaranteeing of 'genuine' racial equality, the transfer of ownership of the land to the 'tillers', equal voting rights for all persons over 18, freedom of political beliefs, the institution of low tax rates and minimum wages, and free elementary and adult education. On the face of it, some of the clauses

appeared to be quite unobjectionable, and the Special Branch commented at the time that it did not seem to be a particularly illuminating document, especially as the establishment of a communist republic by force of arms if necessary (on the lines of the Communist People's Republic of China (PRC) that in many ways was regarded as the CPM's mentor and role model) was not mentioned.²⁸

At a World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) meeting in Beijing in November–December 1949, Liu Shao-chi, the vice-chairman of the Chinese Central People's Government, made it quite clear that China supported the CPM's struggle against British colonial rule in Malaya. He stated 'the path taken by the Chinese party is the path that should be followed by many colonial and dependent countries in their struggle for national independence and people's democracy'. An article in the Cominform journal, *For a Lasting Peace: For a People's Democracy*, on 27 January 1950, repeated the same line that the victory of the Chinese people 'was of enormous significance in strengthening the national liberation struggle in colonial territories'.²⁹ Nevertheless, although the Chinese communists assumed 'the role of mentors and champions of the Asian revolutionary movement', their support of the CPM's uprising was confined to moral and ideological back up only and, as far as it is known, they did not provide any personnel or matériel.

Malaya was not placed under martial law during the Emergency and the civil government remained in place, with the army acting 'in aid of the civil power'. The basic document on which Emergency operations were based, *The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya (ATOM)*, prepared by the Director of Operations, was unequivocal about this point. It laid down that 'the responsibility for conducting the campaign in Malaya rests with the Civil Government' and reinforced the point later by adding 'one of the underlying principles in all operations against the CT in the present Emergency is that the Armed Forces are acting *in support of the Civil Power* [emphasis added by author]'.³⁰

The Malayan government made it clear that the Special Branch was to be regarded as its main intelligence agency and that it reported to the civilian police. As such, it was responsible for providing the government not only with political and security intelligence, but also, more importantly, with operational or combat intelligence on which the security forces could mount counterinsurgency operations.

In the Malayan context, the difference between 'political' and 'security' intelligence was never officially defined. However, for all practical purposes

it was understood by the Special Branch that the former included 'any information needed to protect lives, property and trade from subversion, sabotage and espionage, including communist and extremist nationalist activities', and the latter was thought of in the broadest sense as covering 'any other information required for the effective government of a colony'.³¹ It was, however, obviously difficult to keep the two definitions completely separate and, in practice, they often overlapped.

The 'elusiveness' of the intelligence records for this period makes it difficult to document all aspects of the counterinsurgency responses to the communist uprising in Malaya. This has been partially addressed by fully understanding where the original records might be found and how the intelligence system worked at this time. In Britain, access to public records is governed by statute, namely the *Public Records Act 1958* and the *Public Records Act 1967*.³² The official position in Malay(si)a³³, Singapore and Australia is very similar to the British one, and records selected for permanent preservation only become available for public inspection when they are thirty years old. However, most secret intelligence (including Special Branch) records are closed for longer periods if their release is considered likely to compromise national security or international relations. This policy obviously imposes a serious impediment to research into secret intelligence and Special Branch activities. It is likely, too, that not all secret Special Branch records were handed over by the British when Malaya was granted independence in 1957, and there is information to suggest that some 'sensitive' files were either destroyed or taken back to the United Kingdom.³⁴

Intelligence operations from the time the British colonial power returned to Malaya in September 1945 after the Japanese surrender were the responsibility of the Malayan Security Service (MSS), which had incorporated the functions of the pre-war Malayan and Singapore Special Branches.³⁵ Though the pre-war Malayan and Singapore Special Branches were part of their respective police forces, the Malayan Security Service operated independently and maintained a direct line of communication with the highest echelons of government in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore.

