

Silenced Revolutionaries:
Challenging the Received View of Malaya's Revolutionary Past

by

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ABSTRACT

In the former British colony of Malaya, communism is a controversial subject that often invites significant scrutiny from government officials and pro-British scholars who describes the radical movement as a foreign conspiracy to dominate the small Southeast Asian nation. The primary goal of this thesis, therefore, is to reinterpret and revise the current established history of Malayan communism in a chronological and unbiased manner that would illustrate that the authoritative accounts of the movement was not only incomplete but was also written with explicit prejudice.

The secondary goal of this thesis is to argue that the members of the Malayan Communist Party were actually nationalists who embraced leftist ideology as a means to fight against colonialism. By examining the programs and manifestoes issued by the Party over the years, it is clear that the communists were in fact had been arguing for social reforms and independence rather than a Russian-style proletarian revolution.

This research scrutinizes the authoritative texts written by Cold War-era scholars such as Gene Hanrahan as well as newly published historical analysis of the period by Cheah Boon Kheng in addition to memoirs of surviving members of the Party such as Chin Peng and Abdullah C.D. The evidence indicates that early understandings of the Malayan communist movement were heavily influenced by Cold War paranoia and that over time it had become the accepted version of history.

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I. Introduction.

Literature Review.

In the course of gathering research materials for this thesis, I discovered that the majority of the established literature on the history of communism in Malaya was written either during the height of the Emergency between 1950 and 1960 or in the immediate post-insurgency years. These publications have long been accepted as the authoritative studies on the rise and demise of the Malayan Communist movement and consequently have become the most widely accepted baseline interpretation for these events. The authors were either witnesses or participants during those years of intense communist activity and as a result became highly qualified experts on the subject matter. Authors such as Victor Purcell, Anthony Short, and Spencer Chapman were present during pivotal moments of Malaya's history. Their books and articles provided a wealth of information regarding the Malayan Communist Party and its activities during and after World War II. Spencer Chapman's *The Jungle is Neutral* was especially useful as it provides a rare look into the trials and tribulations of the anti-Japanese communist guerillas between 1942 and 1945.¹ Anthony Short's *In Pursuit of Mountain Rats* continued the narrative by providing in-depth accounts of the guerillas' movements after World War II.² Victor Purcell, a former Malayan civil

¹ Spencer F. Chapman, *The Jungle is Neutral*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1949). Hereafter cited as Chapman.

² Anthony Short, *In Pursuit of Mountain Rats: The Communist Insurrection in Malaya*. (Singapore: Cultured Lotus, 2000). Hereafter cited as Short. This is the newer edition of Short's book which was originally published in 1975.

servant and Protector of the Chinese, in *Malaya: Communist or Free?* wrote mostly on the political climate of the times, commenting on the rise of Malayan communism and its connection to the rising global tension between the East and West known as the Cold War.³ Gene Hanrahan, a scholar researching the strategies and tactics of the communist revolutionary movement in Malaya, wrote perhaps one of the first studies on the Malayan communist struggle. His work, *The Communist Struggle in Malaya* has been cited by many as the most basic text on that history.⁴

Although these studies were, for the most part, accurate and illuminating, they were also troublingly prejudicial in their analysis of Malayan communism. This can be attributed to two factors: the timing of the publications, and the attitudes of the authors. Nearly all of the books were from the post-Emergency era, a time when the authors were attempting to piece together the events that led to the outbreak of war in the Malay Peninsula and to explain how the Malayan Communist Party became such a potent force before and during those long years. Moreover, a majority of the books were written at a time when the Cold War was in real danger of becoming a third global conflict-or so it seemed-causing the authors to be heavily influenced by urgent contemporary events. The literature from this period therefore became quite biased; it was distinctly anti-communist and sought to glorify the actions and sacrifices of the colonial government and its

³ Victor Purcell, *Malaya: Communist or Free?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1955). Hereafter cited as Purcell, *Malaya*.

⁴ Gene Z. Hanrahan, *The Communist Struggle in Malaya*. (New York: Institute of Pacific relations, 1974). Hereafter cited as Hanrahan.

security forces. This included justifying the drastic and brutal actions taken by the authorities-although often in the most paternalistic terms. The unfortunate effect of this blatant selective editing of the facts led to a decidedly incomplete chronicle of events. These “authoritative” narratives only told half the story, leaving the other half conveniently or deliberately missing.

It is most fortunate that new scholarship by authors with access to previously classified government files in London and Kuala Lumpur has surfaced in the last several decades. New studies by Cheah Boon Kheng, C.F. Yong, and C.C. Chin, for example, mark a major departure from previously established accounts and introduce several important details regarding the history of communism in Malaya.⁵ A more complicated picture has emerged. For example, Yong’s excellent research on the roots of Malayan radicalism in *Origins of Malayan Communism* presents a rare look into the beginnings of the peninsula’s history of leftist politics. Meanwhile, Cheah in *Red Star over Malaya* and *The Masked Comrades* argues that Malayan communism was a popular ideology in early twentieth century Malaya and that its adherents were nationalists who embraced communism as a way to express their anti-colonial views. Some of the

⁵ C.F. Yong, *The Origins of Malayan Communism*. (Singapore: South Seas Society). Hereafter cited as Yong. Cheah Boon Kheng, *Red Star over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict during and after the Japanese Occupation, 1941-1946*. (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003). Hereafter cited as Cheah, *Red Star*. Cheah Boon Kheng, *The Masked Comrades: A Study of the Communist United Front in Malaya, 1945-48*. (Singapore: Times Books International, 1979). Hereafter cited as Cheah, *Masked Comrades*. C.C. Chin and Karl Hack, ed., *Dialogues with Chin Peng: New Light on the Malayan Communist Party*. (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004). Hereafter cited as Chin and Hack.

best primary sources available today are the memoirs of Chin Peng, the current party secretary of the Malayan Communist Party, and Abdullah C.D., one of the rare Malay communists still alive today.⁶ These fascinating new sources, while not free of biases, were written without the typical Cold War paranoia and irrational hatred of communism that were common in earlier books. Indeed, they provide an opposite perspective although not always a conflicting one. In other words, the major missing pieces of the puzzle were now available. A new interpretation of the history of communism in Malaya can now be written.

⁶ Chin Peng, *My Side of History*. (Singapore: Media Masters, 2003). Hereafter cited as Chin Peng. Abdullah C.D., *The Memoirs of Abdullah C.D., Part One: The Movement until 1948*. (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2009). Hereafter cited as Abdullah.

Origins of Leftist Politics in Malaya.

Modern political life in Southeast Asia can be traced to the second decade of the twentieth century where in the wake of the dissolution of the old empires and complex alliances in Western Europe that marked the end of World War I, new ideologies and a distinctly revolutionary philosophy began to permeate the archipelago through the inflow of migrants from both East and West.

In British Malaya, the indigenous Malays and the migrant Chinese and Indian population had created a nascent plural society that was both harmonious and wary. The Malays, claiming native status (despite the questionable roots of some) were the dominant ethnic group who had settled in the Malay Peninsula for centuries, while the Chinese and Indians (mostly Tamils) were recent arrivals who originally came as migrant laborers with no intention of settling down.⁷ Once the British had consolidated their control over the Malay principalities in the late nineteenth century, large numbers of Chinese and Indian laborers were hired to work in the established tin mines and rubber plantations as part of the systematic

⁷ Donald Nonini calls into question the indigenous status of the Malays by explaining that these settlers were not a unitary culture or society. Rather, he asserts that the “Malay” ethnic identity did not exist until the onset of the colonial era. In other words, the “Malays” were a European invention. When dealing with the diverse roots of the Malay people, neither William Roff nor Victor Purcell addresses this important historical issue. Donald M. Nonini, *British Colonial Rule and the Resistance of the Malay Peasantry, 1900-1957*. (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1992), 20. Hereafter cited as Nonini. Also William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). Hereafter cited as Roff. See also Purcell, *Malaya*.

development and exploitation of the peninsula's natural resources.⁸ Over time, the number of migrants began to rival the number of Malays and this led to mounting ethnic tensions which in turn allowed the British to exploit the situation by introducing a 'divide and rule' strategy that pitted the different ethnic groups against one another, preventing them from ever uniting and challenging British authority. Under British rule, the Malays were given favored status, which translated to a privileged or 'protected' class among the multi-ethnic population of Malaya. In other words, the Malays were encouraged to maintain their traditional customs and lifestyle while the Chinese and Indians were continued to be used as cheap labor to harvest raw materials.⁹ The multi-ethnic makeup of Malaya's social order was therefore reinforced by the British who wished to maintain control over their prized colonial possession by preventing social and cultural integration and encouraging separate communal development.

In the interwar years, the chaotic political state of East Asia pre-empted the possibility of the Chinese and Indians from returning to their homelands. China had overthrown its ancient imperial system in 1911 and had established a new republic under Sun Yat-sen while India was in the midst of a powerful

⁸ It was much cheaper to hire Chinese and Indian laborers as the Malays were too small in number and prone to rebellion if forced to work for a foreign master. But these migrant laborers were indentured servants, little more than slaves. Nonini, 46.

⁹ Curiously, Roff does not clearly address why the Malays were encouraged to maintain their traditional lifestyle. He gives the reasoning that there were unlimited supplies of cheap labor from China and India and that this allowed the British to exploit the mineral and agricultural resources of the Malay states without having to share the profits with the local rulers. Roff, 13.

nationalist movement that sought independence from Britain.¹⁰ Both nations were far from peaceful and were plagued with factionalism, insurrections, and uprisings. When the Great Depression struck in 1930, the British restricted further migration from China and India, forcing many of the migrants to view Malaya as a possible second home, at least for the foreseeable future. Within a few short years separate cultural identities began to emerge and Malaya's plural society began to mature and grow, eventually developing unique political characteristics.

It was during this period of political upheaval and social change that revolutionary ideologies began to permeate Malaya. Brought over by refugees and exiled thinkers who were avoiding prosecution back home, these new ideas resonated with the immigrant community who longed for any connection with their ancestral home. Fascinated by the powerful nationalist messages carried by the new arrivals, the local Chinese and Indians began to embrace radicalism and activism in support of their brethren's struggles back home. Among them, the Malayan Chinese were the most politically active as they had maintained close observation of China's domestic developments since the late nineteenth century. Beginning with the reformist movement championed by Kang You-wei, the Malayan Chinese community responded positively to the modernization of China

¹⁰ C.F. Yong argues that the political upheavals in China and India reached Malaya in the form of immigrants and refugees who sought to rebuild their lives in a distant land. A number of those who settled in Malaya carried with them strong anti-colonial sentiments that eventually influenced Malaya's own revolutionaries. Hardly any scholarship has been done regarding this early period of Malayan history. Most research concentrates on the pre-World War II decades, leaving the turn of the twentieth century a vaguely documented and understood period. Even Purcell failed to address this connection. Yong, 10.

in terms of education, the military, finance, transportation, communication, and politics.¹¹ Most importantly, these reform movements brought Chinese vernacular education to Malaya.

Soon, another more radical and revolutionary movement led by Sun Yat-sen had eclipsed Kang's reformist ideals which, instead of attempting to restructure the corrupt and decrepit Chinese monarchy, called for the overthrow of the Manchu-dominated Qing Dynasty and the establishment of a republic with a socialist economic system based on Sun's Three Principles of the People: Nationalism, Democracy, and People's Livelihood. In response, revolutionaries in Malaya established organizations such as the Tung Meng Hui (Alliance Association) to disseminate Sun's principles and to provide a conduit for gathering donations and to recruit members. However, it was mainly through Chinese language newspapers published locally that revolutionary propaganda was spread widely to the Chinese community. The effect of this was the politicization of the community and the increasing participation of the overseas Chinese in China's political future.

With the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911, the Tung Meng Hui transformed itself into the Malayan branch of the Kuomintang (KMT, or Nationalist Party) which now ruled China. As China descended into chaos following the usurpation of power first by the former Qing

¹¹ The Malayan Chinese community was mostly pro-China at this time as they were hoping to return home after making their fortune in the *Nanyang* (South Seas, the old name for Southeast Asia). *Ibid.*, 8.

general Yuan Shi-kai and later the rise of provincial warlordism, the Malayan KMT was unaffected and continued to declare its loyalty to Sun Yat-sen and his teachings. The KMT ideology was kept alive in Malaya by intellectuals who were working and teaching in the vernacular schools and the Chinese press, both cultivated an intense sense of patriotism among the students and the readers. This was evident as the newspapers and teachers exalted the efforts by Sun's successor, Chiang Kai-shek, in his famed Northern Expedition to reunify China under KMT rule beginning in 1926. While revolutionary, the KMT and its supporters were became less radical and more bureaucratic as time progressed.

Radical ideologies such as socialism, communism, and Marxism emerged from China's May Fourth Movement of 1919 in which students from major cities in China protested over the continual foreign control of the Shandong Settlement during the Versailles Peace Conference.¹² But even before the outbreak of this massive student protest, several Chinese bearing radical ideologies such as anarcho-communism were already in Malaya during 1917-18; it was these individuals who helped introduce left-wing politics to the Malayan Chinese. The May Fourth Movement provided the perfect catalyst for the propagation of anarcho-communism, as its promoters whipped up anti-Japanese sentiments by calling for anti-Japanese boycotts which ended in bloody riots in Singapore and

¹² The concept of anarcho-communism, and later communism, came about during the May Fourth Movement. It was later introduced to Malayan Chinese intellectuals by the participants. Yong identifies the event as the beginning of the Malayan communist movement from 1921 onwards. *Ibid.*, 10.

Penang.¹³ These anarcho-communists were the forerunners of the communist movement in Malaya.

Birth of Malay Nationalism.

Before World War II, the Malay peasants were an overwhelmingly rural people who respected the traditional authority of their sultans and adhered to long-established customs known as *adat*. Virtually all Malays were practicing Muslims and they usually lived in small *kampungs* (villages) where they owned large tracts of land inherited from their ancestors.¹⁴ Under the pretext of preserving the Malay traditional way of life and culture, the British discouraged them from participating in trade and commerce. Moreover, the British sought to ‘protect’ the Malays from predations by aggressive Chinese merchants by introducing the Malay Reservations Enactment of 1913, which preserved most of the Malay-owned lands and prevented their sale to outsiders.¹⁵ This in effect kept

¹³ Yong corroborates M.R. Stenson’s arguments by showing that the incidents occurring in Malaya were linked to Bolshevik movements in southern China where agents of the Far Eastern Bureau of the Comintern were actively directing the spread of communism to Malaya. M.R. Stenson, *Industrial Conflict in Malaya: Prelude to the Communist Revolt of 1948*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 8. Hereafter cited as Stenson, *Industrial Conflict*. See also Yong, 10.

¹⁴ Roff calls the Malays ‘peasant cultivators’ and says that they had benefited during British rule because it was free of strife compared to the pre-colonial days with their constant fraternal wars. Roff, 30.

¹⁵ Nonini argues that the Malay Reservations Enactment was a cunning act by the British to ensure no one but them could have access to the resource rich lands owned by the Malays. On the other hand, Roff explains that it was to keep the Malays from losing their land to non-Malays. Nonini’s point reveals the less than

the Malays poor and backwards when compared to the numerically inferior but economically adept Chinese.

While comparatively less active than the Chinese, some Malays were also politicized as many Malay youths were influenced by Islamic scholars who were trained in religious schools from the Middle East. Simultaneously, religious students from Cairo and pilgrims who had performed the Hajj in Mecca returned home with a newfound awakening that Islam in Malaya was badly in need of reform. These men, led by Mohd. Tahir b. Jalaluddin, founded the first reformist newspaper, *Al Imam*, to spread their message.¹⁶ Collectively, they were known as the *Kaum Muda* or the Youth Faction because they were striving to break away from the conservative religious leadership and traditional Malay elites known as *Kaum Tua* (Elder Faction) whom they saw as monolithic and unchanging. Both factions clashed over the correct religious path for the Malays to follow with the *Kaum Muda* advocating an Islamic way of life which embraced modern scientific progress while the *Kaum Tua* clung to their traditions of the old days before Western contact.¹⁷ The debate had the positive effect of raising the political

benign nature of this law which the Malays had no choice but to obey. Ibid., 123. See also Nonini, 73.

¹⁶ The contention between the *Kaum Tua* and *Kaum Muda* was extensively covered by Roff's seminal book on the rise of Malay political consciousness. The newspaper was the first attempt at spreading the reformist message through modern media. Roff, 56.

¹⁷ In many ways, the *Kaum Muda* were revolutionaries in their own right and they attacked mercilessly the *Kaum Tua*'s wishful thinking of turning back the clock. To the reformists, the contemporary situation demanded changes which were to be provided by a reformed Islamic ideology. Ibid., 77.

awareness of the Malays, which in turn opened their minds to view education as a key towards obtaining social agency and, eventually, the creation of Malay nationalism.

Rise and Fall of the Nanyang Communist Party.

Anarcho-communism came to Malaya during World War I when a group of Chinese radicals from Southern China arrived to establish a branch of the radical movement called Chan-she (Truth Society) with the call to resist oppression by the government.¹⁸ Among them, Goh Tun-ban, Cheung Hong-seng, Fan Chang-pu, and Hu Tu-tsu were identified as the major players within the movement; most of them arrived between 1914 and 1919. However, Hu and Fan, being the central leaders of the organization, were banished back to China in November 1919 after instigating an anti-Japanese strike. With the two principal leaders exiled, Chan-she shut down shortly after. Cheung Hong-seng, a Foochow native, initially came to Singapore in 1919 before heading to Medan to organize labor strikes against the Dutch for which he was later arrested and imprisoned before being exiled back to China three years later. Cheung would eventually join the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Guangdong before returning to Malaya to found the Nanyang Communist Party (NCP) in January 1928.¹⁹ But in March of

¹⁸ The Chan-she was founded mainly to distribute publications of anarchical literature. Yong, 18.

¹⁹ There have been different names for the organization. Yong and Chin Peng call it the Nanyang Provisional Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, while Gene Hanrahan calls it the Nanyang Communist Party. Some documents even substitute 'Nanyang' with 'South Seas' but these are mostly cosmetic differences.

the same year, Cheung was arrested in Singapore and was convicted of possessing subversive anti-government and bomb-making materials. The British found him guilty of all charges and sentenced him to life imprisonment. By 1930, the Nanyang Communist Party was disbanded and was replaced by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP).

The true herald of Malayan anarcho-communism was Goh Tun-ban who came to Kuala Lumpur in December 1917 seeking work in the local Chinese press.²⁰ As a staunch Chinese patriot who was angered by the corruption gripping China, Goh quickly found himself surrounded by like-minded young intellectuals who shared his passion for social justice and anti-authoritarianism. Establishing the radically vocal newspaper, *Yik Khuan Poh*, in March 1919 through the financial backing of pro-KMT merchants, Goh revealed his nationalist sentiments by publishing a series of articles and editorials that exhorted his fellow Chinese to show solidarity with the homeland by supporting the anti-Japanese and anti-warlord movement in China.²¹ In the wake of the May Fourth Incident, Goh

Based on materials available, the organization was more of an independent communist group than a subset of the CCP. However, many of their veteran members came from Hainan Island and dominated the organization until 1930. Yong, 17. See also Chin Peng, 57.

²⁰ Goh Tun-ban's arrival in Malaya was as mysterious as his departure. He was relatively unknown back in China but was evidently well educated and very intelligent. His skills in writing and editing gave the nascent anarcho-communist movement a much needed boost. He was probably an early revolutionary who was an independent scholar before coming to Malaya. Yong, 20.

