

Terror in the Tropics: An Analysis of the British Army's Counterinsurgency Success in the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960)

Introduction:

In the post-World War Two era, most western counterinsurgency operations (COIN) have been plagued by failure. Be it Afghanistan, Vietnam, Iraq or Somalia, COIN operations have repeatedly encountered similar problems: an inability to decisively defeat insurgent forces, significant collateral damage and a lack of support from indigenous populations. From 1948 to 1960, Britain faced a similar insurgency in its Malayan colony. With much more primitive military technology than used in the Vietnam War — let alone in the 21st century — the British and Commonwealth armed forces decisively defeated the Communist insurgency. This essay will examine how the British Army overcame what appeared to be insurmountable odds, through the lens of military strategies, area control/denial, propaganda campaigns, improvements in intelligence and military-led Malayan political reforms.

Historical Context

Rather than adopt a chronological framework to examine the roots of the conflict, a 'faction by faction' style will be used to clearly elucidate the motivations that drove the Malayan Emergency. Of foremost importance was the ethnic Chinese diaspora. Since the 1400's, many Chinese had immigrated to Malaya, representing 38% of its population.¹ As a cultural and social unit, they were distinct from the ethnic Malays to such an extent that the British governed them via a separate political system.² Not surprisingly, the Malays and the Chinese, also had deep-rooted resentment towards each other.³

During World War Two, the Malayan Chinese had been the primary source of resistance against Japan's iron-fisted rule following the fall of Singapore in 1942. A guerrilla force known as the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) was formed with covert British support

¹ Michael Burleigh, *Small Wars, Faraway Places: Global Insurrection and the Making of the Modern World* (London, Penguin, 2013), p 222.

² Ibid.

³ Burleigh, Michael, p. 224.

and proved to be a thorn in the side of the Japanese. Yet to the surprise of many, the MPAJA did not create a “provisional government” following the Japanese defeat in 1945, merely continuing its political outreach in other forms.⁴ For example, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) directly controlled 214 of the 277 Malayan labour unions and used them to exploit simmering economic grievances in the colony via hundreds of strikes.⁵⁶

The insurgency’s relationship with the Malayan populace was paramount to its early success. The newly created Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA, formed in 1948 after the ‘Emergency’ was declared) used the basis of its civilian support from WW2 and built a close connection with its civilian counterpart: the Min Yuen (Masses Movement). Many of the Min Yuen were the 600,000 Chinese ‘squatters’ who resided on the fringes of the jungle, some working in the thousands of rubber plantations and tin mines.⁷ Other supporters were “clerks and waiters” who helped by “gather[ing] intelligence” for the MNLA.⁸⁹ The greatest benefit the insurgents received from their civilian allies was in the form of logistical support. Almost every need of the Communists was supplied (willingly or unwillingly) by sympathizers: “food, money, medicines, clothing...and fresh recruits.”¹⁰ The initial MNLA plan aimed at isolating the British from the interior by attacking mines, plantations and Government outposts in rural Malaya. This first phase of hit-and-run attacks was fairly successful for the insurgents; the British Army, police force and colonial units were unable to actively engage the insurgents. After the planned completion of the first phase, Chin Peng (leader of the Communists) hoped to link up with the Min Yuen across the country and proceed to a final, climactic victory over the British.

Analysis

It is impossible to create a simple narrative of the counterinsurgency. It would be presumptuous to suggest that any one particular strategy—whether it be the pursuit of Malayan “Hearts and Minds”, military propaganda, the New Villages Program, improved Command and

⁴ John Newsinger, *British Counterinsurgency* (Basingstoke, Springer, 2016), p. 42.

⁵ Philip, Deery, “Malaya, 1948: Britain’s ‘Asian Cold War’?”, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol.9, No.1, (January 2007), pp. 29-54, pp. 41-44.

⁶ The MCP was the political arm of the Communist forces during (and prior to) the Emergency.

⁷ Burleigh, Michael, p. 222.

⁸ Newsinger, John, p. 52.

⁹ Burleigh, Michael, p. 226.

¹⁰ Newsinger, John, p. 54.