The Malayan and Singapore Special Branches were not re-established until August 1948: that is, around two months after the Emergency started, when the MSS was wound up and handed over its functions to them.³⁶ There was a difference, however. Whereas the MSS had been a pan-Malayan organisation covering both Malaya and Singapore, the Malayan

and Singapore Special Branches were separate and assumed responsibility for intelligence in their own respective territories. In both territories, after the demise of the MSS, they were subsumed into their respective Criminal Investigation Departments, and they did not become separate departments until later in the Emergency, in 1952.³⁷

At the onset of the Emergency, the British colonial government attempted to downplay the seriousness of the situation so as not to affect public morale. The government was anxious to ensure, too, that commercial insurance rates were not affected, as would have been the case if it were publicly acknowledged that a virtual state of war existed in Malaya, and that the Communist Party of Malaya was the central directing force behind the insurrection. Such secrecy also meant that little information about the Emergency is available in the public arena. Sometimes, such publicly available information can be used to cross-check other sources; in this instance, this methodology is of limited value.

The High Commissioner of the Federation of Malaya, for instance, suggested to the Secretary of State for the Colonies that such emotive terms as 'war', 'enemy' and 'rebellion' should be avoided, and names such as 'banditry', 'thugs', 'terrorism' and so on be used instead.³⁸ The true meaning of these euphemisms needs to be understood by the research scholar, for a literal interpretation of their meaning would lead to ill-formed conclusions that the British colonial power in Malaya was not faced with an outright war.

It was not until 20 May 1952 at a meeting of the Federation of Malaya Executive Council that the British colonial authorities decided to replace the term 'bandits' with 'communist terrorists' (CTs) as the officially designated name for armed units of the MNLA and the *Min Yuen*, the People's Movement.³⁹ The legal definition of a terrorist in Malaya was a person:

who by the use of any firearm, explosive or ammunition acts in a manner prejudicial to public safety or the maintenance of public order, incites to violence, or counsels disobedience to the law; carries, possesses or controls any firearm, explosive or ammunition without lawful authority; or demands, collects, or receives any supplies for the use of any person who intends or is about to act or has recently acted in a manner prejudicial to public safety or the maintenance of public order.⁴⁰

By the time the Emergency had been declared in June 1948, most of the armed units of the CPM had taken to the jungle in peninsular Malaya

to form what was initially called the Malayan People's Anti-British Army (MPABA). During the three-and-a-half years of the Japanese occupation, the military arm of the CPM fighting the Japanese in the Malayan jungle, aided by the clandestine British-led Force 136, adopted the name Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA).⁴¹ When the CPM took up arms against the British colonial government after the war, it was but a step to change the name to the Malayan People's Anti-British Army.

The use of these labels alone suggests that as far as the Malayan communists were concerned, and irrespective of the contributions of Force 136, both the Japanese and British were regarded as colonialists promoting their own national interests rather than those of Malaya. On 1 February 1949, the MPABA name was changed yet again and the guerrilla army became known as the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA), in accordance with a special manifesto promulgated by the CPM's Central Committee.⁴² Although the English name, Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA), has been adopted in many published accounts of the Emergency, it would appear from the CPM's own English-language publications that the correct version of the name should be Malayan National Liberation Army (*Malaiya Renmin Minzu Jiefang Jun*). The difference arises from the mis-translation of the Chinese characters for *minzu* appearing in the original Chinese name, which should be translated in this context as 'national' and not 'races'.⁴³

After the Second World War, the British government attached great economic importance to Malaya, as it had abundant supplies of rubber and tin. It was, in fact, the world's largest source of natural rubber. There were therefore compelling economic reasons for Britain to ensure that Malaya did not fall into communist hands. In 1948, for instance, the USA imported from Malaya 371,000 tonnes of rubber and 155,000 tonnes of tin, earning Britain a most-welcome US\$170 million at a time when the sterling area had an overall deficit of US\$1,800 million.⁴⁴ Clearly, after the defeat of the Japanese, the old relationship between Britain and its Asian dependencies had re-emerged, whereby Britain's trade deficits with the US were balanced against exports to the US from the British colonies.