²¹ Yong seems to suggest that Goh was an opportunist who would not shy from accepting money from rival organizations in order to further the anarcho-

called upon Chinese students to stand up and take on the responsibility to 'save China' while calling upon the masses to boycott Japanese goods.

But Goh's true agenda was beyond mere patriotism to China; he was an idealist who believed in absolute political freedom and total economic egalitarianism unconstrained by the current state of society. Displaying his disgust towards class society in an article published on April 14, 1919, Goh argued that the only way equality and freedom could be achieved was by abolishing the class system through what he called a 'social revolution' by the common people. He further argued that the best way for the people to bring forth the desired revolution was through education in which intellectuals would serve as the leaders to carry out the transition. Goh's arguments no doubt mirrored standard Marxist ideology, but in terms of methods he favored gradual change over violent struggle. Also dissimilar to socialism, the society Goh wanted were one where anarchism was the rule rather than the exception and where the government obeyed the needs of the common folk rather than bureaucrats.²² It was these thoughts that eventually landed him in trouble with the British, who saw his rhetoric as both subversive and a threat to political stability in Malaya. Arrested on July 29, 1919, Goh was tried for his involvement in the anti-Japanese boycott and was deported on November 15, 1919, never to return to Malaya again.

communist cause. The impression was gained from a series of articles Goh wrote for *Yik Khuan Poh* during the Versailles Conference. Ibid., 21.

²² Goh's rhetoric was typical of most communist ideology. Yong credits him with being the first to openly profess this in Malaya. Hanrahan, however, points to 'several Chinese agents' as the originators. Ibid., 25. See also Hanrahan, 8.

However, Goh's brief presence in Malaya had the effect of introducing radicalism to the Malayan Chinese community which would eventually evolve into a form of communism unlike that found in Russia or China.

With the departure of Goh, Malaya's radical circle was temporarily without any significant leadership for the next several years. Meanwhile, the CCP was established in Shanghai in 1921 and many Chinese radicals, including anarchists, joined the burgeoning party, making it a bona fide political organization. At this time, the British colonial administration was more concerned over the resurgence of the KMT in Malaya and paid scant attention to the growing Chinese communist movement. In the years from 1921-1924, several CCP agents arrived in Kuala Lumpur either to look for work or were dispatched by Shanghai to organize a clandestine branch of the CCP.²³ Under the guise of promoting Chinese nationalism through the publication of journals such as the *Nanyang Critique* and through instruction in night schools, the communists were inserting Marxist and socialist ideology discreetly to avoid attracting unwanted attention from the authorities. Eventually, colonial intelligence agents caught wind of what was going on in 1924 and the journals and schools were shut down and the communists were either deported or left on their own accord.

²³ The eight that were tracked by the British were Chinese communists, not CCP agents. There were probably the ones Hanrahan is referring to but has erroneously placed as arriving in 1927-1928, much later than the actual dates uncovered by Yong. Yong, 45.

Creation of the Malayan Communist Party.

When the Nanyang Communist Party was established in 1928, it was meant to be a branch of the CCP. Following the massive purge of communist members by Chiang Kai-shek, there was an intense need to expand CCP membership overseas especially in British Malaya. A group of agents was dispatched from Shanghai and among them was the former anarchist, Cheung Hong-seng. As mentioned earlier, Cheung Hong-seng previously served as a labor agitator in the Dutch East Indies before he was deported back to China in 1922. Now a card-carrying CCP member, Cheung was tasked with the creation of a provincial committee for the CCP that eventually became the Nanyang Communist Party (NCP). As the first organized communist movement in Malaya, the NCP called for class struggle against British colonialism, Chinese capitalists, and capitalism itself while also adopting a policy of violent extremism that included assassination and bomb-throwing against any enemies of the revolution. The British response was quick and ruthless, leading to the arrests of over 100 suspected activists in August 1928 which effectively gutted the NCP in terms of skilled manpower.²⁴ It took the influx of new members consisting of fresh migrants from China to sustain the organization for the next two years between

²⁴ Most of the deported NCP members were shot on arrival in China by Chiang's Kuomintang (KMT, Nationalist Party) forces. Hanrahan, 10. See also "Warning to Communists: Shot on returning to China." *The Straits Times*. 28 December 1928. Newspaper online. Available from <http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19281228.2.75.aspx>. Internet. Accessed 10 March 2011.

the arrests of August 1928 until early 1930, the NCP tried to stay out of British sights while continuing to pursue their agenda clandestinely.

Comintern (Communist International), the leading body for world communism based in Moscow, was not pleased with the activities of the NCP, which they saw as merely an extension of the CCP and not a genuine Malayan revolutionary organization.²⁵ It was the Comintern's belief that without the participation of the Malays and Indians, a true Malayan proletarian revolution could not be achieved. On the other hand, the Malays were not too keen on communism especially after the arrest of several Malay communist leaders by the British in early 1930s. Meanwhile, local Indians were more concerned with nationalism and independence in their homeland rather than Malayan social justice. To rectify the situation, the Comintern, working through its network in Shanghai, ordered the dissolution of the NCP and replaced it with the MCP on April 1930.²⁶ Additionally, the creation of the MCP meant the breakup of the

²⁵ This was described by Yong, Stenson, Cheah Boon Kheng, and even Chin Peng himself. We can safely assume that this was one of the early points of contention between the Soviet Union and the CCP. Hanrahan, 11.

²⁶ Hanrahan points to Joseph Ducroux's 1931 interrogation as proof that the Comintern had a hand in forging the MCP. Ducroux, whose real name was Serge Lefranc, was arrested by the Special Branch in Singapore with approximately 50,000 Straits Dollars in gold which was supposed to be the seed money for the new communist organization. Yong confirms this by stating that the order to found the MCP came specifically from the Comintern's Far Eastern Bureau in Shanghai. Ibid., 17. See also Yong, 131, and "Alleged 'Reds' On Trial." *The Straits Times*. 20 June 1931. Newspaper online. Available from <http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19310620.2.71.aspx>. Internet. Accessed 15 March 2011.

CCP's influence on Malayan leftists and the decentralization of the region's communist movement. Ho Chi Minh (under the alias Nguyen Ai Quoc), a Comintern agent at the time who was responsible for the development of communism in Southeast Asia, concurred with Moscow's opinion and was instrumental in pushing for the MCP's birth. Ho advised the founders of the new party to learn the Malay language and to unite with the Malays and Indians to create a multi-ethnic socialist state that served the interests of the proletariat masses regardless of ethnic roots.²⁷ It was on this new core principle that the first true Malayan communist movement was born, albeit still dominated by ethnic Chinese members.

Unfortunately, British intelligence had been keeping track of the Malayan communists since the 1928 raid on the NCP. When information regarding the new party was received, the agents decided to act. In the same month the MCP was inaugurated, colonial security forces moved swiftly to suppress the organization by arresting the party's key leaders on April 29, 1930 at a hideout on Nassim Road, Singapore. During the sweep, Ho Chi Minh somehow managed to evade capture, probably to China, denying the British a valuable Comintern prize.

²⁷ Ho Chi Minh was eager to break the CCP's influence in Southeast Asia when he agreed with the Comintern's directive. In truth, Ho felt China had been dominating Vietnam politically for centuries and by supporting the MCP's founding, he was helping a fraternal organization that was free of Chinese control. Additionally, any actions that would further reduce Chinese power were something Ho was most eager to support. Yong, however, disagrees with Hanrahan by arguing that Ho's role in the MCP was merely to offer his advice in organization as well as to secure the MCP within the Comintern camp. Hanrahan, 12. See also Yong, 134.

However, the Nassim Road Incident failed to cripple the fledgling movement as new individuals soon stepped-up to take on leadership roles within the party. Despite continual British harassment, the MCP was able to organize a series of labor strikes throughout Malaya in 1936 that signified the increasing potency of the communist movement.²⁸ The profile of the party was further highlighted when it took advantage of the growing wave of Chinese nationalism following the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 by spearheading anti-Japanese activities. On the other hand, in 1934 the British were able to infiltrate the MCP by successfully inserting a double-agent, the later infamous Lai Teck.

²⁸ The most successful pre-war labor strike was the one that occurred in Batu Arang on November 1936. Hanrahan, 22.

II. Communism in Malaya.

Anti-Imperialism.

The Malayan Communist Party (MCP), the preeminent communist movement in the Malay Peninsula, originally inherited the ideology and objectives of the defunct Nanyang Communist Party (NCP) when it was founded in 1930. Within half a decade, following the outbreak of war between China and Japan in 1937, the MCP found itself forced to alter, or adapt, its political manifesto in favor of one that leaned towards the interests of Malaysians. Despite the change, the party leadership knew very well that the anti-Japanese campaign was very much a struggle against foreign imperialism which, by extension, also included the British in Malaya.

It was during its Third Congress held in 1932 that the MCP finally unveiled its party agenda as well as its long term revolutionary goals for Malaya. In a Twelve Point Program, the British were targeted as an imperialist power that must be driven from the Malay Peninsula; the traditional Malay elites, landlords, and capitalists who had collaborated with the British were to be overthrown as well.²⁹ The program called for the execution of this plan by forcibly confiscating

²⁹ These were the initial goals of the MCP. Over time, they would change and evolve as the shifting political tides of Malaya forced the central committee to make drastic modifications to their manifesto. Cheah Boon Kheng argues that 1932 was the formal establishment of the MCP because the Twelve Point Program was announced in that year. This differs greatly from C.F. Yong and Chin Peng's account that the MCP was officially founded in 1930. Cheah, *PKI to Comintern*, 18.

banks, properties, lands, and farms from the imperialists and “anti-revolutionaries” and redistributing them to the peasants and workers who joined the revolution. Clearly, this agenda followed the classic Marxist theory of land and property redistribution which was to be conducted following a peasant uprising led by the MCP. To the Malayan communists, the British were the core enemy while the rulers and the upper-class were accomplices in the ongoing oppression of the Malayan people. All were fair targets for the revolutionaries and the proletariat.

Independence.

Unlike the Nanyang Communist Party, the Malayan communists of the MCP were seeking to establish an independent socialist nation of their own. To them, nationalism equated to social liberation in which a fair and just republic, built and supported by workers and peasants, was the ideal. Additionally, the capitalist system was to be replaced with a socialist one in which Malaya’s economy would develop without the suffering and exploitation associated with the former system. The inspiration for this was clearly the Russian Revolution; even the proposed name for the new republic mirrored the Soviet Union: Malayan Soviet Republic of Workers and Peasants.³⁰ This no doubt worried both the

³⁰ Clearly these were militant revolutionaries who were much impressed by the violent uprising led by Lenin and his cadres. Yong concurs with Hanrahan’s analysis that the plan was to seize the peninsula by force and then carry out the program. What the MCP failed to outline was a specific method to do so. Yong, 160. See also Hanrahan, 17.

British and the conservative Malays who saw these radical ideas a clear and present threat to the status quo.

Labor Rights.

According to the MCP program for labor rights, an 8-hour work day for men and 6-hour work day for women was the model for the Malayan working-class. Wages would be increased from current levels to allow more money to flow into the hands of those who toiled for the nation. These rights would be guaranteed by new labor laws designed to protect the workers, which included the right to organize trade unions and to bargain collectively. Unemployment insurance, improved living conditions, and the abolishment of contract labor and apprenticeships were to be carried out as well. Regular promotion, long-service pay increments, paid sick leave, free medical benefits, and retirement gratuities were part of the demand as well. According to Stenson, however, these were the same demands Malayan workers had been raising since 1914.³¹ It was obvious that the old ways were being rejected in favor of a Soviet-style, or pragmatic, solution to the persistent question of the welfare of workers. The MCP hoped that the new labor system would provide the rights and privileges that it viewed as the unassailable prerogatives of the working-class.

³¹ The decline of contract labor for migrant workers in Malaya coincided with the rise of nationalism in China and India at the turn of the twentieth century. By emulating their countrymen, the Chinese and Indians sought to protect their rights and dignity as workers by organizing illegal labor unions. These groups were fighting for improved wages, better treatment from the employers, and some benefits for their hard work. The Communists were simply taking over a struggle that had been in progress since 1914. Stenson, *Industrial Conflict*, 8.

To represent the working-class more effectively, the Malayan General Labor Union (MGLU) was formed in 1932 as an affiliate of the MCP. Initially its influence was restricted to select militant seamen, as the MCP did not promote the organization heavily in the beginning. The Comintern was enthusiastic about the labor union, however, and in 1934 it ordered the MCP to organize mass demonstrations, strikes, the sabotage of British naval assets, boycotts, and demonstrations against increased taxation. The MCP responded by extending the MGLU's influence to all major factory and building workers in anticipation of a major general strike.³²

Such a strike occurred in March 1937 and ended with a massive government crackdown on the top leaders of the strike.³³ Following that, the MGLU remained underground until the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War provided the organization a second chance. In China, reconciliation between

³² According to Yong, the directive to strike came from the Comintern's Far Eastern Bureau in Shanghai. By 1935, small strikes were occurring periodically. Stenson, however, claims that the first strikes occurred in 1936 by Chinese workers from pineapple factories in Singapore and Johore. Before that, there were only isolated work stoppages. Yong, 172. See also Stenson, *Industrial Conflict*, 14.

³³ Most of the strikes occurred in the state of Selangor and were centered on disgruntled rubber tappers over their low wages. As it turns out, rubber and tin prices were falling in 1937 due to the recession, forcing reduced production quotas and decreased demand for labor. Stenson adds that coal miners in the town of Batu Arang launched a 'sympathy' strike at the same time in solidarity with the tappers. To the British, this seemed to be a general strike aimed at crippling the Malayan economy. See "Police, Planters, and Strikers," *The Straits Times*. 30 March, 1937. Newspaper online. Available from <http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19370330.2.42.aspx>. Internet Accessed 15 March 2011. See also Stenson, *Industrial Conflict*, 17.

the KMT and CCP had taken place in 1937 in order to unite their forces to fight the encroaching Japanese. This meant that in Malaya, the MCP and the MGLU were allowed by the British colonial government to participate in Anti-Japanese National Salvation Associations after the Japanese attacked China in July 1937. This opportunity gave the MCP a chance to infiltrate and mingle in the various patriotic associations that were popping up all over Malaya and to impress upon young Chinese men and women, mostly students, the importance of social justice and nationalism. The new recruits were idealistic and enthusiastic and they joined the MGLU in large numbers to perform volunteer work and to raise funds for war relief, while also participating in marches in support of China's struggle against Japan. Indoctrination through speeches, presentations, meetings, and information sessions took place within the labor union and also under the guise of the semi-legal Anti-Enemy Backing-Up Society (AEBUS). In this way, the MCP was successful in swelling its ranks with fresh and eager members who supported the communist ideal.³⁴

³⁴ Yong shows that the AEBUS strategy worked beyond the MCP's wildest expectations as they were now a bona fide political party with several thousand active members. The British were aware of this development but were reluctant to do anything about it as they did not wish to incur severe backlash from the entire Malaysian Chinese community. Cheah also mentions that the MCP used the expression of "our nation" to mean China when promoting its anti-Japanese agenda during AEBUS information sessions. This contradicted their professed loyalty toward Malaya and led to significantly more support from the community. Yong, 196. See also Cheah, *From PKI to Comintern*, 30.

Social Liberty.

Freedom was a key argument within the MCP program and the Communists advocated absolute freedom in assembly, organization, speech, strikes, demonstrations, beliefs, and education. Perhaps this was a throwback to the days of Goh Tun-ban and the anarcho-communists where total unrestricted freedoms were to be practiced by those free from the shackles of imperialism and authority. Arguably, this point was aimed at the British colonial government, for whom the freedom to act without restraint would unravel the established administrative structure established since the nineteenth century. Strangely, while the program called for freedom of belief, it was at the same time vehemently against 'reactionary' religions. This conflict was never fully explained nor clearly resolved, making this a curious entry within the MCP agenda.³⁵ Education was also recognized as a major factor in the revolution, but somehow only free education in the people's own language was stressed, leaving other practical knowledge unaddressed at the time.

What was clear to the MCP was that they were against all forms of exploitation by imperialists. The category includes not only the British, but also Malaya's rajas, sultans, and feudal chiefs who were accused of bleeding the people dry through an archaic system of taxation. The party proposed a

³⁵ These ideals came from the Ten Point Program unveiled by the MCP central committee during the Sixth Enlarged Plenum in April 1939. Strangely, Yong claims the resolution was announced in April 1938 instead. Neither Yong nor Cheah elaborate further on that curiously contradicting point. Cheah, *From PKI to Comintern*, 109.

standardized income tax instead that would be fair and less burdensome on the people. In line with their anti-imperialist stance, the MCP vowed to resist British war preparation efforts in Malaya as part of their opposition to militarism and imperialism. But there were no major wars near or around Southeast Asia except for the ongoing civil war in China. It could be that the Party saw the British preparing to counter the increasingly belligerent Empire of Japan, which had begun to make its future designs for East Asia known. The MCP's revolutionary program suggests that it was hoping to save Malaya from being dragged into any future military conflict between the two powers. Nevertheless, the Malayan communists included in their program the vow to support revolutions in China and India as well as to protect the Soviet Union and its efforts to unite the proletariat and the oppressed weak minorities of the world. To them, the Soviet Union was the shining bastion of socialism that served as the model for Malaya's future.³⁶

Ethnic Unity.

The ethnic diversity of the Malayan people was not addressed until 1938 when the MCP central committee made an assessment of the situation in Malaya and reviewed its current policies. As war in Europe was increasingly becoming a reality and Japan began to push south into Southeast Asia, the MCP realized it

³⁶ The MCP began to accuse the British openly of warmongering during the Sixth Enlarged Plenum of 1939. The new policy was to argue for peace by launching an anti-imperialist front against the British. However, the anti-Japanese campaign was more appealing to the people, especially within the Chinese community. Ibid., 34.

must take action to counter the wave of Fascism sweeping both continents. Under the rhetoric of defending peace and sovereignty, and of opposing the incoming Fascist invasion, the MCP outlined a new series of directives designed to unify the ethnic communities of Malaya.

Firstly, the Party proposed a Malayan people's united front made up of all ethnic groups, parties, classes, and religions to fight for democracy, safeguard peace, and resist the encroaching Fascist nations of Germany, Italy, and Japan. A democratic process was to be achieved through a representative council representing Malaysians of all ethnic communities. The council would be given the responsibility to resolve defense, economic, political, and social issues; representatives would be elected by Malaysians from all levels of society in a general election. Each state would have a similar council called the state assembly; its members would be elected in a similar general election.³⁷

Ethnic unity was central to the MCP's plans; by providing a unified platform for all ethnicities from all walks of society to meet and organize, it hoped that the British could be pressured to accept the people's demands for change and improvement. One issue that the MCP raised was salary parity for Malayan civil servants. British expatriates were being paid at a much higher rate than the local people; this pay discrepancy was disadvantageous and discriminatory to non-European government employees. The salary issue was

³⁷ Unlike other MCP programs, this 1938 proclamation was an attempt to attract all ethnic communities into participating in constitutional reforms for Malaya. Parts of the proposal resemble the future Malayan Union plan as well as the Federation of Malaya's proposed Constitution. *Ibid.*, 105.

further tied into Malaysians serving in the British military either in civilian or uniformed positions; local people were paid lower than the lowest ranking British private and were also restricted from rising within the service. This outright discrimination had been a sore point for years but, with the British as the de facto ruler of Malaya, no one has dared to openly challenge the system until the MCP laid out their 1938 program. Similar to the “1932 Revolutionary Program,” the 1938 MCP reiterated its demand for absolute freedom in speech, publication, assembly, beliefs, strikes, and organization.³⁸

Key Individuals of the MCP.