Control or better unit-level tactics — led to the final victory unilaterally. Rather, it was a combination of the above that, over time, ground the resistance to a halt.

Military Tactics and Strategies

The prerequisite to securing Malayan “Hearts and Minds” (depriving the insurgents of popular support) was winning and holding ground in the military sense. Early British military tactics were ponderous and heavy-handed. General Charles Boucher (GOC Malaya 1948) described his strategy as “break[ing] the insurgent concentrations, bring[ing] them to battle...drive them underground or into the jungle, and then to follow them there...[by] police, troops and...the RAF.”¹¹ Large battalion sized patrols had difficulty encountering, engaging and defeating the mobile Communists in the wilderness of the Malayan heartland. Captured MNLAs documents reveal that large British formations “neither harried or worried [them]..but surprise raids and ambushes by small parties were greatly feared.”¹² British aerial bombardment also did little damage to the MNLAs. In a post-war interview, Chin Peng said that “We don’t [sic] worry [about British aerial bombing]. Their bombing never hit the target...they hit only the tree[s]...we worried...the fallen branches might hit us!”¹³

Furthermore, a chronic lack of troops plagued the British effort in 1948. Only “ten battalions (two British, five Gurkha, and three Malay)” were initially available for service, alongside 9000 police officers.¹⁴ Many of the troops were “green” and few units were full strength.¹⁵ *Ceteris paribus*, the actual combat troop strength of the insurgents and the British was roughly equal at 4000 men a piece at the beginning of the Emergency.¹⁶

Finally, the Command and Control aspect of the counter-insurgency was extremely convoluted in the early stages of the conflict. The jurisdiction of the British military and the police force often overlapped, leading to bureaucratic infighting. The Police Chief of Pahang

¹¹ J.A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Santa Barbara, Greenwood, 2002), p. 67.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ C.C. Chin, *Dialogues with Chin Peng: New Light on the Malayan Communist Party* (Singapore, NUS Press, 2004) p. 163.

¹⁴ Nagl, J.A., p. 65.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Nagl, J.A., p. 65.

reported that he faced “a lot of trouble regarding [the] burning down of buildings by the military” given that such actions were a police responsibility.¹⁷¹⁸ Interservice cooperation was so lackluster that, in 1950, the British Defence Coordinating Committee stated that the COIN effort was “unsatisfactory” and recommended that a powerful “coordinating officer” be created.¹⁹

Each of these problems were addressed by a number of crucial decisions, many of them enacted by High Commissioner Henry Gurney’s successor, Sir Gerald Templer (appointed in January 1952). Firstly, the initial overarching strategy of large military “sweeps” up the peninsula was mostly abandoned. Instead, small, mobile formations were used to target the insurgents. Large British military concentrations focused on guarding “white” areas — that is, areas that had been cleared of insurgents and were being restored to normalcy.²⁰ Byzantine bureaucratic strife was also ameliorated in this period. One of General Briggs’ (the newly appointed Malayan Director of Operations in February 1950) first actions was the implementation of a “Federal War Council” to unify authority on all governmental levels, via Directive Number One (April 1950).²¹²² Briggs also issued a formal template for the future conduct of the counterinsurgency in the “Federation Plan for the Elimination of the Communist Organisation and Armed Forces in Malaya.”²³

Furthermore, British low-level unit tactics were modified to reflect the unique conditions of COIN in Malaya. In the post-war period, many of the hard-earned lessons of jungle warfare had been abandoned by British officers whose experience had come in Europe with Montgomery, not in Burma with the Chindits. High Commissioner Templer took a number of steps to address this. A “multiracial” military academy, similar to Sandhurst, was established in 1952.²⁴ Known as the ‘Federation Military College’, it produced dozens of well-trained officers,

¹⁷ Nagl, J.A, p. 68.

¹⁸ The buildings in question were abandoned by the MNLA. By law, OCPDs (Officers in Charge of the Police District) had the authority to handle such buildings, but under General Boucher, the military often decided to proceed without police involvement.