The Soviet Union, although providing moral support for communist parties in Asia, and regarded at that time as the leader of the communist world's opposition to Western imperialism in Asia, was not averse to trading with colonial Malaya and Singapore. In 1946 and 1947, for instance, attempts were made to establish a Soviet representative office

in Singapore to purchase rubber, and two representatives of the Soviet trading corporation Exportkhleb, AM Arinitohev and Papel Ivanovich Sizov, were granted visas to visit Singapore from Hong Kong for short stays from 2 to 28 December 1946 and again on 18 January 1947.⁴⁵ While they were in Singapore, they were kept under close surveillance by the Malayan Security Service, and were observed to be in touch with known local communists.⁴⁶ However, nothing came of their attempt to establish a purchasing office in Singapore at that time and most of the Soviet orders for rubber were placed through the London rubber market.⁴⁷

While Malaya found itself back inside the familiar confines of the old colonial relationship with Britain, the attempts by the communists to provide some kind of alternative remained half-hearted and ineffective. Even during the Cold War (1945–90), that began after the end of the Second World War and arose from the fundamentally different ideologies and interests between the Soviet Union and the West and spread to every part of the world, international communist support for the Communist Party of Malaya was not very impressive. It was confined to the WFTU occasionally issuing protests against alleged repression of Malayan workers, communist-controlled Australian seamen and dockers boycotting the loading and shipping of war material to Malaya, the Indian 'Peace' Council calling for the observance of a 'Malaya Day' in support of the CPM (but nothing seems to have come of it), and the World Peace Council issuing resolutions calling for the cessation of the Emergency in Malaya.⁴⁸ While it may have been expected that the British Communist Party would maintain close fraternal links with the Communist Party of Malaya, it does not seem to have provided much support aside from occasional references to the situation in Malaya in the *Daily Worker*, the British communist newssheet. It did, however, issue a declaration (which did not seem to be particularly objectionable) in support of the freedom of the 'working class movement' in Malaya at the Conference of Communist and Workers' Parties of Countries within the Sphere of British Imperialism, held in London in 1947. When the Emergency was declared in June 1948, the British Communist Party confined itself to saying that the Emergency was the result of the 'British government collaborating with British capitalists to maintain profits at the expense of the legitimate aspirations of Malayan workers'.⁴⁹

The history of the tumultuous events of the Emergency, in which the Special Branch played such an important part, needs to be viewed in the light of the Cold War, which was fought essentially by secret intelligence agencies. Throughout this period, communism was perceived to be the

principal adversary of democracy, and anti-communism became virtually a crusade. In Asia, the Cold War brought about repeated crises, such as the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the First and Second Taiwan Straits Crises, and communist uprisings in many Southeast Asian countries. Chin Peng, the CPM's Secretary-General, undoubtedly hoped, although he did not express it in so many words, that if he could hold out long enough, the People's Republic of China would come to his aid as had happened in the Korean War, when the PRC had intervened on the side of the North Korean army.⁵⁰

In the wider view of the events surrounding the Emergency, the 'domino theory' figured prominently in the minds of many contemporary military and political leaders. The term, coined in 1954, gave rise to a theory arguing that communism was advancing throughout the world in the same way that a row of dominoes falls until none is left standing.⁵¹ It brought about a sense of urgency and a real apprehension at the time that unless the communist insurgency in Malaya could be defeated, Malaya would be in danger of being overrun by the victorious communist forces that were sweeping through Indo-China into Thailand and southward toward the Malayan frontier.

An important question raised by various people is what part did the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) play in defeating the communist uprising? Though the CIA station in Singapore kept in touch with what was going on and maintained close relations with the Malayan and Singapore Special Branches, it did not actually intervene.⁵² It is worth noting, however, that in the 1950s, intelligence operations in Southeast Asia were divided territorially between the British and the Americans. In 1954, Sir John Sinclair, a senior MI6 officer from London, and Fergie Dempster, the MI6 representative in Saigon, flew to Washington, DC, to discuss intelligence operations in the Far East with Allen Dulles, the CIA Director-General. They were accompanied by Maurice Oldfield (later Sir Maurice), the MI6 representative at Security Intelligence Far East (SIFE), Singapore.⁵³

The discussions resulted in what is referred to as the 'Four Square Agreement'; the corners of the so-called 'square' being occupied by the Philippines, Malaya, Singapore and Burma. Under the agreement, the CIA retained intelligence responsibility for the Philippines, formerly an American colony until it gained independence in 1946, leaving the British intelligence services to look after Malaya, Singapore and Burma, which were traditionally accepted as forming part of the British colonial empire. Both intelligence services agreed to co-operate in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Indonesia.⁵⁴