Far from what historians have written about the history of communism in the Malay Peninsula, the Malayan Communist Party was not a monolithic entity that was made up solely of willing Malaysians eager to do the bidding of Moscow. British, and later Malaysian, government propaganda strove to paint the members of the MCP, especially its leadership cadre, as merciless terrorists seeking to bring down civil society and to encourage violence and chaos. Throughout the twentieth century, the government was aware that maintaining a firm grip on resource-rich Malaya necessitated the existence of scapegoats to direct the people’s attention and wrath away from the social and economic unrest plaguing the region. The

³⁸ Wage discrimination had been a longstanding policy of the British who were not interested in paying more than the absolute minimum nor did they wish to offer equal treatment to their servants and employees. Stenson echoes the injustice suffered by the mining and plantation workers. The wage disparity issue, however, was between the Chinese and the Indians. Stenson, *Industrial Conflict*, 29.

MCP's calls for social justice in the 1920s and 1930s provided ample justification for government action and the British wasted no time in targeting specific individuals for arrest, execution, or deportation. However, due to the extreme secretive nature of the MCP in terms of membership, very few of the early leaders could be clearly identified. It was in the aftermath of the Nassim Road Incident that the identities of key individuals were revealed.³⁹ Chin Peng, Abdullah C.D., Rashid Maidin, and Abu Samah were future leaders who only rose to prominence during and after World War II. It is unfortunate that very few details remain today about those early Malayan communists. But to understand the MCP and their struggles for Malaya, several of these individuals must be examined closely.⁴⁰

During the first representatives conference of April 1930 held in a rubber estate north of Buloh Kesap, Johor, the MCP was inaugurated by at least twenty communist delegates along with Ho Chi Minh, who was the Comintern

³⁹ The infamous Nassim Road raid by the Singapore Special Branch on 29 April 1930 almost ended the MCP just as it was being founded. Most of the original founders of the MCP were arrested before being imprisoned or deported back to China. The press was unaware of the name change at this time and was still referring the communist organization as the NCP. See "South Seas 'Red' in Malaya." *The Straits Times*. 9 June 1930. Newspaper online. Available from <http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19300609.2.93.aspx>. Internet. Accessed 22 March 2011.

⁴⁰ Almost nothing is known about the founders of the MCP as there were no records of their history before coming to Malaya. Yong conducted in-depth research into these enigmatic individuals but was able to discover very little background information on them. Most of the information about them comes from Special Branch files after they were arrested in the Nassim Road raid. Yong, 134.

representative to Southeast Asia at the time. Among the delegates, only a handful are known, thanks to research by C.F. Yong.⁴¹

Lei Kuang-juan was the first party secretary of the MCP, he came from Lo-hui district, Hainan Island at the beginning of the twentieth century. Initially employed as a domestic servant in Singapore, Lei became a professional labor union organizer over the years along with fellow Hainanese communist, Wu Ching. Lei was among the many communists arrested by the Special Branch on April 29, 1930, during the Nassim Road Incident. The British had identified Lei as a known communist as early as 1928; for his involvement in the MCP, he was sentenced to a two-year prison term before being deported back to China. Lei was later executed by the KMT in Guangdong in 1932.

Wu Ching, a Hainanese communist who fled to Malaya after the failed Guangdong Uprising in December 1927, was the party organization head. As a professional soldier who had received training at the prestigious Whampoa Military Academy as well as having participated in the Eastern Expedition against the Guangdong warlord Chen Jiongming, Wu was well educated and was an expert in military matters. Upon his arrival in Malaya, he was elected to be the NCP's organization head in 1929 before being elected to carry out the same duties when the MCP was founded. Wu was arrested along with Lei and others at the Nassim Road meeting in April 29, 1930, and was imprisoned for two years before being deported. Wu met a similar fate as Lei upon returning to China.

⁴¹ Biographical information from Yong, 134-138.

Wei Ching-chow, another Hainanese who migrated to Singapore in 1928 was previously the secretary of the standing committee of the NCP before being elected to the same position in the MCP in 1930. Wei was arrested in 1931 and served a six month prison sentence before being deported to China in 1932.

Lin Ching-chung replaced Lei Kwang-juan in May 1930 as MCP party secretary following the latter's arrest the month before. Lin was another Hainan émigré and was the organization head for the NCP before joining the MCP as a central committee member. Unlike his fellow comrades, Lin managed to avoid capture during subsequent police raids following the Nassim Road debacle. He relinquished the position of party secretary after one year and was transferred by the central committee to work in Penang before being dispatched to Shanghai in 1931 to rebuild contacts with the CCP. He returned to Malaya in 1932 but his eventual fate is unknown.

Chen Shao-chang came to Singapore from Hainan Island in the early 1920s and was a prominent figure in the Malayan trade union movement. After being elected as head of the Nanyang General Labor Union (NGLU) in 1929, Chen participated in the founding of the MCP in 1930 and became a central committee member. However, Chen was not elected to lead the subsequent MGLU; the position went instead to Tsai Ting-wei, a fellow communist of Hokkien origin. Chen became infamous as he was arrested in Singapore shortly after his return from Buloh Kesap. With him at the time of his arrest were all the documents pertaining to the founding of the MGLU, which the British promptly

seized. Chen was convicted and imprisoned in Singapore before being deported. What happened to him after returning to China is unknown.

The Missing Malay Communists.

The lack of Malay or other non-Chinese among the founders of the MCP can be attributed to the inherent differences between the various ethnic communities in terms of culture, language, and religion. These characteristics presented a fundamental problem that prevented a unified Malayan movement from forming to resist the British and gain independence. Despite this, there were Malay communists in Malaya since the 1920s; many of them were intellectuals and religious teachers. These Malays were very supportive of the anti-imperialist agenda of the Malayan Chinese revolutionaries and they were also heavily influenced by the activities of the *Perikatan Komunis Indonesia* (PKI, Communist Party of Indonesia) from the neighboring Dutch East Indies. The absence of Malay communists at the conference in Buloh Kesap in April 1930 was due to the arrest of six Malay delegates in Singapore in March 1930.⁴² Suitable replacements could not be identified in time. This was a critical victory for the British who could not accept the appearance of communist Malay elites who challenged their

⁴² The arrest of six Malay communists, three intellectuals and three *ulamas* (religious teachers), was a major coup for the British as it successfully isolated the MCP as a purely Chinese organization. By preventing Malays from participating in that historic moment, Britain effectively discouraged other Malay radicals from joining the Party. Hanrahan and Purcell seem to ignore this fact by claiming that the Malays were too conservative for radicalism while Roff simply credits the PKI for the rise of Malay revolutionaries. Yong, 130. See also Hanrahan, 4; Purcell, *Malaya*, 50; and Roff, 222.

hegemony. It was unfortunate that in one stroke a severe blow was dealt to the MCP at the onset that delayed the participation of Malays in the socialist movement.

New Generation of Malayan Communists.

Leadership of the MCP underwent constant change after April 1930 due to shifting internal party politics in addition to arrests by the British. By 1936, five men had been elected party secretary with five different lists of central committee and politburo members. It was not until 1939 that the MCP finally had a permanent leader by the name of Lai Teck; he led the party until 1947. It was during Lai Teck's leadership during World War II that several outstanding Malayan communists distinguished themselves by engaging the Japanese in the jungles of Malaya. Today, the mere mention of names such as Chin Peng, Abdullah C.D., and Rashid Maidin would invite revulsion and anger from Malaysians. But once upon a time, these young men were celebrated heroes who were given official and public recognition by the British after the war. Tragically, these soldiers of anti-imperialism are now half-forgotten, reduced to a rag-tag band of failed and aging revolutionaries by contemporary historians. Their methods might have been aggressive and ill advised, but these future leaders of the MCP were no different from any Malayan patriots; they were fighting for the independence of Malaya. By understanding who they were and what their motivations were, an undistorted picture of the true history of Malaya's communists can be revealed.

As the face of the MCP for much of the post-World War II era, Chin Peng was both a well known figure and a complete mystery. Government propaganda painted the MCP party secretary as a tough and cunning man who was adept at several languages as well as a charismatic individual who never wavered from his ideals. Born Ong Boon Hua on October 1924 in the small town of Sitiawan to a middle-class family, Chin Peng was the younger of two sons whose father owned a small automobile and bicycle spare-parts shop in town. At the age of twelve, Chin Peng joined the local Anti-Enemy Backing Up Society (AEBUS) after being impressed by a speech given by a visiting Chinese nationalist. Although he longed to enlist in the KMT military to fight the Japanese, it was his young age that prevented him from doing so. At this time, Chin Peng read Mao Zedong's *On Protracted War* and Anna Louise Strong's *Soviet Democracy* and was convinced of the righteousness of the communist movement. Furthermore, a teacher gave him a series of Marxist books that he proceeded to consume diligently, becoming more committed to the communist cause over time. Then in late 1939, his friend Du Lung San, who was two years his senior and now a schoolteacher, invited him to join the MCP. Chin Peng accepted and in January 1940 he was made a probationary member of the party. When the Japanese invaded Malaya, Chin Peng was working in the MCP's propaganda section in Ipoh. To avoid capture, he was forced to retreat into the jungles with other party members where he was later given the job of liaison officer between the MCP and the British forces. At the

same time, he was also ordered to lead a guerilla unit which he would command for the rest of the war.⁴³

Abdullah Che Dat, commonly known as Abdullah C.D., was born on October 2, 1923 in Lambor Kiri, Perak to a small but devout Muslim family. As the second of two children but the only boy in the family, Abdullah was well loved by his parents who brought him up according to traditional Malay customs and Islamic teachings. Throughout his youth, Abdullah was fascinated by the history of his home state especially stories about legendary folk heroes such as Dato Maharaja Lela and Dato Sagor who had fought the British in the past. As a result, he grew up with a strong sense of nationalism which was further influenced by his father's anti-colonialism views and of his alleged involvement in a secret movement against the British in the 1930s. It was during his years in an English institution called Clifford School that he met other youths who shared his views. Moreover, he managed to meet several Indonesian revolutionaries who were seeking refuge nearby at the time who later influenced his decision to join the radical *Kesatuan Melayu Muda* (KMM, Young Malays Union) in 1939. During the Japanese Occupation, Abdullah formed a branch of the KMM in his home village with the support of local KMM members. At the time, the Japanese ignored Lambor as it was insignificant and had no strategic value. However, the

⁴³ Chin Peng's exploits were covered by several historians over the last few decades, but no one came close to uncovering the real life of the former most wanted man in Malaya. In his own words, Chin Peng refuted many assumptions made by Cheah, Spencer Chapman, and Anthony Short regarding his actions during World War II and the Emergency. His explanations appear to have set the record straight. See Chin and Hack, 57.

village was constantly visited by members of the Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) who were operating nearby. A short time later, after learning that the Communists were fighting for the independence of Malaya, Abdullah decided to join the MPAJA and was subsequently assigned to work in the Malay section of the army as an organizer and recruiter. It was in May 1945 that Abdullah C.D. was finally accepted as a full member of the MCP. After the war, he was involved in the founding of the *Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya* (PKMM, Malayan Malay Nationalist Party) along with Dr. Burhanuddin Al-Helmy before moving to Kuala Lumpur to organize labor unions. Like Chin Peng, he was forced to retreat into the jungles following the outbreak of the Malayan Emergency in 1948.⁴⁴

Among the list of infamous Malayan communist leaders, none were as notorious as the enigmatic individual known as Lai Teck. Practically unknown before his admission to the MCP and ascension to the central committee, Lai Teck was seen as a godsend when he provided his considerable political and organizational skills to the party. As party secretary, Lai Teck ushered in a period of rapid expansion and consolidation for the struggling MCP and was instrumental in making the party a political force that threatened to challenge British hegemony. Despite this, the eventual revelation of Lai Teck's real identity in 1947 would shock the party to its core and cripple it financially for years to come. In many ways, the development of the MCP in the post-war era was

⁴⁴ As one of the rare Malay communist leaders who never abandoned the revolutionary ideals, Abdullah C.D. was able to provide a rare insight into the motivations of Malays who joined the communist movement. His story was relatively unknown until recently. Abdullah, 33.

directly tied to Lai Teck whose actions before and during the war affected the revolutionary movement permanently.

Based on information available today, the individual known as Lai Teck was born in 1900 in Vietnam where his background and history before arriving in Singapore in 1934 is completely unknown. Even the name Lai Teck was merely one of several aliases adopted by him throughout his time in Malaya and he was known to have answered to Wright, Light, Wong Siu-tong, Chang Hung, Wong Kim-geok, and others. According to government sources, Lai Teck was initially recruited by the Surete (French Secret Police) to infiltrate the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) as an informant. But following an undisclosed incident where his cover was exposed, the French decided to give him to the British Special Branch who then recruited him to infiltrate the MCP. Introducing himself as an agent of the Comintern, Lai Teck impressed the MCP with his firm grasp of Marxist theory and organizational skills; it quickly admitted him to the party in 1934. Moreover, his fluency in English, French, Vietnamese, Mandarin, and several Chinese dialects made him a critical asset to the party. By organizing several successful labor strikes, such as the famous Batu Arang strike, and a purge within the party of alleged 'opportunists', Lai Teck proved himself to be a formidable leader who produced results. His performance since joining the party did not go unnoticed and during the Sixth Enlarged Plenum in April 1938, he was elected party secretary of the MCP. Lai Teck's deception would go undetected for the next several years until the Japanese Occupation. In March 1942, the *Kempeitai* (Japanese Military Police) arrested him in Singapore as part of a sweep

to identify anti-Japanese Chinese males. In subsequent interrogations, Lai Teck revealed who he was and offered to act as informant for the Japanese in exchange for his life and some money. In his new role as a Japanese spy, Lai Teck provided the names of the top executive members of the MCP and was instrumental in the decimation of the party's regional leadership during the Batu Caves ambush. The betrayal remained hidden until after the war. Then, following an investigation into allegations that Lai Teck had been a spy for both the British and the Japanese, the party secretary suddenly vanished into the night along with the entire party funds. Unconfirmed rumors suggested that Lai Teck was executed near Bangkok after being captured by Thai communists in 1947. The damage done to the MCP was irrevocable and the former party secretary's crimes haunted the revolution thereafter.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ The notorious Lai Teck occupied a unique place in the history of the MCP as he was the greatest traitor to the Malayan communist movement. Yong and Cheah describe the former party secretary as a mysterious individual with an unknown past who infiltrated the MCP as a Special Branch agent. Leon Comber, however, managed to ferret out the details of the man whose clandestine adventure began long ago in Vietnam. Leon Comber, "Traitor of All Traitors – Secret agent Extraordinaire: Lai Teck, Secretary-General, Communist Party of Malaya (1939-1947)," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 299 (September 2010): 1-25. Hereafter cited as Comber, *Royal Asiatic Society*.

III. MCP in World War II.

Pre-War Anti-Japanese Activities.

On the eve of the Japanese invasion of the Malay Peninsula, the MCP had grown from an organization made up of a small but dedicated group of cadres, to an expanded organization with members numbering several thousand. Lai Teck was elected party secretary during the 1939 meeting of the central committee and it was under his leadership that the MCP made its largest expansion. The reason for the surge in membership was the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, which saw the creation of many anti-Japanese organizations by the overseas Chinese community aimed at providing financial and material support for the Chinese war effort. Consisting mainly of youths and students, these Anti-Enemy Backing Up Societies (AEBUS) were infiltrated by the MCP, who conducted mass recruitment through propaganda and information sessions.⁴⁶ These new members were given training in revolutionary activities such as organizing strikes and political agitation under the guise of the AEBUS. Once the Japanese landed, some of these members joined the MCP in the jungles of Malaya to form the MPAJA.

⁴⁶ Although the youths who participated in AEBUS activities were certainly aware that they were working under the aegis of the communists, Hanrahan seems to ignore the fact that they voluntarily became members of the MCP and were not brainwashed by communist propaganda as many Cold War era historians have claimed. Hanrahan, 26.

Invasion of Malaya and British Cooperation.

The creation of the MPAJA is a well documented event; many contemporary historians agree that the guerilla force was the product of a last-ditch alliance between the outlawed MCP and a desperate British colonial government attempting to resist the Japanese juggernaut. What is commonly known was that in the months leading up to the invasion, the MCP made several offers of an alliance to the British that were rejected out of fear and mistrust of the communists.⁴⁷ Once it was clear that the Japanese were coming and that the defenses of the peninsula and Singapore were woefully inadequate, the British were forced to put aside their reservations and consider the MCP proposal seriously. The British had formed an irregular combat unit known as Dalforce to oppose the coming invasion, but it was largely a volunteer unit consisting of several thousand non-political overseas Chinese who had been given little to no basic training. These inexperienced men and women was no match for the hardened Japanese infantry that were about to assault Malaya. It became clear that the MCP, with its well established organizational structure and strict party discipline, was the best and only viable ally left in the colony.

To the MCP, the offer to form an alliance with the imperialists arose from two considerations. First, the MCP had been involved in the AEBUS movement

⁴⁷ Both Cheah and Hanrahan agree that the British were reluctant to arm the MCP until the very last moment because they were worried about post-war complications. Accepting the alliance offer would mean giving the Party some form of legitimacy. Cheah, 58. See also Hanrahan, 33.

since 1937 and their activities were well known to the Japanese.⁴⁸ Retaliation in the form of torture and execution of those involved was likely to be forthcoming. The MCP feared that with their strong affiliation to the CCP and the Comintern, the Japanese would surely hunt them down. Second, Malaya was the home of the MCP and by 1940 a majority of its members had been born in the Malay States, Straits Settlements, or Singapore, making the desire to defend their homeland a far more personal mission than a quest to advance communism. It was decided that armed resistance was the only path left for the MCP and they felt allying with the British would provide the necessary means to train and arm themselves for war.⁴⁹

101 Special Training School.

On December 15, 1941, with the lines crumbling before the Japanese vanguard, the British decided to cooperate with the MCP and affirmed their good intentions by releasing all leftist political prisoners.⁵⁰ The next day, a secret meeting was held in Singapore between the MCP, represented by Lai Teck, and the British military, represented by Major F. Spencer Chapman. Both sides came to a quick agreement that resisting the Japanese took priority and, on the same

⁴⁸ Japanese military intelligence had been monitoring the AEBUS movement for years prior to the invasion and they knew the MCP was behind many of the anti-Japanese activities. Chin and Hack, 59.

⁴⁹ According to Cheah, the MCP wanted a fighting chance rather than wait for the Japanese to come after them. Ibid., 63.

⁵⁰ Hanrahan seems to imply that this was a choice made under duress and that the British defenders were pessimistic about the cooperation. Nevertheless, it was a gesture of sincerity to the MCP. Hanrahan, 32.

day, the 101 Special Training School (101 STS) was set up with the first batch of fifteen recruits, many of them members of the MCP. They began training on December 19.