¹⁹ R.W, Komer, *The Malayan Emergency in Retrospect: Organization of a Successful Counterinsurgency Effort* (Santa Monica, Rand Corporation, 1972), p. 26.

²⁰ Burleigh, Michael, pp. 250-251.

²¹ Burleigh, Michael, p. 234.

²² David, French, *The British Way in Counterinsurgency 1945-1967*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 97.

²³ Burleigh, Michael, p. 235.

²⁴ Burleigh, Michael, p. 249.

many of whom would participate in the counterinsurgency with great acclaim, receiving commendations like the Malaysian Service Medal.²⁵²⁶

Templer also spearheaded the creation of a “Specialist Jungle Warfare” institution in 1953.²⁷ The Academy focused on increasing the proficiency of Commonwealth soldiers in jungle combat. Counterinsurgency expert John Nagl noted that, at the school, soldiers were expected to combine the qualities “of the poacher, gangster and cat-burglar.”²⁸ Soldiers were taught to silently move into ambush positions, exploit the jungle ecosystem and avoid friendly fire incidents in treacherous, low-visibility terrain. Officers were provided with a handbook for warfare in Malaya, the ‘Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya’ (ATOM).²⁹ Modern military technology was also put to use; Sikorsky helicopters transporting commando units became commonplace.³⁰ Following these reforms, special forces units such as the Malayan Scouts, Sarawak ‘headhunters’ or the SAS would infiltrate the jungle and strike the Communists.³¹

In order to muster the necessary manpower, the British sought to increase recruitment and troop deployments. High Commissioner Templer enlisted 50,000 Chinese into the Home Guard, a militia to protect the ‘New Villages.’³² The expansion of the Home Guard was of such importance that Templer himself ensured that every Malayan state had at least one Home Guard training facility and that 200-300 instructors would be trained per month. Hundreds of Commonwealth officers were brought into the peninsula to provide effective leadership for the Home Guard detachments. By 1953, the Home Guard consisted of 250,000 men, and total manpower was at 450,000 (including 40,000 professional British and Commonwealth soldiers).³³³⁴

²⁵ Burleigh, Michael, p. 249.

²⁶ An image of the Malaysian Service Medal can be found in Appendix B.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Nagl, J.A, p. 69.

²⁹ Newsinger, John, p. 55.

³⁰ Burleigh, Michael, p. 250.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Newsinger, John, p. 62.

³³ J.R, Arnold, *Jungle of Snakes: A Century of Counterinsurgency Warfare from the Philippines to Iraq* (New York, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), p. 171.

³⁴ R.O, Tilman, “The Non-Lessons of the Malayan Emergency”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 6, No. 8, (August 1966), pp. 407-419, p. 417.

Overall, these military reforms paid great dividends. Approximately 7000 insurgents had been killed by the end of 1953 and, most importantly, insurgent activity had dropped drastically, from a peak of over 6000 in 1951 to fewer than 4000 in 1952 — a precipitous decline that would continue until the conclusion of the Emergency.³⁵

Area Control and Winning Hearts & Minds: The Briggs Plan and the New Villages

In any discussion of counter insurgencies, the term ‘Hearts and Minds’ is often bandied about. However, ‘Hearts and Minds’ are a means to an end and do not exist in a vacuum — suitable military conditions must be established prior to winning over the civilian population in question. The unique geography of Malaya and the limitations of Britain's military resources contributed to the creation of a remarkable series of undertakings: the population control methods of the Briggs Plan and the New Villages program.

Fundamentally, the Briggs plan sought to disrupt the critical link that any insurgency depends upon: its symbiotic relationship with the masses. Crucially, the insurgents were not self-sufficient and relied on “food and intelligence” from the Min Yuen, or simply coercing any villagers they came across.³⁶ As Director of Operations (1950-1951), Sir Harold Briggs oversaw the resettlement of around 400,000 Malaysians by the dawn of 1952, with 600,000 being resettled in total over the course of the ‘New Villages’ program. Each village was fortified and provided basic amenities like water and electricity.³⁷ “Police post[s], health clinic[s] and school[s]” were also made available in some hamlets.³⁸ However, these settlements were not intended to provide high-quality living standards. One resident of a village described the often atrocious conditions: “at the fetid edge of a mangrove swamp...was the ‘new village’ ...four hundred beings...foot-deep in brackish mud...there was no clean water anywhere.”³⁹ Their inhospitable conditions notwithstanding, the New Villages were the key cog in the Army’s overarching strategic plan.

