

# Intelligence, Empire and the Communist Underground in Southeast Asia

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## Intelligence, Empire and the Communist Underground in Southeast Asia

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JAMES MATTHEW BLACK, JAN 13 2013

The memoir of a British Special Branch officer, Alec Dixon, offers an illuminating microcosm of the state of counter-subversive intelligence in Europe's Southeast Asian empires c.1920-41. In 1927 Singapore, whilst huge crowds of agitated Hailams gathered to 'hear hot talk of blood and revolution', most of the European security and police officers could be found, almost paradoxically, 'playing cricket at a club... two miles distant'. Shouts of "Down with Imperialism" rang out, communist flags were raised and a pitched battle unfolded before a bayonet charge by Indian soldiers cut through the Chinese mob at Kreta Ayer.[1]

A string of bombing campaigns followed. In the flurry of recriminations and retaliatory police operations that ensued, a midnight raid on a communist cell exposed the extent of the security apparatus' infiltration: Dixon's assistant 'Fong was revealed as head of the Singapore organisation... [while another officer's] boy was its secretary and treasurer'.[2] Newspaper editorials called for a rapid overhaul of security efforts: 'If the Criminal Investigation Department [the public cover name for colonial intelligence] needs strengthening in personnel, there should be no difficulty in this being done. We cannot afford to neglect the subversive movement... If we do we are going to pay the penalty. The time has come for Singapore to show her mettle.'[3]

This short study will examine two episodes of supposed 'intelligence failure' in the European fight against Asian anti-imperial insurgency: first, the string of unprecedented mass revolts that supposedly caught security forces off-guard in 1926-31; and second, the failure of the European intelligence services to clamp down on a number of key insurrectionaries: Nguyen Ai-Quoc, Tan Malaka, and Serge Lefranc. To an uncritical or polemical eye, these were classic scandals of intelligence, with grave implications for the outcome of empire in Asia. Nguyen Ai-Quoc, for instance, later re-styled himself as Ho Chi Minh; Tan Malaka defied Dutch exile to become mythic founding father of an independent Indonesia. Surveying the human carnage at Kreta Ayer, Dixon mused on bayonets as 'unintelligent masses of steel, generally fatal to the fools behind them'. He might seemingly have been discussing colonial intelligence.[4]

This essay, however, offers a more nuanced view. It will demonstrate that European intelligence services were more prepared for, and adaptive to the 1926-31 revolts than was publicly recognised, largely overcoming initial challenges of collection, analysis and dissemination of intelligence in ways impressively sophisticated for pioneering young organisations with minimal manpower. It will show too that the failure to successfully convict Malaka and others was due less to a deficit of intelligence than of legal mechanisms that had not kept step with the development of modern intelligence practices. Underpinning these problems were a number of what Jervis calls 'patterns of perception (and misperception)', outlined by Rosati as the tendencies to '(1) categorise and stereotype, (2) simplify causal inferences, and (3) use historical analogies'.[5] On an operational level, then, interwar colonial security often resembled sophisticated rapiers more than Dixon's 'unintelligent masses of steel'. But as war loomed, more profound cognitive deficiencies in intelligence conceptions of the anti-colonial threat would indeed prove 'generally fatal to the fools behind them'.[6]

Turning to the first 'failure', it is possible to see this thesis of 'operational success, conceptual deficiency' at play. Here the focus is on three connected trial-by-fire cases: the Perserikataan Komunis di India (PKI) revolts 1926-7 in

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Indonesia, the Singapore violence 1927-8, and the Nghe-Tinh insurgency in Vietnam 1930-1. Each proved a formative test for Dutch, British and French intelligence in Southeast Asia; difficult episodes eliciting not only national concern, but also unprecedented inter-imperial cooperation against a feared overarching Comintern plot.[7]

The first large-scale crisis saw the Dutch East Indies hit by a two-stage rebellion across western Java and Sumatra. Beginning in Bantam, Java on 12 November 1926, the uprising was quickly labeled a dramatic security failure; one Dutch official at Soerakarta decrying 'a struggle of life or death between the PKI and the government' as rebels attacked wedanas, seized railways, sabotaged telegraph lines and assaulted Glodok prison.[8] A second uprising spread through western Sumatra 1-12 January 1927.