The training course was ten days long and altogether the 101 STS would graduate seven classes of guerillas, totaling one hundred and sixty-five men.⁵¹ As each class graduated, the new recruits were hurriedly sent to the field and ordered to operate behind enemy lines. However, these guerillas were poorly armed and inadequately equipped, with each unit being given a limited number of rifles, explosives, and automatic weapons. The official decision for doing so was the British desire to retain most of the weapons for their own units.⁵² In truth, there were misgivings about arming the communists and this prejudice led to the decision to limit as much as possible the flow of firearms to the guerillas. Despite this disadvantage, the STS-trained soldiers rejoined their comrades in the jungles and began to train others in preparation for a campaign behind the lines.

Additionally, the British also knew that following Malaya's capture, they would need a 'stay-behind' force, to be led by Europeans but made up of Asians. This force would serve as a harassment force on Japanese supply lines and vulnerable points while waiting for an eventual Allied counterattack. The rapidity of the Japanese advance made the assignment of European officers impossible and the

⁵¹ Cheah explains that this was a very rushed affair as time was of the essence. Spencer Chapman was very much impressed with the young Chinese he trained at 101 STS and he felt they were the best students ever to graduate from the school. Cheah, *Red Star*, 59. See also Chapman, 31.

⁵² Hanrahan states that this was the truth. Chin Peng and Cheah, however, made no mention of this issue. Hanrahan, 33.

modified plan essentially allowed the communist guerillas to operate on their own without British supervision.

The Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army.

Once the first 101 STS graduates made contact with the MCP central committee in northern Selangor in March 1942, they were reorganized along with new recruits to become the 1st Regiment of the newly formed Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA). Subsequent groups of graduates would make contact with other state committees and through them the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Regiments were formed.⁵³ By mid-1942, the British colonial forces had capitulated and the Japanese Occupation had begun. The MPAJA at this time was focused on survival due to its lack of adequate preparation in terms of supplies and equipment. Furthermore, most of the guerillas grew up in urban areas and were physically untrained for the tropical jungle's harsh conditions.⁵⁴

Overconfident leadership coupled with foolhardy decisions led to several disastrous engagements that almost decimated the guerillas. Disease, desertion, and combat losses plagued the guerillas throughout the first year, but those who survived eventually adapted and losses began to reduce considerably. At the same

⁵³ Although they were called regiments, each unit was only four to five hundred strong. Rarely did the guerilla regiments expand beyond that number as a large force was harder to hide in the jungles. Chin Peng's own testimony confirmed this, although he insisted they were of regimental strength. Cheah, *Red Star*, 60. See also Chin Peng, 85.

⁵⁴ Almost none of the original group of guerillas had ever lived in the jungles for any extended period of time. Most were intellectuals rather than laborers. Hanrahan, 35.

time, recruitment of volunteers from the towns and villages along with refugees fleeing Japanese persecution allowed the MPAJA to replenish its ranks quickly.⁵⁵ By the middle of 1943, with sufficient numbers, adequate training, and enough equipment, the guerilla force was finally at a level at which it could mount effective operations against the Japanese.

As the MPAJA consolidated and began to live up to its name, the MCP also expanded its operations, establishing a mass base through the creation of an underground support network that helped to coordinate the resupply effort for the guerillas. Local MCP state committees coordinated these activities while each state's Military Affairs Committee handled all matters pertaining to recruitment, liaison with the British, and related issues. Overall command nominally remained in the hands of the MCP central committee headed by Lai Teck.⁵⁶ However, due to the geographically dispersed nature of the guerilla regiments and the difficulty in maintaining constant communications, each regiment was in effect operating independently with each unit answering to their respective State Committees.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Chin Peng and Abdullah C.D. mentioned the influx of volunteers to join the MPAJA especially after experiencing Japanese atrocities. Many became guerillas to seek revenge on the invaders and this helped to keep the MPAJA at strength throughout the war. Cheah, *Red Star*, 61. See also Chin Peng, 76, and Abdullah, 26.

⁵⁶ Lai Teck never joined his comrades in the jungles, preferring to remain in Singapore to "observe the situation" as he gave orders through a slow, but secret, courier service. Hanrahan, 37.

⁵⁷ The lack of radio equipment made communications extremely difficult, forcing the guerillas to pick targets of opportunity while they awaited further instructions from the central committee. Chin Peng's regiment was operating in such a capacity until the arrival of Force 136. Cheah, *Red Star*, 62.

Command structure of the regiments was based on the model used by the CCP Red Army with the ranking military officer in charge of all combat decisions and the political commissar the de facto leader of the unit. The guerillas were given political and military training daily, which focused on physical education, combat tactics, and Marxist-Leninist instruction. These classes were taught by the officers who usually came from an educated background or had prior military experience in China.⁵⁸ The rank and file was either illiterate or had minimum education before enlisting in the MPAJA. An overwhelming majority of the guerillas were in their early twenties and, despite the dangers and risks, each one was a volunteer.

Organization of the MPAJA.

At the height of its power, the MPAJA numbered over six thousand armed men who in turn were supported by at least ten thousand civilian volunteers scattered throughout the towns and villages of the peninsula. On average, each regiment consisted of four to five hundred members that were divided into five or six patrols. Each patrol was then led by an officer who was almost always a member of the MCP. Regimental command was made up of two officers: the commander and the political commissar. The commissar system was later abandoned following the Batu Caves incident, leaving the regiment commander

⁵⁸ This would be Chen Kuang, a veteran of the 8th Route Army from China. It was he who taught the MPAJA the tactics of guerilla warfare employed by the Chinese Red Army. Hanrahan, 38.

solely in charge.⁵⁹ Unlike conventional military hierarchy, there were no ranks within the MPAJA. Members addressed each other, including party leaders, as ‘comrades’.⁶⁰ However, discipline within the regiments was tight. Tactically, the MPAJA tended to set its base on the fringes of populated areas such as outlying villages or Chinese squatter areas where they could easily obtain supplies and information. But once the Japanese started burning down villages and massacring its inhabitants in retaliation for providing assistance to the guerillas, the MPAJA had no choice but to retreat further inland, often entering aboriginal land.⁶¹

The central body in charge of coordinating the cooperation between the people and the MPAJA was the Malayan Peoples’ Anti-Japanese Union (MPAJU).⁶² It was through the MPAJU that food, funds, supplies, and intelligence was collected and transferred to the guerillas. Recruitment was also

⁵⁹ Chin Peng gave a detailed account of the tragedy that led to the abandonment of the commissar system. He specifically blamed Lai Teck for the massacre. Cheah and Hanrahan confirm this. Chin and Hack, 84. See also Cheah, *Red Star*, 61; and Hanrahan, 39.

⁶⁰ Very little is known about the MPAJA’s daily life. Most details were obtained from Chin Peng’s memoirs as he was one of the last surviving members of the MCP who still remember those days. Chin Peng, 71.

⁶¹ The *Orang Asli* (aborigines) were the original inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula. During the war, the MPAJA occasionally had to rely on the aborigine Senoi people living in Perak and Pahang for food as they were cut off from the towns and villages due to heavy Japanese patrols. Cheah, *Red Star*, 65.

⁶² This was the civilian arm of the MPAJA. Hanrahan makes no mention of their existence, however, leaving the impression that the guerillas had no auxiliary support. Chin Peng makes passing references to the MPAJU, confirming that they had supplied the guerillas with information and food. *Ibid.*, 65. See also Chin Peng, 78.

done through MPAJU contacts where, except for government officials working for the Japanese administration, responses from the people were encouraging, hence the ability to replace casualties. Both the MPAJA and MPAJU were organized and led by the MCP, which made it clear that those who joined the resistance need not be communists.⁶³ As fighting the Japanese took precedence over all other considerations, propaganda work on MPAJU and MPAJA members was conducted only minimally. Although it was the MCP's ultimate goal to create a 'Malayan Democratic Republic' that was supported by the three main ethnic groups, the overwhelming dominance of the Chinese within the resistance movement coupled with the tendency by certain segments of Malays to assist the Japanese in hunting down the MPAJA led to bloody clashes between the two communities.⁶⁴ Despite distrust of the Malays, Malay volunteers did join the MPAJA and MPAJU, albeit in smaller numbers.

Southeast Asia Command.

The British, reeling from the rapidity and totality of the Japanese victory in Malaya, found themselves cut off from their former colony between 1942 and 1943. Except for some stragglers left behind when the main bulk of the British

⁶³ Volunteers were not required to become members of the MCP, nor were there active recruitment conducted at the time. Cheah, *Red Star*, 67.

⁶⁴ Cheah and Abdullah C.D. talked about the Malay-Chinese conflict which was exacerbated after the war. Based on Cheah's research, the root cause of the issue stemmed from the Malay's desire to side with the Japanese whom they saw as liberators. The Chinese, on the other hand, saw them as traitors. *Ibid.*, 70. See also Abdullah, 64.

forces retreated to Singapore for a last stand, there were no active British military assets in the Malay Peninsula until the arrival of Force 136. Before the secret landing of John Davis and five Chinese agents on May 23, 1943, the MPAJA conducted their war of resistance independently without any support from the British. The Allies' Southeast Asia Command (SEAC), based at Colombo, Sri Lanka, was eager to reestablish contact with resistance elements in the Malay Peninsula as it required intelligence to plan for the liberation of the territory. For that purpose, Force 136 was formed and John Davis, a former police officer in the Federated Malay States Police, Colonel Richard Broome, former 101 STS instructor, and Lim Bo Seng, a Straits-born Chinese, were sent back via submarine to contact the MPAJA and to assist in directing and coordinating the resistance efforts.⁶⁵ Although they successfully landed on the coast of Dinding, it was only on September 30 that Davis and his group finally met a contact person from the MCP central committee who then moved them into the safety of the jungles. Due to intense Japanese patrols and the time required to set up the meeting, it took another three months before Davis managed to meet with Lai Teck and convey SEAC's offer.

Once cooperation from the MPAJA was affirmed, from 1944 onwards SEAC began to resupply the guerilla army with weapons, equipment, supplies,

⁶⁵ The mission to contact the MPAJA was codenamed Operation Gustavus and it was conducted in two parts. Broome, Davis and Lim arrived on Gustavus II. The plan was to have Force 136 agents attach themselves to each guerilla regiment. The MPAJA resented this as it meant taking orders from the British. Chin and Hack, 82.

and money via submarines or by clandestine air drops. During the past two years in which the guerillas had been forced to salvage whatever British supplies; now for the first time they were properly armed and equipped.⁶⁶ In truth, the material assistance provided by the Allies was in preparation for the planned August 1945 invasion of Malaya codenamed Operation ZIPPER. In that scheduled amphibious assault on the west coast of Malaya, the MPAJA were to play a crucial role in assisting returning British forces in the liberation of the peninsula. SEAC therefore decided that strengthening the guerillas through resupplies and Force 136 technical assistance was of great importance to the overall strategy for Malaya's liberation. The MPAJA, and by extension the MCP, naturally welcomed this decision as it allowed them to build up arms caches that could be used in a post-war showdown with the British.⁶⁷ However, the presence of Force 136 was only barely tolerated as the guerillas never accepted the British soldiers as comrades. As a result, Force 136 personnel often found themselves at the mercy of uncooperative, and sometimes hostile, MPAJA fighters.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Hanrahan stated that the Allies dropped enough equipment to arm 3,500 guerillas. Chin Peng's account also mentions that the air drops provided much relief for the beleaguered guerillas; the arms would later be used against the British in 1948. Hanrahan, 43. See also Chin Peng, 113.

⁶⁷ It was Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten who insisted on this policy as he felt the guerillas were crucial in securing the safety of post-war Malaya. The irony was not lost on the MCP who took advantage of the Admiral's gracious offer. Cheah, *Red Star*, 75.

⁶⁸ Most of the guerillas were not aware of the agreement between SEAC and the central committee until sometime later. Even after receiving orders to cooperate, the guerillas still loathe to work with Force 136 as they felt the British were here to steal their chance at glory. *Ibid.*, 151.

The sudden end of the Pacific War in September 1945 precluded any opportunity for a cooperative effort between the MPAJA and the British in liberating Malaya. Operation ZIPPER, the supposedly grand invasion of the peninsula, was cancelled due to the Japanese surrender. As a result, Malaya was spared the horrors of a brutal military campaign and the MPAJA fighters suddenly found themselves the heroes and liberators of the peninsula because they had been the only resistance force that had engaged the enemy in combat throughout the three years and eight months of Japanese Occupation. Although the total number of combat missions remains unclear due to the dearth of declassified MPAJA documents, it has been confirmed that at least three hundred engagements took place between 1942 and 1945 with at least two hundred of those considered to be major actions.⁶⁹ This fact, no doubt, was a point of consternation for the returning British, who were determined to downplay the MPAJA's contribution to the war effort by claiming that their sacrifice and efforts were insignificant. This spiteful British attitude stemmed from a need to redress the humiliating surrender of Malaya's British defenders to a numerically inferior enemy. As an unwanted military force that the British reluctantly helped to create, it was simply convenient to heap any blame and negativity upon the MPAJA.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ The numbers come from a 28 November, 1945 report by the 25th Indian Division Weekly Intelligence Review. The report listed the number of MPAJA attacks and the total number of casualties up until 31 August, 1945. Chin and Hack, 91. See also Cheah, *Red Star*, 304.

⁷⁰ Force 136 was ordered by SEAC not to give the MPAJA the impression that the British were ready to abandon them now that they no longer had any use for the guerillas. Liaison officers such as John Davis concurred with SEAC, but the

Regardless, with the Japanese forces surrendering to the nearest MPAJA unit, Malaya was, in effect, under MCP rule in late 1945. To the guerillas, and to the MCP who had led the resistance, it would seem to have been the perfect time to seize control and carry out their plan to establish a socialist republic. During the first post-war meeting of the central committee, Liu Yao, Chairman of the Military Affairs Committee, proposed that an armed coup to be launched immediately. Nonetheless, Lai Teck vetoed the idea and instead called for cooperation with the returning British, arguing that achieving their goals constitutionally was the best way.⁷¹ This decision was made on August 27, 1945, and it was relayed to the British along with an eight-point manifesto demanding democratic reforms and civil liberties. The British government proceeded to reoccupy Malaya without incident. Thus, the MCP may have missed its golden opportunity due to the machinations of a triple agent.

Ibrahim Yaacob and the failed MCP-Giyu Gun Alliance.

While the Chinese-dominated MCP was at the forefront of the anti-Japanese war, Malay nationalists were also resisting the Japanese, albeit in their

newly established British Military Administration (BMA) thought otherwise. Hanrahan is of the opinion that the MPAJA had become a nuisance due to their obsession with hunting down traitors and collaborators. *Ibid.*, 159. See also Hanrahan, 44.

⁷¹ Lai Teck's successful derailment of the armed struggle policy remained a sore point for Chin Peng and his comrades who blamed the traitor for their setbacks. Cheah explains that this was because Lai Teck was eager to reestablish contact with his handlers and that any attacks on the British would make him appear a renegade. Chin Peng, 128.

own unique way. Before the war, no other Malay organization advocated independence for Malaya louder than the *Kesatuan Melayu Muda* (KMM, Young Malay Union). As the most radical and revolutionary Malay organization, the KMM attracted scores of patriotic and nationalistic Malay youths who agreed with the pro-Malay vision presented by Ibrahim Yaacob, leader of the KMM. But unlike the MCP's goal of a multi-ethnic communist republic, the KMM called for a union between Malaya and Indonesia to create a greater Malay nation in which the Malays would be the dominant group numerically.⁷² As the Japanese began their invasion of the peninsula, the KMM openly welcomed them and offered to be their guide during the push south. By becoming allies of the Japanese, the KMM leaders hoped that independence would be granted when the British were defeated. To the KMM's dismay, the Japanese not only withheld independence but instead ordered the dissolution of the KMM in June 1942, saying that they did not wish to encourage political activism by any particular group in Malaya.⁷³ If the KMM's wishes were entertained, it would encourage other ethnic communities to demand similar treatment from the Japanese. Hence, the Japanese suppressed all political activities and outlawed all existing organizations.

⁷² Ibrahim Yaacob was very much in favor of a political union between the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya into a united 'Indonesia-Raya' or 'Melayu Raya' (Greater Indonesia or Greater Malay). Roff, 232.

⁷³ Abdullah C.D. says that the Japanese banned the organization once they found out about the KMM's true intentions. Many of the regional members such as Abdullah then decided to support the MCP to fight the Japanese. Abdullah, 16.

With the dissolution of the KMM, the Malays were left without any political organization to represent their political ambitions. Even so, the Japanese were aware of the contribution the KMM had provided during the invasion as well as during the transitional period when the new Japanese Military Administration (JMA) was being set up. In fact, members of the KMM were routinely consulted by the JMA on matters pertaining to the welfare of the Malay people. In return, the KMM made use of this relationship to extend the good graces of the Japanese to the Malay peasants in the form of food and protection. Despite this arrangement, Ibrahim Yaacob and the KMM executive committee members were dissatisfied with the Japanese and their perceived betrayal in 1942. Ibrahim was eventually recruited to lead the Malai Giyu Gun (Malay Volunteer Army) and the Malai Giyu Tai (Malay Volunteer Corps) in 1944 as part of the Japanese plan to form a local defense army in preparation for an Allied counterattack. The Japanese evidently formed these support groups to appease Ibrahim Yaacob by giving him some responsibility for the mobilization of Malay youths. However, Ibrahim had lost faith in the Japanese by then and was ready to turn on his former patrons, provided he could find suitable allies. Left with no other choices, he turned to the MPAJA.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Ibrahim Yaacob and the KMM's alliance with the Japanese was a well documented event. His actions during the closing days of the Japanese Occupation made the MCP wary of him as he had proven to be duplicitous if given the opportunity. According to Cheah, Ibrahim's secret communication with the MPAJA was an act of desperation as he was a staunch Malay nationalist who wanted an ethnically pure Malay nation. Cheah, 122.

According to Ibrahim Yaacob, he made secret contact in early 1944 with the MPAJA; both sides agreed to cooperate to fight the Japanese first before switching to fight the British for independence. Ibrahim also promised to bring his army to the MPAJA's side when the time was right. In the meantime, he would ensure that no further clashes between the two armies would occur by ordering his troops to refrain from firing on the guerillas. Previously, the Japanese had used the Giyu Gun to combat MPAJA in military operations throughout the peninsula. But with the secret alliance in effect, no further engagements took place and this was especially true for the Ipoh area in July 1944, where the Giyu Gun was explicitly reported not to have fought the local MPAJA regiment.⁷⁵ Elsewhere, however, the Giyu Gun continued to clash with the MPAJA, leading many within the MCP to question the sincerity of the Malays. It seems that the Giyu Gun-MPAJA alliance was merely a marriage of convenience that was based on tentative trust between the two leaders. Before anything more substantial could be carried out, the Japanese suddenly surrendered in August 1945, throwing all plans into disarray. Hoping to seize the moment, Ibrahim tried to fulfill his end of the bargain by mobilizing his army for a rendezvous with the MPAJA. Unfortunately, Lai Teck ordered the MPAJA not to cooperate with the Giyu Gun as he had concluded that the MPAJA guerillas would stand down and not resist the returning British. Betrayed, the Giyu Gun was forced to disband and its members simply returned home. Ibrahim later fled to Jakarta and never returned to Malaya.

⁷⁵ Chin Peng knew of the contact between Ibrahim Yaacob and Lai Teck but was not privy to the details. Cheah cites Ibrahim's book which talked about the secret arrangement in 1944. Chin and Hack, 69. See also Cheah, *Red Star*, 112.