³⁵ Karl, Hack, “The Malayan Emergency as counter-insurgency paradigm”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol.32, No.3, (2009), pp. 383-414.

³⁶ Burleigh, Michael, p. 226.

³⁷ Burleigh, Michael, p. 237.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Burleigh, Michael, p. 238.

The purpose of the New Villages was to sever much of the relationship between the Min Yuen and the MNLA; in this, they were supremely successful. Even if villagers ostensibly supported the Communist cause, it became impossible for them to actually aid it. ‘Food denial’ programs meant that “precise records of each purchase and sale” were kept.⁴⁰ Central cooking stations were erected inside the villages, further preventing the disappearance of food.⁴¹ Without supplies from villagers, the guerrillas were forced to become self-reliant. Since the MNLA was never able to “dominate populated areas, [secure] logistical links to other countries” or maintain its own resource base, the cutting off of its links to its supporters by the British Army would doom the insurgency.⁴²

Chin Peng’s memoirs and interviews effectively convey the extent of the impact of the Briggs Plan/New Villages. They were devastating to the MNLA’s supply lines because “even a small group of...30 guerrillas, was unable to sustain itself for much longer than two weeks...in the jungle. Beyond this...their diet had to be supplemented by food from outside.”⁴³ The logistics situation became so precarious that the MNLA tried “making rubber seed[s] edible.”⁴⁴ This new strategic paradigm forced a shift in MNLA policy. Large groups of insurgents, sometimes over 200 men, were dispersed into smaller forces to avoid starvation. Most damning was the fact that the MNLA was losing the strategic initiative; with a chronic lack of resources and improved British tactics, the Communists could no longer choose the time and place of engagements.

The leadership of the insurgency sought to halt the resettlement by declaring the “Politburo’s August 1950 Guide to the Anti-Resettlement Campaign.” Yet it was to no avail. After all, the “British did not tell you when they’d come...The Army moved your belongings without your agreement...they forced you.”⁴⁵ With the novel British strategy bearing fruit, the MNLA was forced to change tack. The so-called ‘October Resolutions’ of 1951 marked a sea change for the MNLA. They renounced “indiscriminate terror” as “counterproductive” and

⁴⁰ Burleigh, Michael, p. 238.

⁴¹ Hack, Karl, p. 15.

⁴² K.A, Hack, “‘Iron Claws on Malaya’: The Historiography of the Malayan Emergency.”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 30, No.1, (March 1999), pp.99-125, p.104.

⁴³ Chin Peng, Ian Ward, Norma Miraflor, *My Side of History* (Singapore, Media Masters, 2003), p. 267

⁴⁴ Peng Chin, Ward Ian, Miraflor Norma, p. 270.

⁴⁵ Chin, C.C, p. 153.

focused violence on more “symbolic targets.” With its most crucial supporters isolated and its supplies dwindling, the MNLA was forced to ‘strategically retreat’. Chin Peng suggests that they planned to form a “jungle base [and] operate small-scale...guerilla warfare...to regain the initiative.”⁴⁶ This retreat thus ended any realistic chance of a political victory for the Communists. For without insurgent contact to the masses, a ‘people’s revolution’ as envisioned in Marxist dialectic could never occur.

British Military Intelligence and Propaganda Campaign

In order to defeat an enemy, one must know your enemy. In the early days of the Emergency, British forces often operated with little information about their opponent’s movements and plans. The Malayan Security Service was widely viewed as an incompetent organization and was eventually abandoned. In its place, Special Branch operatives took on the burden of infiltrating the MCP and Min Yuen and providing essential information to the counterinsurgency effort.