Here lies evidence of a common failing in intelligence analysis. As Jervis explains, 'Most people are slow to perceive accidents, unintended consequences, coincidences, and small causes leading to large effects. Instead, coordinated actions, plans and conspiracies are seen.'[9] The rebellion was in fact indicative of the underground's weakness, not strength as many Dutch colonial officials thought.[10] The PKI leadership was fractured between impetuous local committees, the Batavia central command and Moscow-backed émigrés in Singapore; hence the disjointed, uncoordinated two-stage violence. Simultaneously, the rebellion testified to Dutch operational success: the orders to revolt in November had been intercepted the day before, decoded using police knowledge of PKI ciphers, and transformed into an immediate rush of arrests that quashed two other planned uprisings in east and central Java. By the episode's close, some 10,000 people had been arrested for association with the PKI or feeder groups, with 1,000 jailed or exiled to the mass internment site at Boven Digoel.[11] Apparent failure was in fact, in many ways, a desperate PKI lashing out against Dutch success.

The British performance around Kreta Ayer proved similarly more ambivalent than immediately apparent. Police agents had been in the Hailam crowds tracking known agitators when the violence hit, and while Dixon's assistant Fong and others had in turn infiltrated Special Branch, they were exposed. The bombing campaign from 24 February 1928 showed the growing effectiveness of intelligence-led raids, with seven conspirators arrested by 8 March – successes that silenced the terrorism and yielded the important capture of Wong Te Choi, head of the South Seas Revolutionary Party, and 'completed bombs and material for their manufacture'.[12]

Of the three baptismal encounters with the communist underground, that in French Indochina proved most dramatic, bloody and seemingly damning of local intelligence. When, following the earlier Yen-Bai mutiny, the newly-united Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) led a wave of peasant uprisings in 1930-1, the authorities' response was as brutal as it appeared undirected: Résident Supérieur Le Fol directing bomber squadrons to attack protestors, setting up military outposts in villages and authorizing the Foreign Legion to execute 'without any preliminary inquiry... all [suspected] Communists caught making propaganda'.[13] Hundreds were killed, over 10,000 jailed. Yet amongst the military's cruelty there is clear evidence of sophisticated if ruthless intelligence work from the Sûreté. There was a noticeable correlation between police introduction of modern information controls and declining volatility: a new dossier system and identity cards in January 1931 providing a fillip to 'pacification', says Bernal. Access to government soup kitchens was leveraged to create networks of informants. The police onslaught rendered the Vietnamese communist underground a moot force for years.[14]

Thus whilst the different European agencies had had differing levels of warning about the threat of insurgency, each proved adaptive and effective in collecting and exploiting intelligence once crisis had hit. When considering the importance of the 'failure' to stop violence outright, then, it is clear both that the intelligence responses were surprisingly effective given the brutal limitations on manpower and funding, and that these 'failures' were probably necessary – even perversely useful – in spurring further institutional reform in the region.

Singapore Special Branch benefitted in particular, able to step up operations year-on-year until intelligence reports were soon detailing huge victories from 'temporary possession of the original accounts of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP)', to elimination of access to Comintern subsidies, or even possession of 'a 45-page report submitted by the Perak Communist Party Central... [giving] a full and comprehensive account of [its] personnel and future plans'. Inside, effectively, were signed confessions – the MCP Secretary-General Loi Teck, a British agent, having had each of the 'Working Committee... submit... in his own handwriting details of his own history and activities in connection

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with communism'.[15] In the wider history of intelligence as a function of state, then, these colonial episodes played a part in swaying skeptical political leaders of the necessity of this novel, modern phenomenon.

The second supposed disastrous failure of Western intelligence in the region was its inability to deal effectively with key architects of insurrection such as Nguyen Ai-Quoc (the future Ho Chi Minh) or Tan Malaka, who formed part of a cadre of highly mobile, motivated and trained agents in the Comintern's regional network. Here failures were not so much of intelligence as of political will and of legal institutions, both of which had not kept pace with modern security needs, rendering much valuable intelligence frustratingly inactionable.

The chained arrests in 1931 of Serge Lefranc in Singapore, the Noulens in Shanghai and Nguyen Ai-Quoc in Hong Kong were – far from a bungling – perhaps the apotheosis of new efforts at international intelligence coordination; each seizure a product of shared efforts between different western and Chinese forces. The Noulens raid yielded real treasure, seeing thousands of documents seized and exposing the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, the main Comintern front in East Asia. Certainly, there was an element of good fortune; Lefranc, typically so careful, had accidentally sent an overtly coded message through the censored Indonesian post. Yet the rest of the casework was aggressively and professionally carried through, turning an initial Dutch lead into sprawling French, British and Kuomintang operations. The real 'failure', in fact, occurred when the seized individuals were brought into outmoded local legal systems, which seemed to benefit the accused, more than perturb them.