With the hasty departure of its founder and leader, the KMM quickly fell out of favor with the Malay peasants who were angered by their collaboration with the Japanese.

IV. The MCP in Post-War Malaya.

Heroes of Malaya.

With World War II finally over following the surrender of Japan to the Allies in August 1945, the MPAJA began to emerge from their hidden jungle bases to gain control of the Malay Peninsula from the Japanese forces. In some of the liberated towns and villages, the guerillas were greeted with much fanfare and celebration by the grateful people of Malaya who were thrilled to be free from the yoke of Japanese Occupation. Malays, Chinese, Indians, and other ethnic groups joined together in showering the resistance fighters with much praise and gratitude in the wake of their efforts during the three years and eight months of war.⁷⁶ As heroes of Malaya, the MPAJA, and by extension the MCP, took the initiative to assume administrative duties in the outlying regions, leaving urban areas such as Kuala Lumpur and Singapore in the hands of the Japanese Military Administration. Additionally, the MPAJA also moved quickly to disarm the Japanese garrisons left behind, collecting large numbers of firearms in the process. The MPAJA was caught completely by surprise by the Japanese surrender and had no clearly defined plans when they were ordered to take over the populated areas. In any case, in the weeks before the first returning British

⁷⁶ In many areas vacated by the Japanese, smartly uniformed guerillas were seen marching down main streets under triumphal arches erected by supporters and residents who were grateful to see them. The celebrations were mostly conducted by the Chinese with lesser participation by the Malays and Indians. Hanrahan also confirms that the welcoming of the guerillas did take place. Cheah, 177. See also Hanrahan, 49.

soldier set foot on Malaya, the six thousand strong MPAJA was effectively ruling many parts of the colony virtually unopposed.⁷⁷

Once word of the surrender was known by the public, chaos ensued in the streets. Despite repeated threats by the Japanese authorities to maintain law and order, looting and incidents of violence persisted with summary executions and brutal reprisals carried out on suspected collaborators.⁷⁸ While Malaya was mired in chaos, the MCP found itself in a dilemma, with two factions arguing over the next course of action. One group argued that the guerillas should continue the struggle by turning their guns towards the British now that the Japanese had been defeated. Another favored the return to labor organization and agitation as the best way to achieve the party's goals. Eventually, after about two weeks, the central committee under Lai Teck decided to favor the latter proposal and the MPAJA was ordered to cooperate with the returning British forces.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ According to Hanrahan, the MPAJA ruled the towns and villages within the 'liberated regions' but says they were not in complete control of the entire peninsula as the Japanese garrison was still present. Hanrahan, 49.

⁷⁸ Despite the Japanese banning shortwave radios, many Malaysians still managed to keep their sets hidden during the Occupation and had been following the war's progress for some time. When news of the surrender was broadcast by the Allies, the people immediately took to the streets to celebrate and to payback to those who collaborated with the Japanese. Cheah, 133.

⁷⁹ Lai Teck certainly had a hand in this decision. According to Chin Peng, he was not going to allow the MCP to capitalize on this once in a lifetime opportunity. The British would execute him if he allowed this to pass. Chin and Hack, 105.

British discomfort over MPAJA/MCP dominance.

The British were very uncomfortable with the idea that Malaya was under communist control in 1945. Although they were valuable allies during the war, the MCP's usefulness to the British expired the moment their common enemy was defeated. As a result, orders were relayed to Force 136 by Southeast Asia Command (SEAC) to take necessary actions to prevent the MPAJA from seizing power in Malaya.⁸⁰ In a precarious position among the guerillas since the early days of the war, Force 136 was in no position to make demands that the MPAJA cease their activities at once and obey SEAC orders to remain in camp. Instead, they achieved a compromise. MPAJA members were allowed to occupy places vacated by the Japanese provided they kept the peace and did not allow ethnic clashes and vigilantism to take place.⁸¹

This was a temporary solution. For the British, to regain control of the colony meant that the MPAJA must be disarmed and disbanded. Under strong pressure from SEAC's Admiral Mountbatten, the MCP acquiesced to the British demand and ordered the demobilization of its guerilla army on December 1, 1945. In exchange, compensations in the form of cash and a sack of rice were to be paid to each of the guerillas, provided they returned the British-supplied arms. The British also sought to recognize the contributions of the MPAJA by decorating

⁸⁰ The orders were dispatched from SEAC in Colombo on August 11, 1945. This was an attempt to rein in the MPAJA before they could assert too much control over Malaya. Force 136 barely managed to do so before the main British force landed. Cheah, *Red Star*, 150.

⁸¹ This was part of the August 11 instructions to Force 136. *Ibid.*, 161.

several of its leaders with awards and medals, thereby appeasing the MCP.⁸² However, the MCP had hoped the British Military Administration (BMA) would recognize the legality of the communist organization and accept the various proposals and recommendations regarding Malaya's political issues. The British ignored both requests, leaving the MCP in a semi-legal status. Nevertheless, the MCP decided to move forward with its united front strategy that was announced by Lai Teck during the Eighth Enlarged Plenum of the central committee held on January 22, 1946. During the meeting, Lai Teck explained that the situation in Malaya made armed uprising very unfavorable to the communists and that a peaceful, popular movement was far more suitable to carry out the revolution.⁸³ This was later interpreted to have been an attempt by Lai Teck to sabotage the MCP by deliberately leading the organization along an untenable path. The central committee approved this policy and later sent the British a nine-point program for the democratization of Malaya, including the demand for self-rule.⁸⁴

Naturally, the proposal both irked and worried the British, who felt that under no circumstances would they allow the establishment of a socialist republic in Southeast Asia, especially in their sphere of influence. The British believed the

⁸² Hanrahan claims that the payments were for mustering out the guerillas but seems to indicate that it was more to reclaim the supplied weapons. Cheah argues that the payments were part of an incentive for the disbandment of the regiments. Hanrahan, 51. See also Cheah, *Red Star*, 259.

⁸³ Chin Peng and most of the central committee members were not convinced but they obeyed the party secretary nonetheless. Chin Peng, 55.

⁸⁴ The program was submitted at the conclusion of the Eight Enlarged Plenum of the MCP Central Committee. *Ibid.*, 155.

nine-point program was nothing but a cover for an MCP plot to cause ethnic disharmony. Furthermore, it was not in the interests of the British to grant self-rule immediately, as they still wished to retain control of the colony and use it to rejuvenate Britain's economy.⁸⁵ Therefore, the MCP program was promptly rejected. At the same time, it must be understood that the costs of World War II had caused Britain to be financially depleted by 1945. Without the means to maintain its far-flung empire, London's political establishment had decided that the best course of action would be to grant independence to the colonies, albeit under specific terms and conditions. In fact, low-key preliminary discussions regarding a proposed Malayan constitution took place between the Malay sultans and the British shortly after 1945. These discussions would eventually culminate in the Malayan Union plan. The MCP argued against these 'secret meetings' and called instead for an open election to select members of a legislative council and to let the people publicly discuss and decide on a new constitution.⁸⁶ To the British, the MCP's demands were dangerous because they could potentially cut off Britain's access to Malaya's plantations and mines, resources the British

⁸⁵ The British government was focused on reviving the tin and rubber industries to generate cash quickly. This was noted in an article from the October 1945 issue of the *Economist*, cited in Daud Latiff, "The British Military Administration, September 1945 to April 1946," in *Malaya: The Making of a Neo-Colony*, ed. Mohamed Amin and Malcolm Caldwell (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1977), 131. Hereafter cited as Mohamed.

⁸⁶ The Malayan Union plan was an attempt by the British to consolidate their administration at the cost of the sultans' sovereignty. Cheah asserts that leftist Malays from the Malay Nationalist Party actually supported the Union plan but the MCP was against the arbitrary appointments of the council members. Cheah, *Masked Comrades*, 13.

sorely needed to revitalize their shattered economy. Britain hoped that by securing the cooperation of the traditional Malay ruling elite, actions taken by the British in Malaya would seem legitimate in the eyes of the mostly rural Malay people.⁸⁷ This had the effect of creating divisions within the Malayan population by pitting the Malays against the Chinese and Indians, creating exactly the sort of ethnic disharmony the British had accused the MCP of trying to foster.

The 'United Front' Policy.

What really worried the British upon their return to the Malay Peninsula was the realization that the Malayan people had developed a new political consciousness. The nearly four years of suffering and terror had awakened the ethnic communities of Malaya to the importance of peace and freedom. Although the Japanese had raped, robbed, and extorted from the people during the Occupation, their brief regime had also inadvertently allowed the budding concept of an independent Malayan nation-one that encompassed all the peninsular ethnic groups-to emerge. Despite this grand ideal, the fundamental issues plaguing the Malayan people remained unresolved; in fact there was little to no unity between the major ethnic communities. One major factor was that, as Donald Nonini suggests, the parochial Malays had long been "spoiled" by the British, who through political subterfuge and occasional strong arm tactics had deliberately

⁸⁷ Sir Harold MacMichael's strong-arm tactics in obtaining the Malay Rulers' consent to the Union plan was a widely known fact. This event was the spark that led to the popular manifestation of Malay nationalism as described by Donald Nonini. Yet the British were convinced the Malays would quietly obey once their sultans had been cowed into submission. Nonini, 13.

stunted Malay economic and social growth for at least a century.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, the Chinese and Indians, either migrants or Malayan-born, had been encouraged by the British to work and develop the colony to the best of their abilities, leading to vast economic disparity between Malays and the newcomers. This was one of the most important causes of ethnic tension between the Malayan people since before the war. The MCP understood this and knew that to truly unify the Malayan people, a united front across all social classes and ethnic communities must be formed. Only by presenting their demands for a democratic process collectively could the people resist returning to the old colonial days of divide and rule.⁸⁹

The MCP was well aware that they alone could not carry out the constitutional reforms of the united front. Therefore, by subscribing to Mao Zedong's 'New Democracy' strategy, they sought allies from among new political parties such as the Malay Nationalist Party (MNP) and the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU), which happened to share similar nationalist goals such as

⁸⁸ Nonini explains that the Malays had been under a policy of benign neglect as the British were not in a hurry to replace local officials with European ones and that it was the Chinese that were being used to develop the plantations and mines. *Ibid.*, 48.

⁸⁹ The policy was revealed by *The Sunday Times* on 7 December, 1947 in which the newspaper claimed to have gotten hold of a secret MCP booklet known as *The Malayan People's United Front, the Party's Basic Policy*. The MCP denied the booklet had come from them but instead provided their version of the united front policy which was very similar to the alleged secret booklet. Cheah, *Masked Comrades*, 55. See also "Secret Plan for Red Malaya: By a Political Observer," *The Straits Times*. 7 December, 1947. Newspaper online. Available from <http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19471207.2.54.aspx>. Internet Accessed 20 March 2011.

democratic reform and independence for Malaya.⁹⁰ The MNP was formed by Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy, a former right-hand man of KMM leader Ibrahim Yaacob who advocated political union with Indonesia as a means to safeguard Malay rights. This goal differed radically from the Malayan Union plan. The MDU, on the other hand, was formed through a partnership between communist and non-communist individuals with the explicit aim of opposing colonialism and demanding self-government from the British. While the MNP was wholly comprised of Malays, the MDU counted Europeans and Eurasians in addition to Malaya's three major ethnic groups among its membership. The MDU represented the ideal united front image the MCP had hoped to promote. Meanwhile, another political group emerged known as the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which was originally formed to protest the establishment of the Malayan Union. It soon evolved into a staunchly conservative organization that was primarily concerned with Malay supremacy rather than independence. Seeing UMNO as an entity that catered to the indigenous elites only, the MCP quickly rejected its agenda as running counter to Malaya's democratization and proceeded to denounce the party. For the united front to succeed, the MNP and the MDU were the communist's best hope. The British, naturally, were aware of this.

⁹⁰ The MCP had been influenced by Mao's ideology for years. They saw the situation in Malaya was similar to China. Stenson and Purcell, however, claim that the united front strategy was adopted because the Party believed that the British would allow the operation of less openly directed political organizations. Cheah, *Masked Comrades*, 24. See also Stenson, *Industrial Conflict*, 130; and Purcell, 60.

Established on December 21, 1945 in Singapore by English-educated intellectuals such as Philip Hoalim Sr., Lim Hong Bee, Gerald de Cruz, and Lim Kean Chye, the MDU has been described by contemporary historians such as Cheah Boon Kheng and Victor Purcell as a puppet organization of the MCP operating under the guise of the united front strategy. In truth, it was a political group that shared goals similar to those of the MCP but that aimed for self-government through constitutional means rather than through a Malayan Socialist Republic.⁹¹ The similarities can be attributed to the participation of MCP members in the MDU who brought with them their experiences in mass organization and agitation from the pre-war years. Nevertheless, the MDU touted ‘Malayan Democracy’ and ‘United Front for Malaya’ as their key slogans and embraced any individual or any organization that expressed willingness to work with them towards independence. It was inevitable, however, that the MDU would gradually come under MCP domination as the communists were much more aggressive and far more knowledgeable in political agitation compared to the non-communist members. The rising militant voice within the MDU central committee, voiced by its prominent communist members, led the British to believe that the MDU was either infiltrated by the MCP or had become a communist organization under a different name. The BMA asserted that both the

⁹¹ The similar goals shared by the MDU and the MCP provoked accusations from the British that the former was a front for the communists. None of the MDU leaders such as Philip Hoalim Sr. was a member of the MCP. On the other hand, Chin Peng claims that the MDU was not exactly an MCP front organization; it was, however, firmly under communist influence, he says. Cheah, *Masked Comrades*, 74. See also Chin Peng, 199.

MCP and the MDU were twin organizations with similar key individuals such as Wu Tien Wang, a member of the MCP central committee, and Lim Hong Bee, a prominent communist agitator, who were promoting identical goals. As such, the British extended their anti-communist propaganda to include the MDU in 1946.⁹²

The culmination of the MCP's united front strategy was the formation of the AMCJA-PUTERA coalition. It came into existence in response to the British decision to include UMNO in secret negotiations with the Sultans to replace the Malayan Union plan with the conservative Federation of Malaya. AMCJA stood for All-Malaya Council of Joint Action and it was an umbrella organization for an alliance consisting of the MNP, MDU, the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions (PMFTU), the New Democratic Youth League, the Ex-MPAJA Comrades' Association, and the Women's Federation. Led by prominent Malayan Chinese leader, Tan Cheng Lock, the AMCJA then joined forces with a group of Malay organizations known as the *Pusat Tenaga Rakyat* (PUTERA) in order to form a larger United Front.⁹³ The MCP was not a member of this coalition, but several of its members were part of it through their memberships in the MDU, MNP, or the trade unions. The MCP wholly supported the AMCJA-PUTERA's principles and ideals. This represented the first broad collaboration among

⁹² This occurred in December 1946 when the BMA began targeting the MDU. The Special Branch was in favor of heavy repressive measures while Victor Purcell preferred much subtler means. Cheah, *Masked Comrades*, 85. See also Purcell, *Malaya*, 50.

⁹³ The AMCJA-PUTERA coalition claimed to be an all-inclusive political body. However, its policies, inadvertently or not, were clearly based on the MCP's united front strategy. Cheah, *Masked Comrades*, 87.

Malaya's diverse political organizations, which, acting together, became the voice for the Malayan people who opposed the British and their pro-UMNO policy in regards to Malaya's Constitution and citizenship issues. The increasing demands for democratic reforms and genuine self-rule under the aegis of the AMCJA-PUTERA eventually provoked the British to label the coalition as an MCP invention and to accuse its leaders of being communists in nationalist disguise.⁹⁴ I will argue that these proponents of the united front were never communists; they were in fact nationalists with radical socialist views. Grippled by the rising Cold War paranoia, however, the British chose to ignore this critical difference and began systematically to suppress them and all leftist groups through a relentless propaganda campaign that later culminated in the MCP insurrection of 1948.

Lai Teck's Betrayal.

During the restless period between the return of the British and the beginning of the Malayan Emergency, the MCP was forced to deal with a shocking internal issue that nearly ripped the organization apart. Lai Teck, the party secretary elected in the Sixth Enlarged Plenum of the central committee back in April 1939, had been reelected in January 1946, making him the longest-serving leader of the MCP. Highly respected for his knowledge of Marxist-Leninist ideology as well as his organizational skills, Lai Teck was also venerated

⁹⁴ Purcell felt that the AMCJA-PUTERA alliance was not well received by the people despite its passionate campaign for a new Constitution to replace the Malayan Union. What Purcell fails to mention was that the British had been deliberately ignoring the alliance in favor of working with UMNO. Purcell, *Malaya*, 60.

as Malaya's Lenin. Since 1939, the MCP had obediently followed his every instruction, never questioning his methods or the reasons behind his decisions. In truth, unbeknownst even to the central committee, Lai Teck was a British spy who later, to save his own life, collaborated with the Japanese when he was arrested in Singapore during the Occupation. The unraveling of Lai Teck's cover began in October 1945 when Ng Yeh Lu, a member of the MCP propaganda committee who was arrested by the Japanese in 1942, accused the party secretary of being a traitor. Ng claimed that when he was forced to serve the Kempeitai (Japanese Military Police) as a translator, he had unwittingly come across documents that explicitly identified Lai Teck as the spy within MCP who was feeding the Japanese information on the MPAJA's movements.⁹⁵ Moreover, Ng physically witnessed the arrest of a central committee member named Tsai Ke Ming whom Lai Teck had informed on. The most damning accusation made by Ng was that the Batu Caves massacre of the MCP/MPAJA upper echelon on September 1, 1942 was actually caused by Lai Teck who informed the Kempeitai of the secret meeting.

These accusations shocked the MCP to its core and the central committee was reluctant to believe the words of a former collaborator. But Ng provided an article written by former Kempeitai officer Onishi Satoru, who was Lai Teck's

⁹⁵ Ng Yeh Lu was one of many who had accused the party secretary of treachery. Unlike other accusers who had been discredited or executed under Lai Teck's orders, Ng managed to avoid a similar fate because he was in possession of physical evidence implicating the traitor. Chin Peng was present during the incident and was shocked beyond belief over the betrayal. Chin and Hack, 111. See also Chin Peng, 169.

handler during the war, stating that a central committee member had personally arranged for the Batu Caves conference that led to the extermination of large numbers of the communists. This led the MCP central committee to open an investigation into the allegations and to summon Lai Teck to answer them. Sensing that his time was up, Lai Teck disappeared into the night in March 1947 along with most of the MCP's funds. A three-man investigation team led by Chin Peng was set up to investigate Lai Teck in the wake of his disappearance. Two months later, Chin Peng's team concluded that, based on corroborating statements and other evidence, Lai Teck had indeed betrayed the MCP during the war and would therefore be expelled. A year later, the MCP released a report known as The Wright Document, condemning Lai Teck as a British agent on top of being a Japanese spy.⁹⁶ Following this crisis, the MCP central committee elected Chin Peng as the new party secretary and decided to abandon Lai Teck's constitutional struggle policy in favor of a more militant approach.