The British Military faced two main difficulties when it came to intelligence. Firstly, due to the decentralized nature of the MCP and the Min Yuen, it was tough to infiltrate or capture a ‘cell’. Secondly, very little communication of note was intercepted by British agents. In order to tackle these obstacles, the British began surveilling and targeting Communist message couriers, generally female sympathizers. Oftentimes, suspected Communists would be captured and spirited away to a Government facility where they were coerced into revealing their associates. Furthermore, the Army and Police grew adept at intercepting Communist messages. They developed techniques to reveal hidden messages that were often concealed in lemon juice or liquid aspirin.⁴⁷ High Commissioner Templer himself remarked that “the Emergency ‘will be won by our intelligence system.’”⁴⁸ By capturing and ‘turning’ Min Yuen informants or MNLA guerrillas, vital information about the whereabouts of the MNLA and its plans were revealed, providing British troops an advantage in combat.

⁴⁶ Chin, C.C, p. 159.

⁴⁷ Burleigh, Michael, p. 255.

⁴⁸ Newsinger, John, p. 56.

Military propaganda, directed at guerrilla fighters and their sympathizers, was also a key tactic. Templer correctly realized that weakening MNLAs morale would reap immense dividends via the capture of deserters. To this effect, aircraft were outfitted with loudspeakers blaring out Templer's voice, saying that he "personal[ly] pledge[d]" that those who turned themselves in "will [sic] not be ill treated."⁴⁹ Captured Communists also broadcast messages to their former comrades, imploring them to aid the British. These proved to be particularly effective since the defectors targeted their messages to specific individuals, often recounting the good treatment they received as British captives. Templer even sponsored the creation of the Special Operations Volunteer Force (SOVF), 12 platoons made up of former Communists, who were used to ambush the MNLAs.⁵⁰

By the end of the Emergency, the military had distributed more than 500 million propaganda leaflets in the jungle. These pamphlets sowed dissent amongst the ranks by implying that Communist officers were able to take mistresses, a privilege not afforded to the rank and file. Others depicted dead insurgents, ruthlessly killed by the Army with a clear message: 'do you want to share their fate?' Flyers aimed at civilians warned against "feed[ing] the Communist mad dogs: they will bite you!"⁵¹ The propaganda campaign was so effective that, by 1955, every captured/defected insurgent said that they had encountered some aspect of British Army propaganda.⁵² One notable example was when Ah Kuk was assassinated by none other than his own bodyguards!⁵³ When they presented his decapitated head to the authorities, the bodyguards stated that they had been convinced by the handsome reward (\$75,000) for Ah Kuk.⁵⁵

Templer's Political Reforms: Foundation for Malayan Independence

Finally, the last piece of the puzzle in the counter-insurgency was the foundation of a self-governing Malayan state. While this essay is focused on the military methods used to defeat the Communists, the political affairs of Malaya were also tied to the military. High Commissioner Gerald Templer himself is said to have remarked that "The shooting side of the

⁴⁹ Burleigh, Michael, p. 252.

⁵⁰ Nagl, J.A, p. 100.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Burleigh, Michael, p. 252.

⁵³ Peng Chin, Ward Ian, Miraflor Norma, p. 311.

⁵⁴ Ah Kuk was the MNLAs second in command.

⁵⁵ Peng Chin, Ward Ian, Miraflor Norma, p. 313.

business is only 25% of the trouble and the other 75% lies in getting the people of this country behind us.”⁵⁶ Given Templer had all-encompassing powers (not just of the police and the armed forces but also ‘political authority’), he actively worked towards building a political rapprochement in Malaya. Templer pushed for cooperation between the elites, both Malay and Chinese, hoping to create a solid political establishment. His efforts succeeded, with the “birth of the multi-ethnic Alliance Party” which would be led by Tunku Abdul Rahman.⁵⁷ Members of the Party also became active in directing the course of the counter insurgency, in order to “Malayanize responsibility...of the emergency.” Overtures were sent out to the ethnic Chinese, promoting greater involvement on their part in the civil service with the overall goal of exploiting their tensions with the Communists. Much to Chin Peng’s chagrin, Malaya’s first independent federal elections took place in 1955, with a resounding victory for Rahman’s Alliance Party. Chin Peng himself realized that “the core of [his] armed struggle had been abruptly extracted” with the newfound Malayan independence.⁵⁸ The fact that British managed to “harness nationalism...for the government [and] against the insurgents was the...most vital part of winning...‘hearts and minds’ of the population” and thus, winning the conflict.⁵⁹