With intelligence officials' calls for secrecy ignored, the Noulens case in particular rapidly became a global cause célèbre and propaganda pulpit, attracting celebrity backers as disparate as Albert Einstein and Madame Sun Yat-sen. Not to be outdone, Nguyen Ai-Quoc, armed with the legal acumen of International Red Aid, reveled in manipulating loopholes and ambiguities to 'attack the proceedings [of his trial] in every possible manner and by every known step'.[16] Embracing his multiple identities, for instance, he gave baffling answers such as the bizarre admission that a photograph of Nguyen Ai-Quoc was of himself, but that he had never worn a hat like the one pictured in it.[17]

Faced with lengthy legal battles and potential public embarrassment, colonial authorities decided to bury the wealth of damning intelligence against the future Ho Chi Minh, quietly organizing a release. Sir William Peel, having endured similar frustrations with Tan Malaka, lamented yet another 'agent the Government has been obliged to assist in getting back into touch with its Russian principals'.[18] The lack of applicable modern counter-subversion statutes meant trivia such as passport infringements often proved the sole route to convictions – hence Wong Muk-Han, easily the most junior of the men arrested with Lefranc, ironically received the greatest punishment for a migration violation. With Lefranc charged with minor infractions under the Societies Ordinance Act – and even allowed to keep \$12,000 of confiscated Comintern gold – it was easy to sympathize with the head of Special Branch, René Onraet's bitter judgment that insurrectionists 'profited by the stubborn and almost childish unwillingness of some men to take these subversive activities seriously'.[19] What was later couched in terms of intelligence failure appears, on proper scrutiny, a dearth of legal powers and political will.

The two distinct phases of European intelligence's duel with anti-imperialism, then, show a number of important operational successes amongst the supposed failure, even if intelligence efforts could sometimes feel hampered by the failings of the legal mechanisms they were trying to serve. However, though a focus on these quantifiable markers of reactive success – arrests, internments, communiqués intercepted – may be convenient, such metrics are ill suited to what was supposedly a preventative profession. René Onraet, as Inspector-General of the Straits Settlement police 1935-9, railed against obvious tangible tallies of success:

'The real value of police work today cannot be judged altogether on the number of arrests made; nor can the test of its success be based solely on the result of investigations. A fair judgment can only be given as the achievement of otherwise of [political] ideals... over a number of years. In two words, this means internal security.'[20]

Vital however is Zizek's distinction between the 'subjective' and 'objective' – superficial but attention-grabbing spikes on the historical seismometer and the more systemic, background reverberations concealed below.[21] Operational successes in quashing issues only avoided more fundamental questions about the true nature of the anti-colonial

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threat, and legitimated continued avoidance into the future. Underpinning both 'intelligence failure' episodes was a common set of cognitive failings that indicted 'the decision-maker as well as – and probably with more justification – than the intelligence analyst'.<sup>[22]</sup>

As Heng reminds us: 'most intelligence failures... stem from... a self-afflicted blindness which looks but does not see, choosing not to conceive and verify what contradicts one's conventional assumptions'.<sup>[23]</sup> This can be broken into Rosati's Jervis-inspired model of tendencies to '(1) categorise and stereotype, (2) simplify causal inferences, and (3) use historical analogies'.<sup>[24]</sup>

There is ample evidence of the tendency to '(1) categorise and stereotype' in intelligence reports of anti-colonial threats. Often the imposition of a reductionist taxonomy on complex threats was a product of a lack of resources; a crude triage method for fledgling understaffed organisations. After Kreta Ayer, Dixon, for instance, became Singapore's first-ever Immigration Officer, 'obliged to examine over a thousand coolies in... half an hour'. His method for rooting out communist infiltrators was thus, partly out of necessity, a compact checklist of hands, muscles, shoes:

'Nine out of ten hands I touched were hard and calloused. The tenth... with the soft hands... was invariably detained... since very few of [communist agents] were of the muscular coolie type... During my few months I detained about three hundred Hailams. All but two of them wore what an English outfitter describes as "gent's boaters." I am not sure whether this is a coincidence or a psychological discovery...'<sup>[25]</sup>