Lai Teck was very influential on the MCP and had built a cult of personality around himself since assuming the mantle of leadership in 1939. This can be traced back to his arrival in Singapore in 1934, when the MCP had genuinely believed Lai Teck was a Comintern agent sent by Moscow to help lead the struggling Malayan communist movement. This impression was reinforced by his resume, in which he claimed to have studied communism in Moscow as well

⁹⁶ This was confirmed by the Special Branch which reestablished contact with Lai Teck shortly after the return of the British in November 1945. Leon Comber, *Malaya's Secret Police, 1945-60*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 32. Hereafter cited as Comber, *Secret Police*.

as to have worked briefly for the CCP in the Shanghai Town Committee before being sent to Singapore. His undercover skills were actually developed in Vietnam, where he was born. Forced by the French Surete (National Police) to infiltrate and report on the Vietnamese communist movement after being arrested as a student activist, Lai Teck apparently honed his skills during this time. However, his cover was eventually blown in an unspecified incident and the French decided to give him to the Malayan Special Branch led by Rene Onraet who proceeded to plant him in the MCP.

Masterfully manipulating the young and impressionable Malayan communists, Lai Teck quickly became the indisputable leader of the MCP and led it for more than a decade until his desertion. Since his joining the MCP, raids and arrests that led to the imprisonment, execution, or deportation of several prominent Malayan communists can be attributed to his leaking information to the British security forces. His collaboration with the Japanese in 1942 was apparently an act of self-preservation. Angered and humiliated, the MCP had only themselves to blame for playing into the hands of a triple agent who not only caused the decimation of its members but also crippled the organization financially when he absconded with the funds. According to Leon Comber and Chin Peng, Lai Teck was eventually killed in Bangkok when he tried to escape the Thai communists who had been asked by the MCP to capture him. The money he stole was never recovered.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Lai Teck's story is a classic tale of international espionage worthy of a New York Times bestseller. Most narratives provide vague and unconfirmed

British purge and the Malayan Emergency.

The build-up to the Malayan Emergency began soon after the British Military Administration (BMA) had regained control of Malaya at the end of 1945. The SEAC Supreme Commander, Admiral Louis Mountbatten, had agreed, when the war with Japan began, to cooperate with the MCP/MPAJA during and after the war. It was this agreement that shaped the BMA's post-war policies: 1) the MCP would be officially recognized by the colonial government during and after the Japanese invasion; 2) the MPAJA would continue to exist upon the British return; and 3) it would only disband at a time designated later.⁹⁸ Moreover, the MCP's demand for freedom of speech, publication, and association were also granted by the BMA as a gesture to appease or reward their communist allies for their wartime service. These concessions partially fulfilled the MCP's manifesto of August 27, 1945 but made no mention of granting full legal status to the MCP anytime soon, making the organization a semi-legal entity. To the communists, it meant that they are now free to make a bid for power through political agitation. Within a short time, restless MCP members began to organize strikes and protests against the BMA, demanding the democratic reforms outlined in the eight-point

information regarding his background and motivation. But recently, more details have emerged thanks to researchers such as Leon Comber who not only confirmed his identity but was able to confirm his demise at the hands of Thai Communists in Bangkok. Chin Peng however, was the first to find out about the death of Lai Teck in late 1947. Comber, *Royal Asiatic Society*, 6. See also Chin Peng, 190.

⁹⁸ Mountbatten placed great importance on the MCP and he even accepted in principle the eight point manifesto of 27 August, 1945. Cheah, *Red Star*, 242.

manifesto of August 27. Unlike the civilian officials of the BMA who tried to tolerate and reason with the MCP, the British military viewed the communists as a disruptive element that must be removed promptly. It launched crackdowns on these protests, leading to shootings, arrests, imprisonments, and in some cases, deportations.⁹⁹

Chin Peng argued that Lai Teck's insistence on moderate policies after the war severely hampered the MCP's efforts towards establishing a democratic republic in the Malay Peninsula. This was evidently motivated by the traitor's desire to return to the good graces of his former British masters by causing as much damage as possible to the communist movement. As a result, the MCP was limited to making repeated political demands to the British by submitting multiple revisions of similar self-rule proposals, which included the rights of local people to determine own administration, judiciary, and legislature, as well as the right to manage the economy and national defense. The British systematically ignored these proposals and moved instead to restrict the proliferation of communist propaganda by introducing the Printing and Publishing Ordinance of 1945, which

⁹⁹ Both Purcell and Force 136 officers initially favored a liberal approach to deal with the MCP. Eventually, they would support the military's tough measures in dealing with the communists as they had become disillusioned over the party's uncooperative behavior. Cheah, *Red Star*, 242. See also Victor Purcell, *Memoirs of a Malayan Official*. (London: Cassell, 1965), 353. Hereafter cited as Purcell, *Memoirs*.

led to the closure of several Chinese newspapers deemed to be subversive and the imprisonment of their staff members under charges of sedition.¹⁰⁰

All of this caused the relationship between the MCP and the BMA to worsen, with the communists retaliating by launching several labor strikes. In early 1946, the MCP decided to hold a demonstration on February 15 to commemorate the anniversary of the fall of Singapore to the Japanese.¹⁰¹ The British denied the MCP's request for permission as they were incensed at this deliberate attempt to insult British pride. On February 14, the Singapore police conducted a massive raid on the Singapore General Labor Union, the New Democratic Youth League, and the MCP, netting scores of top leftist leaders who the British then imprisoned. The planned demonstration failed to materialize, and the aggressive police response signaled that the British were losing patience with the MCP. But it would take two more years of tension before the British finally pushed the MCP into a twelve-year-long armed revolt.

One technique often employed by the MCP to voice their opposition was labor strikes. By organizing work stoppages and mass demonstrations, the communists hoped to force the colonial government into negotiations and, they hoped, capitulation to their list of demands. This may seem an odd strategy given the fact that the British in the pre-war years did not look kindly upon disruptive

¹⁰⁰ The newspapers were the *Shih Tai Jit Pao*, *Pai Ma Tao Pao*, *The North Malaya News*, and *The Age*. The MCP's main propaganda paper, *Sin Min Chu*, continued to operate despite the ban. Chin Peng, 142. See also Mohamed, 172.

¹⁰¹ According to Hanrahan, the BMA saw the demonstration as an excuse to spread terror. Hanrahan, 55.

public behavior or civil disobedience. More often than not, induced street anarchism invited swift and deadly British retribution. Even so, the MCP had long recognized the importance of the working class to their struggle and it was by controlling or influencing the labor unions that the communists obtained the numbers needed to present a show of force. Beginning with the establishment of the Singapore General Labor Union (SGLU) in late 1945, the MCP rapidly took command of the labor movement by establishing unions for all trades in Malaya, with MCP members as union leaders.¹⁰² The Pan-Malayan General Labor Union (PMGLU) was also formed at this time in Malaya, serving as a counterpart to the Singapore organization. Chin Peng agreed that by early 1946, all labor unions had become integral parts of the greater communist struggle towards establishing a Malayan socialist republic, leading the British to label all trade unions as leftist fronts.

Although a creation of the MCP, the PMGLU at first was not very successful as the various trade unions that were organizing strikes independently did not require their assistance or protection. Regardless, most unions still felt the guiding hand of the PMGLU which continued to direct and organize demonstrations and work stoppages for the next two years.¹⁰³ Armed with

¹⁰² There was another SGLU before the war that was not related to the new one established in 1945. The new SGLU was merely another front for the MCP. Stenson, *Industrial Conflict*, 62.

¹⁰³ As the most outspoken and militant organization, the PMGLU usually served as the lead in these strikes by actively encouraging mass participation by all trade unions. *Ibid.*, 64.

efficient organizational skills inherited from the MCP, the PMGLU was able to attract increasing numbers of supporters into its fold, eventually growing into a powerful financial machine that could bankroll both labor and communist campaigns. The PMGLU's prominence was attributed to its being the only organization with enough authoritative clout to improve worker conditions. At the same time, the PMGLU was able to enforce unity among its multi-ethnic members by including a variety of leaders from different ethnic backgrounds and ideologies within its organizational structure. No doubt, having MCP-appointed officers within the hierarchy helped to impose discipline, obedience, and unity of action. In the long run, this prevented desertion or contention among the members over matters concerning methods and objectives. In many ways, the MCP had inculcated a militant attitude into the PMGLU by making it somewhat akin to an army in organizational forms. This was hardly surprising given that most of the MCP officers were former MPAJA guerillas. By April 1947, the PMGLU had a total membership of 263,598 or approximately half of the total workforce of Malaya.¹⁰⁴

Labor strikes in Malaya did not occur purely due to communist agitation. Most of the protests and demonstrations were motivated by genuine economic distress; post-war Malaya was suffering from acute rice shortages in addition to shortages of many other basic foodstuffs. Moreover, wages had fallen to pre-war

¹⁰⁴ Michael Morgan explains that Malayan labor militancy took off at this point and the economy came to a near standstill. Each time the British tried to break the strikes, the workers retaliated with more strikes. The Malayan labor movement was at its height in 1947. Morgan, 170.

levels while the cost of living had increased fourfold, making whatever a worker earned inadequate to feed himself, let alone a family.¹⁰⁵ But the British were adamant that the labor unrest was political in nature and plotted from the shadows by the MCP. Convinced of this, in March 1947 the British decided to reinstate the Trade Union Ordinance of 1940, hoping to suppress the PMGLU's growing popularity by forcing all labor unions to register with the government.¹⁰⁶ The PMGLU responded by reorganizing itself into the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions (PMFTU) in August of the same year, thereby successfully skirting the law as the new entity was a 'federation' and not a 'union'. The Singapore branch used the same tactic in August 1946, thus making it legal as well. The British were correct in assuming that the PMGLU, and later the PMFTU, was one of several front organizations of the MCP.¹⁰⁷ But the PMFTU was the most important MCP front because it had finally gained the mass support needed for the MCP's united front strategy to deliver the dream of a Malayan Democratic Republic. The unprecedented success of the PMFTU encouraged the MCP to

¹⁰⁵ This fact is not addressed by Stenson or Hanrahan. They give too much credit to the MCP. *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁰⁶ The revival of the Trade Union Ordinance would eventually destroy the unions. Morgan explains in detail how the highly restrictive law effectively crippled most of the labor unions, empowering the employers in return. *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁰⁷ Both the PMGLU and the PMFTU had representations from the rubber plantations, the tin mines, the dockyards, the taxi services, and even the municipal offices. This encompasses most of the major Malayan ethnic groups except for a small minority of Malays. The Indians were predominantly working in the rubber plantations and the dockyards while the Chinese were concentrated in the tin mines and other assorted public services. Stenson, *Industrial Conflict*, 106.

believe that labor struggle alone would be sufficient to drive the British from Malaya.

By 1947, with mounting incidents of violence being reported weekly and the BMA hard pressed to respond, the British finally decided to combat the rising tide of labor unrest. Additionally, employers were tiring of the strikes and the compromises they had to make in order to keep their workers working. In late 1946, some were beginning to adopt a hardened attitude when dealing with striking workers and it was through the cooperation of these employers that the colonial government decided to launch a campaign of suppression on the workers. There were two major employers' unions at the time: the Singapore Association and the Malayan Association. These were front organizations formed to represent the interests of the mine and plantation owners, and they were actively encouraged by the government to firmly resist workers' demands and to institute stricter terms of employment for workers.¹⁰⁸ What happened next was striking workers now found themselves being confronted by a heavy-handed police who would not hesitate to use guns or brute force to break the strikes; this led to several violent deaths and mass arrests. Within months, these brutal police actions began to affect the workers; there were significant declines in the number of strikes. The standard pattern of crackdown would now see the police arriving in force to arrest and beat up any non-complying workers or PMFTU officials

¹⁰⁸ The employers' unions were formed by the European elites to seek closer cooperation with the government to combat labor unrest. They were very influential and had close ties with the British colonial authorities and security services. *Ibid.*, 155.

caught attempting to organize demonstrations or to protest. Meanwhile, employers took this opportunity to dismiss workers who participated in strikes as well as to reduce the wages of all workers by using the excuse that falling worldwide commodity prices necessitated the cuts. These concerted attacks on the trade unions effectively reduced the number of man-days lost due to labor unrest in 1947. By the end of the year, the labor movement had been forced on the defensive as their freedom to move about and organize was curtailed by the employers with explicit government encouragement and support from these. With a growing number of its members dismissed, injured, killed, or imprisoned, the PMFTU was now in danger of destruction as the reduced membership subscription would severely limit the trade union's ability to conduct propaganda work and organize demonstrations.¹⁰⁹ The trade union activists knew drastic measures were needed but they could not foresee the unmitigated disaster for Malaya's labor movement that soon occurred.

On January 31, 1948, the Malayan Union plan was shelved and replaced by the Federation of Malaya plan. This was the culmination of a series of secret discussions between the nine reigning Malay sultans, the British, and UMNO shortly after the colonial government discovered how passionately the Malays opposed the Malayan Union. The new plan called for the retention of the sultans as head of state with limited authority over religious and cultural affairs in addition to stringent citizenship prerequisites for non-Malay residents of Malaya.

¹⁰⁹ Employers no longer feared the PMFTU by 1948 as the trade unions were now emasculated by the new labor laws which prevented workers from joining or organizing unions under penalty of losing employment. *Ibid.*, 204.

This new plan was opposed by the MCP, which felt that the manner in which the Federation came into being was not only undemocratic but also biased towards the Malay elites only. Moreover, the fact that there were no consultations with other ethnic communities who had made Malaya their home for decades led the MCP to voice its opposition to the creation of this new semi-independent nation.¹¹⁰

Despite this unwelcome turn of events, the MCP was still following the moderate policies laid down by the deposed Lai Teck. This was because its members felt that the people of Malaya were still recovering from the horrors of the Japanese Occupation. To launch an armed rebellion so soon would not only cause them to lose the mass support they had been enjoying but, at the same time, also drive the already wary Malays to openly resist them. Additionally, the central committee had come to an understanding that even though these were policies put forth by a traitor, the arguments presented were not necessarily wrong.¹¹¹ The MCP had always hoped that one day they would join the government as a legitimate entity, with full rights and privileges to lead Malaya. With the Federation of Malaya's creation now an undeniable reality, the MCP was forced

¹¹⁰ The MCP central committee was angry that Britain had forced the Federation idea to the people by posing it as a constitutional solution to Malaya's crisis. Despite everything the MCP had done, the new Constitution delivered none of the demands it had been campaigning for since 1945. Chin Peng, 201.

¹¹¹ According to Chin Peng, the central committee tried to rationalize its legal struggle as outlined by Lai Teck even after he was exposed as a traitor. Lai Teck had presented a convincing argument before his escape and the MCP thought it was best to maintain the current policy until further notice. Chin and Hack, 118. See also Chin Peng, 193.

to review its policies and it came to the conclusion that perhaps the armed struggle route was the correct choice after all.

Most conventional historical narratives point to the Southeast Asian Youth Conference held in Calcutta on February 19, 1948 as the catalyst for the MCP's eventual insurrection. It was believed that during the conference agents from Moscow gave secret directives to the assembled Southeast Asian communist delegates on the methods and timing for a near-simultaneous uprising against colonial authorities. The alleged plan for Malaya was to have widespread labor unrest in the form of riots and vandalism in April followed by mass demonstrations on May 1 before a full blown rebellion in early June. The idea was to launch the revolt in various parts of the Federation and to establish a series of liberated areas that would eventually be extended to cover the entire peninsula. Once that was achieved, the MCP could declare the formation of the communist Republic of Malaya, which was set for August 31, 1948.¹¹² This so-called timetable is dubious; later evidence revealed that the Calcutta Youth Conference did not endorse or encourage armed violence as a means to achieve independence. In fact, in March 1948 the MCP central committee was in the middle of discussing new policies while the PMFTU was continuing its campaign of labor

¹¹² Stenson is convinced it was the Calcutta Youth Conference that encouraged the MCP into an armed revolt. Chin Peng, however, makes it clear that the conference argued against such a move; Laurence Sharkey, party secretary of the Australian Communist Party, informed Chin Peng and the central committee of the conference's decision while stopping over in Singapore on his way home. Purcell was convinced that such a plan existed. Stenson, *Repression and Revolt*, 4. See also Chin Peng, 202.

protests and demonstrations. The general attitude of the MCP at this time was quite pessimistic; labor strikes alone were not bringing the results it had hoped for. Continuing police suppression and a severe lack of funds to launch new strikes were pushing the MCP to a point of desperation. As a possible last resort, minimal efforts were now made to prepare for an armed struggle, as the British stepped up their attacks on protesters and a ban on the trade unions and the communists loomed.¹¹³

The colonial government's first salvo to curtail the unrest was the Trade Union Ordinance of May 31, 1948 which effectively made the PMFTU and other similar organizations illegal under Federation law. This was a hasty decision made in response to the mounting number of labor incidents in recent months as well as the proliferation of communist propaganda and anti-government activities. While there had been fears within the colonial government that the increasing number of violent strikes was part of a planned MCP coup, reports from the security service indicated that the communists, while still dangerous, were not an immediate threat to internal security in Malaya.¹¹⁴ Regardless, the banning of the trade unions was taken as a warning by the MCP, who knew that they were now

¹¹³ There was a feeling within the MCP central committee that eventually the British would crack down on the communists. In fact, Chin Peng estimated it would be a year or two before the British acted, leaving them ample time to prepare for a guerilla war. Chin Peng, 205.

¹¹⁴ It was John Dalley, former founder and commander of the ill-fated Dalforce and head of the Malayan Security Services after World War II, who wrote a report (MSS 988) two days before the Emergency began, on 14 June, 1948, claiming there was no immediate threat to internal security in Malaya. Short, 80.

in the government's crosshairs. However, despite neutralizing the trade unions, there were no reductions in the level of violent activities gripping Malaya. Political murders, usually targeting informers or anyone found to be working against the labor movement or the MCP, rose in June. The murder of three Kuomintang leaders in Johor on June 12 firmly convinced the British that the communists were escalating the conflict in retaliation for outlawing the trade unions. To the MCP, these murders were meant to be acts of intimidation only.¹¹⁵ Those being executed were usually non-Europeans considered enemies to the communist cause or strikebreakers who used thugs and gangsters to harass protestors. But the event that finally forced the British to take drastic action was the murder of three European plantation managers in Sungai Siput on June 16, 1948, causing a State of Emergency to be declared in several areas in Perak on the same day and its extension to the entire state the next day. By June 18, the whole of Malaya was under martial law. Surviving members of the MCP such as Abdullah C.D. later testified that the murders had triggered an unexpected rapid response from the colonial government, which meant, coupled with the general unpreparedness of the MCP for a protracted guerilla war, that once again the communists were forced to go underground prematurely.

It was obvious that the MCP had lost the initiative when the Emergency was declared. Debates over the Emergency's origins have often pointed to the murders of June 16, 1948 as the root cause of the twelve-year-long civil war but

¹¹⁵ Chin Peng was not aware of the murders at the time; although he approved of the killing of the plantation owner which he claimed to have been harsh and cruel to the workers. Chin Peng, 215.

new revelations show that the truth was far more complicated. The murders were merely the final catalyst for a long-brewing crisis that had been going on since the trade unions began agitating in 1945. As early as May 21, 1948, colonial government officials had been discussing ways to counter the rising wave of violence that was being instigated by the MCP. Prior to the Sungai Siput murders, a Printing Presses Bill was already presented before the Federation Legislative Council on June 12 and a Sedition Bill as well as an Emergency Regulations Bill were also being debated as precautionary measures. Once it became clear that the situation in Malaya was rapidly spiraling out of control, the decision was made to declare a State of Emergency.¹¹⁶ The MCP responded to martial law by mobilizing its former MPAJA members. Since late May and early June the communists had been secretly setting up platoons in several states in preparation for an expected British crackdown in September. The Emergency's sudden declaration in June, however, forced the MCP to accelerate its plan and it called out to comrades and volunteers to join them in the struggle. Not many answered the call to arms but by the end of 1948 there were approximately 3,000 guerillas in the jungles once more.