Conclusion

At the zenith of the Emergency in 1951, Prime Minister Churchill and his Colonial Secretary Oliver Lyttelton reached out to Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, hoping for advice on how to tackle the insurgency. The aging Field Marshal responded with the following:

Dear Lyttelton,

Malaya. We must have a plan. Secondly we must have a man. When we have a plan and a man, we shall succeed; not otherwise.

Yours sincerely

Montgomery (F.M.)⁶⁰

Montgomery’s laconic note would hold true; with a multifaceted strategy and

⁵⁶ Burleigh, Michael, p. 245.

⁵⁷ Burleigh, Michael, p. 258.

⁵⁸ Peng Chin, Ward Ian, Miraflor Norma, p. 395.

⁵⁹ Nagl, J.A., p. 91.

⁶⁰ Burleigh, Michael, p. 243.

competent leaders, the British Military would succeed, despite the daunting situation at the outset of the Malayan Emergency. Yet for those who seek a tried-and-tested counterinsurgency blueprint, Malaya may be more of an exception than a norm. There is something to be said about whether the effectiveness of British Military actions or the constraints of the MNLA had a greater impact on the course of the Emergency. When compared to other Cold War insurgencies, the British were able to build up major manpower advantage while the MNLA never received any foreign support and were hemmed in by the geography of the peninsula. Nevertheless, a few lessons emerge from the conflict, revealing how Britain pacified the colony.

Firstly, the Army discarded its initial strategy of ‘rolling-up’ the peninsula with large formations. Instead, small-scale units, trained in jungle-warfare from a plethora of troop academies were used to strike at the MNLA on its homeground. Secondly, the Army disconnected the guerrillas from their civilian supporters via the New Villages and the Briggs Plan. In doing so, they denied the Communists their essential logistical support, isolated their supporters, drove the MNLA into the jungle and forced them to abandon a strategy of active combat. Thirdly, military propaganda sowed division amongst the ranks of the MNLA, providing the counterinsurgents with important information from deserters or captives. Finally, military officials like Sir Gerald Templer did not overlook the political scene; by providing the foundation for Malayan self-governance, the British undercut the insurgency’s *raison d’etre*. While none of these military efforts would have been successful in isolation, when enacted in conjunction they delivered victory in the Malayan Emergency. As Professor Karl Hack puts it, “Area dominance [military control] is the *sine qua non* for security, information, and then building successful hearts and minds stuff on top.”⁶¹

⁶¹Author’s correspondence (via email) with Professor K.A. Hack, Oxford, 23 December 2020.

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⁶² Please note that an online copy was used for many of the books in the bibliography. As such, page number citations may be different from standard paper copies.

Appendices:

Appendix A: Timeline of Events

<u>Event</u>	<u>Date</u>
End of World War Two.	2nd of September 1945.
Sir Gerard Edward James Gent appointed as High Commissioner of Malaya.	1st February 1948 .
Sungai Siput Incident (beginning of conflict)	16th June 1948.
Sir Henry Gurney appointed as High Commissioner of Malaya	1st October 1948.
Lieutenant-General Sir Harold Briggs arrives in Malaya as Director of Operations.	1950-1951.
Sir Henry Gurney was assassinated by MNLA guerrillas.	6th October 1951.
Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templer is appointed as the High Commissioner of Malaya and as the Director of Operations in Malaya.	22st of January 1952.
Sir Gerald Templer's tenure as High Commissioner of Malaya ends.	31st of May 1954.
Malayan General Election (the first on the Federal level).	27th of July 1955.
End of the Emergency.	31st of July 1960.

Appendix B: Malaysian Service Medal



Source: Wikipedia.com, Malaysian Service Medal,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysian_Service_Medal#/media/File:Pingat_Jasa_Malaysia_medal.png. Last accessed: 14/02/2021.