These categorisations reflected not mere expediency, however, but also what Melman labels a propensity at the time to conceive of terrorism as an aesthetic, ontological statement as much as an ideological one; terrorism distilled as a persona, mannerism or gesture.<sup>[26]</sup> Similarly, they reflected intelligence misconceptions of the local demographic specificities of communism in Asia – Bernal noting how Sûreté obsession with European-style proletariats led police to overlook the true peasant nature of Vietnamese anti-colonialism.<sup>[27]</sup> More notable still was the bias of ethnic chauvinism, which emphasised insurgents' racial and cultural naivety, misunderstanding their motivations and objects: 'A people such as the Bantamese... will always be greatly susceptible to propaganda which tempts them' with the 'promised Utopia'; or 'The Annamese peasant... accepts all [communist] promises without worrying himself whether they are realisable'. Indeed, British intelligence targeted their resources specifically against Chinese cells rather than the more 'docile' Malays.<sup>[28]</sup>

Connected to this ethnic bias was the tendency to '(2) simplify causal inferences'.<sup>[29]</sup> Chief amongst this category of failure was the persistent misconception of anti-colonialism as primarily an extraneous, imported threat that did not reflect on domestic politics. The very first line of the Dutch East Indies Governor-General's secret report into the PKI revolts 1926-7 made it clear that blame lay not with local agency but 'the Communist International in Moscow'.<sup>[30]</sup> In similar style, Onraet contested: 'Untoward events in the Straits Settlements nearly always had an external influence'.<sup>[31]</sup> So too concluded the French inquest into Nghe-Tinh.<sup>[32]</sup> The necessary security antidote, then, was quarantine of malleable subjects from foreign agitators; a quarantine attempted enthusiastically with new modern technologies of border control, photography and fingerprinting – articulated in H.J. Spit's Indonesian dream of an all-seeing 'dactyloscopic sieve' to 'strain' the flow of colonial subjects from island to island.<sup>[33]</sup>

Tied to these first two tendencies was another, to '(3) use historical analogies'; in particular, to analyse unrest through the lens of spontaneous tribal violence as seen in late-nineteenth-century Burma, rather than modern nationalism.<sup>[34]</sup> Special Branch, for instance, initially struggled when it interpreted the communist underground in Singapore 'on much the same lines as an old-fashioned secret society [yet with] methods... unfamiliar to our detectives... [so that] many weeks elapsed before they could gather useful information'.<sup>[35]</sup> To these historical analogies must be added 'natural' ones, a motif of colonial intelligence reports. As Guha explains, the 'prose of counter-insurgency' implicitly strove not to analyze insurgency so much as coopting it into an affirmation of the ruling order's values. This was manifest in the denial of human agency through allusion to natural phenomena: rebellion spreading like wildfire, agitation as a contagion, communism taking root as a weed, as in this secret 1934 report of the Singapore Political Intelligence Journal:

'Ever since 1928 the Malayan Communist Party has been trying... to graft the foreign plant of Communism upon the

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native soil of Malaya and has so far failed... [it] remains an almost entirely exotic growth... [so that] fresh seed must take the place of the old... before the Malayan field can ever bear the red harvest of Moscow'.[36]

For Onraet, Special Branch was – with its youthful, modern institutional culture and pioneering use of new technologies – a vanguard of modernity and Reason itself; for ‘a force that provides this security for all classes represents the reasoned wish of a reason-conscious people.’[37] Opposition to the regime was thus, by implication, opposition to Reason itself, and could not be analyzed in rational terms (a convenient cover for limited intelligence understanding). The spread of anti-colonialism became not a function of local grievance or regime policy, but a phenomenon as reasonless as fire or plague. Thus, Guha explains, ‘insurgency [was] regarded as *external* to the [insurgent]’s consciousness and Cause made to stand in as a phantom surrogate for Reason, the logic of that consciousness’.[38] Insurgents became, then, not subjects in their own conscious acts of defiance, but unthinking supporting figures in a political narrative reaffirming the western claim to equivalence of ‘empire’ with ‘Reason’. Within this discourse, hard questions about the nature, morality and viability of empire needed not be asked, despite intelligence to the contrary. European colonial intelligence agencies were discursive political projects in the Foucauldian sense as much as they were security ones.