¹¹⁶ Anthony Short feels that this was more of a panic reaction than a carefully considered move. According to him, the government had been powerless to deal with the unrest plaguing Malaya since 1945. Now that Europeans were being targeted, the government had to respond by enacting more laws and by declaring martial law. Purcell, on the other hand, says that the Emergency was declared in response to the increasing incidents of violence and lawlessness. Short, 75. See also Purcell, *Malaya*, 61.

Birth of the Malayan National Liberation Army.

On July 17, 1948, more than a month after the Emergency was in effect, the police raided MCP offices in Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Singapore, and other major cities. This was followed with mass arrests of any suspected communists and anti-government individuals on July 21. Two days later, on July 23, the MCP and its associated organizations were declared illegal by the colonial government. By then, significant numbers of the MCP and former trade union members had reached the safety of the jungles and had linked up with the guerillas hiding in the bases there. The new guerilla army, now known as the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA), spent the first year of the Emergency consolidating and rearming. Hidden arms caches in every state, prepared since World War II, were dug up and each state's regional commanders were tasked with organizing their local unit individually, as they were unable to establish the MNLA's command structure before the Emergency began. The original plan had called for a central committee meeting in August to decide all matters pertaining to the insurrection. But with the situation progressing too rapidly, the communists were forced to disperse in the jungles and to proceed without a working central leadership for the time being.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ The MCP was in a state of confusion following its hasty retreat into the jungles. Attacks were being carried out without Chin Peng's approval or knowledge and there was no coordination between the units. Guerilla casualties were high in return for little to no strategic gains in those early months. Chin Peng, 226.

Within weeks, the MNLA had mobilized sufficient men for military operations and they began by launching attacks into outlying areas. The most successful example was the raid on the Batu Arang coal mine, which the guerillas held for two weeks before retreating. In the wake of this event, the British proclaimed that the MCP now held the early advantage as the guerillas had proven that they could strike anywhere and at anytime without warning. But in reality, these sporadic attacks were uncoordinated affairs conducted by local commanders who picked targets at random with the sole objective of causing as much damage as possible.¹¹⁸

As the MCP Party Secretary, Chin Peng was desperate to assert control over the MNLA, which had been operating independently since June. It was not until August that some form of central authority was finally set up in Cameron Highlands with Chin Peng ordering the guerillas to adopt Mao Zedong's strategy of establishing liberated zones as they drove the British from an area.¹¹⁹ Except for a brief five-day interlude in mid-July in which the small town of Gua Musang on the east coast state of Kelantan was liberated from government control, the MNLA was never able to duplicate the People's Liberation Army's success in China. British forces continued to hound the guerillas, who were often forced to

¹¹⁸ The attack occurred on 13 July, 1948 in which approximately eighty guerillas were said to have participated in the operation. Several pieces of mining equipment were damaged by the guerillas before retreating two weeks later. As a result, the British were concerned that similar attacks on other vital economic centers were forthcoming. Short, 99.

¹¹⁹ The MCP had been admirers of Mao and his tactics. The strategy they chose to adopt came from Mao's *On Protracted War*. Chin Peng, 230.

relocate deeper into the jungles and disperse their forces into smaller units. This was done due to difficulties in resupply and the dangers of maintaining a large force where the chances of discovery and annihilation by British patrols were high. Furthermore, the civilian support network, the Min Yuen, was not properly established when the Emergency began. Unlike during the Japanese Occupation, there were no large numbers of volunteers in the towns and villages eager and ready to provide material assistance and intelligence for the guerillas.¹²⁰ Whatever help they could obtain was through friends, family, sympathizers, or at gunpoint. It was the last approach that angered and drove many would-be supporters from the MCP's cause. Chin Peng made no apologies for that as it was war. Nevertheless, the MNLA's prime objective was still setting up liberated areas in the northern and southern regions of the peninsula. Once that had been achieved, the final goal would be the establishment of the People's Democratic Republic of Malaya.

Labeled as bandits, then later as Communist Terrorists or CTs, the MNLA's public image suffered greatly under the British propaganda machine. Common sense would state that standard operating procedure for belligerents would be to launch smear campaigns. But in the MCP's case, the British were actually trying very hard to justify their continuing presence in the Malay

¹²⁰ Short did not explain the cause for the Min Yuen's low recruitment except to cite the success of the government in counter-guerilla operations. Chin Peng admits they had wrongly assumed that the people would be willing to offer their support as they had in World War II. When that did not happen, they resorted to forceful measures to obtain what they need. Short, 213. See also, Chin Peng, 273.

Peninsula. There were two reasons for them to vilify their former Communist allies. The first was the fact that the MCP's contribution to the Allied war effort and its rise to prominence after World War II had become an embarrassment to London. The second, which was the most important reason, was that Britain desperately needed Malaya's extremely profitable rubber exports to bail out their bankrupt economy. It was therefore in the best interests of the British to project an impression to the Malayan public and to the world that the insurrection currently occurring in Malaya was part of a greater communist conspiracy directed from Moscow.¹²¹ Old suspicions and assumptions that the MCP had clandestine support from either the CCP or the Soviet Union had, over time, become an accepted fact. Post-Cold War materials have finally overturned the convenient lie the British promoted more than half a century ago, revealing not only that the MCP had not sought external support but also that no agents from either China or Russia had even made contact with them. The only 'support' Chin Peng remembers obtaining was the encouraging news that Mao's guerillas had defeated Chiang Kai-shek's well-equipped and numerically superior KMT army in 1949.

From 1950 onwards, the MCP central committee decided to order the MNLA to seek out targets of opportunity throughout the peninsula in a campaign

¹²¹ Two months before the 1954 Geneva Conference, Malcolm MacDonald, the Commissioner General of Malaya, sent a memo to the Foreign Office in London advising that Britain must maintain the lie that the communist insurrection in Malaya was due to a foreign conspiracy rather than a genuine nationalist movement. Neither Hanrahan nor Purcell mentions this, but their arguments would validate the attitude adopted by the British government after the dispatch of this memo. Chin Peng, 356.

to sow as much destruction as possible. This strategy apparently worked as it caused the British to reinforce its ground forces by transferring several regiments from overseas. But the most important achievement for the MNLA was the creation of an all-Malay unit known as the 10th Regiment. This was crucial to the MCP's final goals since until the second year of the Emergency, the guerillas were primarily made up of Chinese fighters with a small number of Indians. To truly become a Malayan struggle, Malays had to be recruited into the MNLA. It was to Abdullah C.D. that the MCP turned for training and indoctrination of the new recruits. The project was marginally successful as only a handful of Malays were dedicated to the MCP cause. To them, driving the British out of Malaya was their objective, not embracing communism. By joining the MNLA, the Malays of the 10th Regiment hoped to continue the anti-British resistance their forefathers started more than a century ago.¹²²

In that same year, Lt. General Sir Harold Briggs, former commander-in-chief of Burma Command, arrived in Malaya to take charge of the anti-communist campaign as director of operations. A two-war veteran with an impressive service record, Briggs was the first true adversary of the MNLA. After analyzing the situation in Malaya, the new military commander of the British Army in Malaya introduced a series of strategies that later became known as 'The Briggs Plan.' The basic outline of his plan was threefold: first, intelligence gathering from both the military and the police was to be unified and streamlined;

¹²² Aside from Rashid Maidin, Abdullah C.D. was one of the rare but hardcore Malay Communists. His 10th Regiment was the only all-Malay guerilla unit. *Ibid.*, 264. See also Abdullah, 10.

second, the Min Yuen support network must be crushed, especially in the squatter areas; third, drastic measures must be taken to cut off the MNLA's food supplies. The physical manifestation of this plan was the creation of 'New Villages' which were designed to resettle squatters who lived at the jungle's edge. Briggs' plan had a devastating effect on the guerillas as they had been relying on the Min Yuen network hidden within the rural squatter community for food. By forcibly moving the villagers into concentration camps, the guerillas' supply lines were effectively cut off.¹²³ To stay alive, the MNLA turned to hunting wild animals and scavenging for edible greens in the deep jungles.

To preserve their fighting strength, the MNLA broke down their forces into small units and dispersed them into wider areas. But it was clear by 1951 that the strategy adopted at the beginning of the insurrection was not working. A review was conducted between August and September of the same year, and on October 1 a new resolution was announced by the central committee; it ordered the guerillas to cease sabotage and terror operations and to develop closer ties with the middle-class. Chin Peng would later admit, in an interview in 1999, that

¹²³ The Briggs Plan was very successful and it was the key strategy that decimated the guerillas. Short speaks in detail about the implementation of the plan which began to produce results as early as late 1951. Chin Peng would concur with Short's assessment as he nearly starved on several occasions during those twelve years. Short, 237. See also Chin Peng, 395.

this directive was a mistake as it allowed the British to press their attacks on the MNLA, whom they correctly assessed to be quite demoralized by then.¹²⁴

Ironically, the most significant victory the guerillas scored in the Emergency was the unexpected killing of Sir Henry Gurney, the British High Commissioner in Malaya, on October 5, 1951. The incident occurred when an MNLA platoon was laying an ambush for what they assumed to be a military convoy. Their objective was to capture weapons from the neutralized soldiers when they happened to discover a limousine following behind the jeep they were attacking. In the ensuing firefight, Gurney was killed and the guerillas were driven off by British reinforcements. The guerillas had no inkling who it was they had shot to death in the ambush and it was not until the next day that the MCP found out it was Gurney.¹²⁵ The revelation brought no small measure of delight to the communists who until that moment were desperately looking for some major success to justify their continuing struggle. The British, naturally, exploited Gurney's death by portraying the former High Commissioner as a victim of an intricate MCP assassination plot. The theory never gained traction, however, but the incident itself did throw London and Kuala Lumpur into disarray. The MCP central committee did not capitalize on this unanticipated boon by issuing propaganda announcements. Instead, the communists restrained themselves by

¹²⁴ Chin Peng explains that it was the MCP's inability to stop the resettlement of the squatters that led to the change in policy. Chin and Hack, 160.

¹²⁵ Gurney was ambushed while travelling to his hill station retreat in Fraser's Hill with his wife. He never anticipated the guerillas appearing in the area and had brought relatively few armed guards with him. Ibid., 157.

remaining tight-lipped over it and used the temporary reprieve to plan their next move in the war.¹²⁶

Four months later, London appointed Lt. General Sir Gerald Templer as the new high commissioner and director of operations in Malaya. Sir Harold Briggs passed away shortly after Templer's appointment and it was now up to the new commander of British forces in Malaya to continue the counter-insurgency work Briggs had begun. A completely different breed of leader compared to his predecessors, Templer was a hardened military man who did not shy away from brutal tactics to achieve his objectives. Interrogations, food rationing, large monetary rewards for captured or killed communists coupled with intense military operations: this became the new general's trademark.¹²⁷

Although weakened by the Min Yuen's neutralization due to the 'New Villages,' the MNLA nevertheless continued to launch random attacks to keep the British forces confused and off balance. In response, Templer stepped up his methods by imposing 22-hour curfews and cutting rice rations to towns and villages suspected of cooperating with the guerillas. Furthermore, he hoped to entice the communists into betraying each other by increasing the reward amount

¹²⁶ The death of Henry Gurney was purely an accident. However, the MCP chose not to exploit this information as they felt it was only a temporary victory. Chin Peng, 294.

¹²⁷ Templer's strategy involved mobilizing large number of troops to hound the guerillas while the Special Branch was deployed to the towns and villages to arrest as many known communist sympathizers as possible before interrogating them for information. Short, 365. See also Chin Peng, 299.

for the capture of important leaders such as Chin Peng. It didn't work, however, as the MCP were deeply committed to their cause. Templer was aware that the only way he could defeat the slippery communist guerillas was by getting the public on his side. Under his administration, the colonial propaganda machine worked tirelessly to misinform the public of the MCP's anti-colonial agenda as well as to deliberately cultivate a climate of fear and uncertainty to justify their increasingly brutal methods of suppression. The Malayan public was convinced the guerillas could strike anywhere and at anytime with impunity. But the truth was, the MNLA had been spending more time avoiding British patrols than launching large-scale attacks.¹²⁸

Forced to be regularly on the move due to constant British air and ground harassment, the guerillas relocated their headquarters to southern Thailand by 1953. The location they finally arrived at was a remote region known as Betong which was surrounded by dense jungle on all sides. Shielded from air reconnaissance by thick foliage and with no fear of British pursuit due to the territory belonging to Thailand, the guerillas were finally able to set up a permanent home base, an objective that had eluded them since the beginning of the Emergency. It was here that the MCP began to reestablish its courier networks to contact its scattered units and to review its war strategy. Since 1948, the MNLA had been hampered with poor or non-existent communications between

¹²⁸ Despite Templer's 'Battle for the Mind' strategy, there were harsh repercussions if people failed to cooperate with government. The propaganda campaign used pamphlets and strategic leaflets to spread the government's message. It failed to incite the guerillas into surrendering. Short, 421.

the guerilla regiments and headquarters. Although preparations to obtain modern radio equipment through the black market and to distribute it to the hidden guerilla regiments had been underway before the Emergency's declaration, the tightening of security following the Sungai Siput murders inadvertently caused the shipments to be indefinitely delayed.¹²⁹ Courier networks, despite being extremely slow and prone to discovery by the British, were the only alternative. It was these long delays in communication that forced the MCP to allow regional commanders to act independently, often without direct instructions from the central committee for months.¹³⁰ British assertions that MNLAs attacks throughout the peninsula were part of a coordinated strategy were therefore unfounded and untrue. All offensive operations launched by the guerillas were purely to sow as much chaos and confusion as possible on the British forces in the hopes that the colonials would eventually give up and leave Malaya.

The war entered a state of semi-stalemate by the end of 1953 and early 1954 as both the MNLAs and the British were unable decisively to defeat one another. The guerillas, suffering from shortages of supplies and continuous military setbacks, were reduced to launching hit-and-run raids on isolated

¹²⁹ The radio equipment was in a Singapore warehouse awaiting collection when the Emergency began. Without it, the guerillas were at a disadvantage throughout the war. Chin Peng, 278.

¹³⁰ The communications issue plagued the MNLAs since the beginning of the insurrection. The courier system was not only prone to government interception but was also time consuming. Orders took months to reach their intended recipients which by then would have been too late to carry out. Chin and Hack, 148.

outposts and small army patrols, as they now had lost the initiative when the liberated zones strategy failed. They knew the British were trying to goad the guerillas into an open battle where the numerical and technological superiority of the British army could be employed to eradicate them. Unwilling to either surrender or give up their ideals despite the staggering odds, the MCP members were determined to harass the British until a new opportunity presented itself.

As it happened, a new direction was suddenly announced by the ‘MCP’ in early 1954, to abandon the establishment of the People’s Democratic Republic of Malaya in favor of joining with other Malayan political parties in a legal fight for independence. In reality, the announcement came from Siao Chang, a top MCP leader who had been sent to Beijing in late 1952 to deepen his Marxist-Leninist education while also serving as liaison to the CCP.¹³¹ The abrupt change in strategy was neither approved nor endorsed by Chin Peng and the central committee, who had no knowledge of the announcement until months after they had settled in southern Thailand. It turns out, during the long months when the MCP headquarters was relocating to Betong, the British were successful in smashing the party’s fragile courier network, causing the communist leadership to be completely out of touch with the outside world. The Malayan comrades in Beijing, acting on standing orders issued by Chin Peng in case the central committee was wiped out, took charge of the MCP after assuming the worst had occurred when they lost contact with the MNLA. Therefore, after some

¹³¹ Siao Chang was described by Chin Peng as the MCP’s ‘insurance policy’ in the event the central committee was eliminated. Chin Peng, 351.

consultations with Moscow and CCP officials, they decided to utilize negotiations to end the war. The wording of the announcement implied that the MCP was prepared to sue for peace provided the State of Emergency was lifted and the Emergency regulations were repealed. Chin Peng and the central committee decided to go along with the new direction despite having no input in its creation. However, they were also very wary of the British who might not be sincere in entering negotiations. More importantly, the Beijing announcement revealed to the MCP that both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China had viewed the armed struggle in Malaya as untenable. This bitter reality was a tough pill to swallow but the Malayan communists knew it was something they had to accept eventually in light of the circumstances.¹³²

The Baling Conference of 1955.

While the MCP leaders contemplated their future, Malaya was undergoing a political awakening that was threatening British control over the peninsula. Malays under the leadership of UMNO's president, Tunku Abdul Rahman, had been agitating for a general election that would fill a majority of the Federal Council's seats. The Chinese, under MCA's Tan Cheng Lock, was also in support of an election that would grant more autonomy to Malaya. Originally, Tunku's platform had been the creation of a purely Malay nation through constitutional elections. But after realizing that the British would never consent to an ethnic-

¹³² Although the peace overture was made without Chin Peng's permission, it unwittingly provided an opportunity for both sides to try and end the war. Chin Peng, 351.

driven political framework, Tunku sought an alliance with the MCA. Tan readily agreed. In its first test, the UMNO-MCA alliance won a landslide victory in the 1952 Kuala Lumpur Municipal Council elections. Armed with this newfound confidence, the newly christened Alliance Party was confident that they could now finally stand up to the British in demanding more political concessions with an eye towards independence. After several rounds of negotiations, the British finally consented to an election on July 27, 1955. The Alliance then announced that if it won the election, independence would be achieved within four years. At this point, it appeared that the Malay politicians had achieved more for the independence movement within the last few years than the MNLA had since 1948. With the armed-struggle path now an impossibility given the drastically altered political situation, the MCP felt that the only option left was to seek a peaceful settlement with the future ruling power of Malaya, in order to allow the communists to leave the jungles and rejoin society. The plan was to rebuild the MCP as a legal organization and then participate in Malaya's constitutional system while gradually pushing the nation towards socialism.¹³³ Since UMNO was the popular choice on the road towards independence, the MCP therefore decided to throw its support behind Tunku.

¹³³ This was the ideal scenario the MCP was hoping for when they decided to support Tunku's political bid. The mood within the central committee was positive and although none of them would admit that the insurrection had failed by 1954, there was hope that the communist movement would continue in some form other than armed struggle. Chin Peng insisted it was merely a temporary setback. Chin and Hack, 164.

As leader of the UMNO-MCA alliance, Tunku Abdul Rahman was aware that the British would never grant Malaya its independence as long as the communist guerillas continued to present a clear and present threat. With the Federation Council election looming on the horizon, Tunku decided that by offering amnesty to the guerillas, a peaceful end to the insurgency could be obtained, thus paving the way to eventually dissolve the State of Emergency. Responding to the amnesty, the MCP sent a counter-proposal offering to discuss terms to end the war, rather than surrendering outright. The communists knew the war had entered a stalemate with the British unable to stamp out the insurrection. Yet, by the same token, the MNLA had also failed to defeat the British in combat and to liberate any region in Malaya. By emphasizing this reality, the MCP leaders hoped to pressure Tunku into accepting their overture for peace. Needless to say, the colonial government flatly rejected this offer, claiming that the communists were suing for peace now because they were losing the war. Following the Alliance's victory in the election, Tunku announced publicly that he would enter negotiations with the MCP, specifically with Chin Peng himself. Preliminary talks were then conducted between representatives of Chin Peng and Tunku with inconclusive results. However, it was finally agreed that a face-to-face meeting between the two leaders would be held in the small northern town of Baling on December 28, 1955.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ The British were against any preliminary talks initially because they were worried Tunku might reach an agreement with the MCP without their knowledge. However, Tunku was actually hoping to end the war by negotiating directly with Chin Peng without British interference. This unfortunately confirmed British

On that historic day, Chin Peng and his party arrived at the town of Baling with the hopes of negotiating a way to have the MCP recognized as a legal entity once more, or at the very least to allow the leaders and members of the MNLA to regain their freedom of movement and not face any legal persecution or imprisonment. Unfortunately, the peace talks began with Tunku insisting that the surrender of the MCP was the only viable means to peace. Nevertheless, Chin Peng still went ahead and asked for the legal recognition of the MCP, which was unsurprisingly flatly rejected by Tunku and his delegates. Throughout the talks, the new Chief Minister of Malaya insisted upon the total surrender of the Communists and that the MCP be dissolved. Tunku promised that those who surrendered would undergo a period of rehabilitation before being allowed to become free citizens again. Chin Peng regarded the amnesty offer carefully before reiterating the demand for Malaya's political freedom and the right of communists to openly profess their ideology. He further argued that the people should have the right to decide which political path the nation should take rather than having that choice be decided by a select few in the government. It was Chin Peng and the MCP's stance that freedom of thought and choice must be recognized by the Malayan government if the new nation was to survive past its independence. Tunku made no firm response to this demand. The only concession the MCP delegates gained from him was the freedom to join any existing political party after being cleared by the authorities.

fears. Regardless, Tunku's insistence on conducting exploratory talks with MCP representatives was eventually allowed, albeit with British supervision. *Ibid.*, 173.

On the second day of the talks, Chin Peng decided to offer a compromise to the Malayan government. Speaking on behalf of the MCP and the MNLA, he offered to throw down their arms if Malaya gained self-determination in internal security and national defense. After all, Chin Peng added, the purpose of the MNLA was national liberation and once the British left Malaya, the army's reason to exist would be gone as well. Tunku seized upon this opportunity and assured Chin Peng that his upcoming trip to London would allow him to achieve those exact goals. Regrettably, when translating the term 'throwing down their arms,' Chin Peng insisted this meant not surrendering their weapons but rather setting them aside for future disposal. Tunku immediately rejected this condition as he feared a repeat of China's takeover by the communists. The talks were collapsing just as a hope for resolution emerged. Tunku now refused to compromise on his position and returned to his previous day's demand that the MCP surrender immediately because their ideologies were too incompatible. Chin Peng rejected this and the peace talks ended with the status quo preserved.¹³⁵

History will remember Tunku Abdul Rahman's triumphant return from the London negotiations in February 1956 with the proclamation that August 31, 1957 would be Malaya's Independence Day. Having failed to stop the war on favorable terms, the MCP now decided to place its hopes on a second meeting

¹³⁵ The Baling Talks were both a success and failure for Tunku. Despite failing to end the war, Tunku had shown to the British that he was a strong leader who was tough on communism. His performance had impressed the Colonial Office enough to grant Malaya independence. For the MCP, it was a very demoralizing affair which nearly collapsed the already ailing struggle. *Ibid.*, 177.

that Tunku had promised prior to the Baling talks. In the meantime, the insurgency continued as before. Unexpectedly, Tunku refused to resume the peace talks upon his return from London and reaffirmed his ultimatum of unconditional surrender. The MCP refused, despite facing increasing isolation from the Min Yuen and from the rest of the scattered guerilla units. The MCP then made a decision to refrain from denouncing Tunku for betraying its hopes for a peaceful end to the war. After independence, several more attempts at urging the government to enter peace talks were rejected by Tunku, who now chose to adopt a hard-line attitude.¹³⁶

In the jungles, the guerillas were increasingly demoralized as the stress of a seven-year-long war with no end in sight began to take its toll on their mental wellbeing. In a short time, mounting casualties due to combat in addition to the lack of a stable food supply pushed several of the guerillas to surrender, further crippling the MNLA. A minor, but unexpected, domino effect then took shape with an increasing number of guerillas turning themselves in to the government in return for financial rewards and pardons. Strangely, this occurred despite the regiments having little or no contact with one another, making the phenomena purely coincidental. Without a doubt, the increasingly desperate situation of the scattered guerillas provided an opportunity for persuasion. Substantial sums of

¹³⁶ According to Chin Peng, Tunku came to the Baling talks knowing that the negotiations would fail. What the Malay leader had hoped to achieve was some kind of compromise in case the London meetings failed. Once he secured Malaya's independence, Tunku had no reason to negotiate further with the communists as they were now unnecessary to his objectives. Chin Peng, 395.

cash and the opportunity to start a new life were tempting offers to a bunch of starving, tired men whose faith in the insurrection was beginning to waver. Those who surrendered were sometimes given special training before being returned to the jungles to encourage further desertions, to assassinate local communist leaders, or to betray their fellow comrades to the security forces. By late 1958, the MNLA had lost so much of its strength through casualties and surrenders; the southern half of the peninsula was now devoid of guerillas, leaving the forces in the northern states as the remaining active fighting force. From an approximately 3000-strong army when they first raised arms in mid-1948, the MNLA now totaled no more than 350 men.¹³⁷

With the prospect of continuing the armed struggle now gloomier than ever, the central committee decided after a lengthy meeting in 1959 that it was time to switch back to underground political work as the only option left. The plan was to have the guerillas rejoin society while continuing to promote their communist ideals until such a time when they could once again rise up in revolt. As part of the demobilization process, top MCP cadres such as Chin Peng, Chen Tien, and Lee An Tung moved to Beijing in 1961 in order to keep them safe and to seek political advice and guidance from the more experienced CCP. To Chin Peng and his comrades' dismay, Deng Xiao Ping, the secretary general of the CCP at the time, insisted that the MCP continue the armed struggle as he felt the

¹³⁷ This was the weakest period for the guerillas. Short has made an accurate analysis of the MNLA's condition by stating that there were only about six hundred guerillas left when the State of Emergency was lifted. This is corroborated by Chin Peng's testimony. Short, 493. See also Chin Peng, 403.

time was ripe for revolutions to take place in Southeast Asia. Deng was motivated by the developments in Vietnam where Ho Chi Minh's forces are preparing to reunite the divided nation by force. He believed that such a monumental event would serve as a good example for other Southeast Asian communist movements to emulate and follow. To that end, Deng even promised financial support to the MCP provided they take up arms once again.¹³⁸ After serious deliberations with other MCP leaders in Beijing, Chin Peng reluctantly decided to acquiesce to Deng's suggestion. This was also the first time that the MCP had accepted foreign assistance in its struggle and it was with this financial backing that the second armed struggle in Malaya would be launched in 1968. Meanwhile, back in Malaya, the Malayan government had declared the Emergency over on July 31, 1960 once they are confident the MNLA had ceased to be a credible threat with the surviving guerillas retreating to their sanctuary in southern Thailand. The MCP may have lost the war, but they had not yet given up their ideals.

End of the Emergency.

Cold War narratives often equate the end of the Emergency as the end of the communist insurgency in general. As we have seen, the gradual decline and eventual winding down of the insurrection against the British had begun since the early 1950s. Unable to secure their initial objectives of establishing liberated zones since taking up arms in 1948, the MNLA quickly lost the initiative and

¹³⁸ Deng's offer was to remain a secret as the CCP did not wish to let it be known that they had been actively supporting Southeast Asia's communist movements. The so-called Second Emergency would begin in 1970 with little to no success despite being provided with US\$100,000 in financial support. Chin Peng, 329.

remained on the defensive ever since. With near limitless personnel and greater degrees of firepower, the British had held the unfair advantage since the shooting war began. In a war of attrition, the smaller and under-equipped guerilla army was unable to sustain the kind of casualty rate that the British were able to absorb while still continuing to prosecute the war. Therefore, the MCP central committee's decision to switch to clandestine operations for the immediate future was born out of a mixture of quiet desperation and an acceptance that the tide had turned against them. Although the guerillas would eventually revitalize and rebuild from the safety of their bases in the Malaya-Thai borderlands before resuming their armed confrontation against the government, they would never again achieve the kind of success and notoriety that made them headline news in Malaya for more than a decade. The insurgency would continue intermittently with no significant progress until 1989 when, once again, after suffering staggering losses at the hands of security forces, the MCP finally signed a peace treaty with the Malaysian government, ending once and for all the long and turbulent armed struggle of the Malayan Communist Party.

V. Conclusion.

Post-Emergency publications have long emphasized that the Malayan Communist Party was never truly a nationalist organization by virtue of its anti-capitalist philosophy and the unwarranted assertion that it was a puppet organization with its strings stretching all the way to Moscow and Beijing. The British were especially eager to tie the communist rebellion in Malaya to the greater international conflict known as the Cold War, as it would reflect negatively upon their image if it were known that their opponents were simply patriotic local revolutionaries who happened to embrace Marxism as their ideology. As rebels fighting against a powerful and highly experienced colonial empire, the MCP and its nationalist messages were easily drowned out and distorted by the extremely competent British propaganda juggernaut. By removing the Cold War paranoia that has influenced most of the writing about the rise of Malaya's communist movement, a wholly unexpected and uncomfortable truth is revealed, forcing modern day researchers to scrutinize all the so-called authoritative accounts from that period for evidence of intentional bias or faulty intelligence. Certainly, this is not to dispute the credibility of previously established literature, nor is this an attempt to redress past injustices inflicted upon the MCP. Rather, we must be aware that the facts and truths surrounding the history of the Malayan communists are still clouded in deliberate obfuscation and censorship, as certain details and events may prove embarrassing or politically inconvenient to those in power today.

The standard definition for nationalist refers to someone who loves his or her country or is a member of a political group advocating or fighting for national independence. By this definition, the MCP was most certainly a nationalist organization; their manifestoes and armed struggles demonstrated repeatedly the loyalty of its members to Malaya and their desire for the nation to be free from British rule. Detractors of the MCP often equate nationalism with aspects such as capitalism, liberalism, and democracy and reject the MCP because its ideology ran against bourgeois ideals of wealth accumulation and property-owning. Unlike other political groups, the Malayan communists believed that the people should be the ones deciding the nation's path and that the working class especially should be given the right to do this because they were the majority and also the ones who actually labored on behalf of their homeland. Mass organizations such as trade unions were to be a platform for the proletariat to be heard as well as to negotiate for better working conditions from the government. Their intense popularity threatened the plantation and the mine owners' profits as they now had to pay more to keep their previously 'meek and docile' workers from striking. The British naturally sided with the employers as these were the people who kept money flowing back to Britain. The MCP was determined to stop this exploitation and it was this, rather than their methods, that courted British reprisals. The murders and riots instigated by the communists were aggressive protests against British policies and actions amid a volatile power struggle. When the Malayan Union plan was unveiled, the MCP members were not interested as they knew it was still colonialism under a new packaging. It was also commonly assumed that

the MCP did not have Malaya's interest at heart when they began their revolution because the leadership was closely following a doctrine that was being dispatched from the Soviet Union or China. This argument is fundamentally flawed because, if this had been the case, the MCP would have received a constant flow of advisors, recruits, and material support from either communist nation during those long years of war. The fact that the guerillas could not replenish their ranks and not field any heavy weapons during the insurgency proves they were alone throughout the struggle. Moreover, Chin Peng's own testimonial stresses that the Malayan Communist Party never took any orders from anyone throughout the Emergency.

As a political organization that was born from the ashes of the pro-CCP Nanyang Communist Party, the MCP has often been accused of focusing on improving the lot of fellow Malayan Chinese only, while neglecting the needs of other ethnic communities. While this was not true despite its membership being overwhelmingly Chinese, the British nevertheless exploited this weakness effectively by fanning xenophobic elements among the Malays with propaganda designed to incite fear and hatred towards the Chinese community. British motivations to provoke ethnic unrest between the Malays and Chinese were two-fold. First, this was a classic British 'divide and rule' strategy. By propagating the impression that the MCP was an extension of international communism, especially from China, the British was creating a rift between the two major ethnic groups in Malaya. The wave of misunderstandings and suspicion that erupted from this precluded any hopes of inter-ethnic cooperation between the

two communities, hence preventing the local population from uniting against them. Second, the British acknowledged the valid threat of the MCP's anti-colonial message as well as its call for equality among the Malayan people. Colonial rule was inherently racist in nature with the white colonizers occupying the top of the social hierarchy followed by their collaborators and finally the common people at the bottom. Therefore, defeating the MCP by turning the Malays against them guaranteed longer British dominance over the peninsula, at least for the immediate future.

Never once did the MCP issue or promote any ethnic-based policy designed to benefit certain communities, nor did it seek to create a second People's Republic of China within Malaya. Ever since its founding in 1930, the MCP was vehemently anti-British in its rhetoric and manifestoes. But to promote leftist ideals in a plural society such as Malaya proved to be more arduous than the Malayan communists ever suspected as the colonial authorities cunningly twisted the radical messages they were promoting to the Malays, who responded by siding with the British. Malay religion, traditions, and customs were respected and accepted by the communists who had never touted atheism as part of their ideology nor did they ever seek to denounce any form of religion or worship. Malay radicals who joined the MCP did not abandon Islam nor were they ever asked to do so, as it did not interfere with their revolutionary work. Members of other faiths were also given the same freedom and few ever gave up their beliefs. The Party's only blunder was its lack of strong Malay representation within the

organization's top echelons and membership-a regrettable situation that occurred due to circumstances out of its control and definitely not by design.

No doubt, the standardized account of the Malayan communist movement has been the work of an elaborate and longstanding British government policy of vilifying the enemy. Specific instructions were laid out by the Colonial Office to prevent the MCP from being dignified in any way in official publications or pronouncements. As such, this policy caused as much damage as the sabotage by a deep cover agent planted in the heart of the MCP. While Lai Teck's infamous betrayal was undoubtedly dramatic in scope and breadth, the traitor's contribution was not the most crippling blow. That honor went to the manipulation of popular opinion through the press and the Briggs Plan. The former reduced the anti-colonial insurgents into a murderous, merciless band of terrorists while the latter literally starved some of the rebels into submission. What cannons, bombs, and aircraft failed to achieve in those twelve years was accomplished by an insidious, non-military method. In other words, communism's failure to take root in Malaya was due to a combination of poor timing in launching the insurgency, ineffective strategy by the central committee, and the overwhelming technical superiority of the British on and off the battlefield. Another way to look at the history of Malayan communism is to understand that the movement was handicapped from the beginning in the face of a very diligent and incorruptible colonial security apparatus. Not only could British agents infiltrate the rebel organization at will but they were also able to derail crucial policies of the movement for almost two decades. In spite of this, we should remember and acknowledge the MCP for what

it was trying to accomplish rather than recalling the atrocities that were committed by them. Sadly, the same pattern of censorship and information control still applies in modern Malaysia.

Even so, after more than two decades of peace, the Malayan communist insurgency is still widely assumed to have been part of an elaborate Cold War conspiracy. The image of two world superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, engaged in a clandestine 'chess game' where nations such as Vietnam, Korea, and Malaya were mere pawns on the road to world domination permeated the popular imagination. It did not help when the media inadvertently assumed that the war in Malaya as somehow related to the wars in Korea and Vietnam. Certainly, the belligerents in all three areas were communist-led movements versus the so-called democratic forces and it was tempting to draw a blanket conclusion to show all three wars as connecting chapters in a larger shadowy war. This theory was subscribed to by many, both within and outside academia, as it was the most 'plausible' explanation at the time. But with the declassification of Cold War materials plus the testimonials of former communist rebels, once hidden truths are now being discovered. For Malaya, the MCP's saga stands out because it was not an international conflict involving foreign powers (aside from the British Commonwealth) and the fact that it was not inspired by the Chinese Civil War, which was at its height when the Emergency began. The unpopular truth regarding the history of communism in Malaya remains a theory subject to challenge. Regardless, such challenges cannot invalidate the facts.

The history of modern Malaya remains an incomplete picture with critical events such as the rise and demise of popular radicalism remaining curiously missing from official government chronicles and official histories taught in schools. At the very least, some form of recognition should be given to the MCP despite its status as an anti-government entity. The contributions of Malaya's radicals, bloody and violent as they may have been, need to be conveyed to future generations of Malaysians as they were instrumental in shaping the early political direction of the nascent nation. Members of the MCP were not brainwashed nameless drones with a single-minded drive to crush anyone who stood in the way of communism and who sought to dominate Malaya on behalf of their masters in Moscow. These were young men and women who were idealistic, patriotic, and angry over their homeland's pathetic condition under foreign rule. Lacking options in a land where they were second-class residents, radicalism was seen as an attractive option to voice their dissatisfaction with the status quo, as opposed to meekly accepting their fate as inferiors to Europeans. By standing up to the British colonizers, the Malayan communists joined a long lineage of anti-colonial rebels stretching back to the early days of European incursion into the peninsula. All have been revered for their passionate but ultimately futile resistance to foreign domination except for the MCP. This is because, unlike the old folk heroes, the Malayan communists have been pegged as a purely Chinese-based movement that counted no indigenous Malays within their ranks. Since the Chinese were not *bumiputra* (sons of the earth) owing to their foreign ancestry, the government therefore decided that their deaths and sacrifices were not to be

acknowledged as having been committed in the interests of Malaya. Additionally, it would be unseemly and politically inconvenient for the current Malaysian government to admit that the staunchest nationalist movement in Malaya was actually led by the communists. The legacy of the Cold War notwithstanding, the surviving MCP revolutionaries are now at peace with Malaysia and they should be remembered for their genuine anti-colonial efforts.

The question that remains today is the significance of the MCP for the development of modern Malaya and by extension, modern Malaysia. The question comes at a time when the people must confront their nation's past and understand that Malaysia's journey to nationhood was not a clear cut or straightforward path. On the contrary, it involved significant bloodshed and destruction of property before the British realized their stay was unwelcome. Perhaps it is safe to say that while the communists were physically contesting the British for control of the peninsula, the UMNO, MCA, and MIC were challenging the colonizers constitutionally for the legal transfer of power to the Malayan people. This is not to suggest there was some secret, concerted plot at work, only that the conditions were ripe for revolution on both fronts to push out the British despite the absence of an agreement between the Alliance Party and the MCP. If the British discovered that a plot of sorts existed between them, the repercussions would surely have been disastrous for the Malayan independence movement. The Alliance would have ceased to exist, Tunku Abdul Rahman would have been arrested on charges of treason, and the war would have elevated to a level not unlike the Korean or Vietnam War. The Americans might even have intervened at

that point as President Dwight D. Eisenhower was a staunch anti-communist. As the Cold War paranoia gripped London, it was both fortunate and also regrettable that the MCP was the only movement to raise arms in the name of freedom and liberty for Malaya. In many ways, the insurrection allowed the Alliance to negotiate successfully with the Colonial Office, since the British sought above all to deny to the communists the one prize they had been seeking: independence. By allowing Malaya to become a sovereign nation, the pretext for rebellion was lost to the MCP and both Tunku and the British gained the satisfaction of keeping the peninsula out of Russian and Chinese hands, or so they imagined. The passage of time may have obscured some of the facts, but the truth that the MCP fought for the people is clear. That, arguably, is the one truth that must be recognized by all Malaysians and Malaysians.

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