There were some dissenting voices, of course, that called for the more holistic approach necessary if empire was to survive – French minister Albert Sarraut, Nguyen Ai-Quoc’s keenest pursuer, arguing that: ‘public order does not reside above all in active policing or repressive legislation... The protector state must take precedence over the police state. The most important policing to organize in these countries... is the “moral police” which disciplines and restrains the conqueror’s actions’.[39] Yet readers of this alternate, forward-thinking cognitive script remained a diffuse minority, their ideas ‘scattered across individuals and bureaucratic units’, their warnings lost in Wohlstetter’s classic ‘signal-to-noise’ problem.[40]

It is not clear that cognitive failure could have necessarily been avoided. Andrew reminds us of the acute burden of proof demanded of interwar agencies’ requests for funding in the context of a global depression and the novelty of institutions effectively still at the ‘proof of concept’ stage.[41] Even if procedural reforms could have been possible in this sensitive political context (or realistic in the age of ‘The White Man’s Burden’), Hopple emphasizes that ‘biased heuristics and other suboptimal information-processing routines’ would likely endure despite such changes.[42] It is not clear, besides, that an anachronistically liberal intelligence service could hope to be effective if it adopted political assumptions and ends so divergent from those of government. As Chan stresses, it is ‘a result of the very nature of intelligence work [that] a high premium is placed on the recruitment of those who share the regime’s value and belief system.’[43]

Recalling Dixon’s notion of ‘unintelligent masses of steel’, then, European security organizations in interwar Southeast Asia appear more as sophisticated rapiers, responsible for impressive operational victories.[44] However, these short-term successes and failures seem to have had limited impact in determining the outcome of the struggle for the region. The advent of war and Japanese invasion could not be easily accounted for (by these inward-oriented agencies at least), of course: the Dutch, in particular, never recovered from Japanese occupation of Indonesia 1942-5. Yet even without the grand drama of the Second World War, the end of European empire in the region was also in part a function of a shortage of the requisite self- and situational awareness from security apparatuses and government. Lacking in this regard, operationally sophisticated intelligence agencies would indeed prove, in Dixon’s terms, ‘generally fatal to the fools behind them’.[45]

[1] Dixon, A., *Singapore Patrol* (London: G.G. Harrap & Co., 1935), pp.128-133

[2] *Ibid*, p. 137.

[3] *The Straits Times*, 1 April 1927, p.8. Though publicly labeled the Criminal Investigation Department, the so-called Special Branch dealt with little or no criminal investigation whatsoever, being instead the state security and intelligence institution.

[4] Dixon, *Singapore Patrol*, p.133.

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- [5] Jervis, R., *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Rosati, J. A., 'The Power of Human Cognition in the Study of World Politics', *International Studies Review*, 2, 3 (2000), p.59.
- [6] Dixon, *Singapore Patrol*, p.137.
- [7] Lord Birkenhead, Secretary of State for India accused the Soviets of 'unceasing underground activities throughout the world to destroy the British Empire', quot. Euden, X. F., and North, R. C., (eds), *Soviet Russia and the East 1920-1927: A Documentary Survey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), p.289.
- [8] Ibid, chpt. 1, note 42.
- [9] Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, p.343.
- [10] 'Introduction' in Benda, H. J., and McVey, R. J., (eds), *The Communist Uprisings of 1926-1927 in Indonesia: Key Documents* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), xxiii.
- [11] 'The Report of the Commission installed by Government decision No. X of January 26, 1927, to investigate the disturbances which took place in various parts of the Residency of Bantam in November, 1926' (The Bantam Report), in Benda and McVey, *The Communist Uprisings of 1926-1927*, p.49.
- [12] *The Straits Times*, 9 March 1928, p.9.
- [13] Telegram, 8 October 1930: N. F., carton 325, dossier 2634, quot. in Bernal, M., 'The Nghe-Tinh Soviet Movement 1930-1931', *Past & Present*, 92 (1981), p.153.
- [14] Bernal, 'The Nghe-Tinh Soviet Movement', p.155.
- [15] Supplement to the *PIJ* (1935) no.1, 'A Statement of the Malayan Communist Party Accounts'; supplement to the *PIJ* (1935) no.5, 'An Analysis of the Numerical Strength of the Malayan Communist Party and Subsidiary Organisations for the Years 1931-1934'; Item 9, *PIJ* (1939), quot. in Choon, B. K., *Absent History: The Untold Story of Special Branch Operations in Singapore 1915-1942* (Singapore: Horizon Books, 2001), p.145.
- [16] SCMP, 1 August 1931, quot. in Duncanson, D.J., 'Ho-ch-Minh in Hong Kong, 1931-32', *The China Quarterly*, 57 (1974), p.94.
- [17] SCMP, 17 and 20 August 1931, quot. in *ibid*, p.91.
- [18] Quot. in *ibid*, p.100.
- [19] Onraet, R., *Singapore – A Police Background* (London: Dorothy Crisp & Co., 1947), p.114.
- [20] *Ibid*, p.72.
- [21] Zizek, S., *Violence* (London: Profile Books, 2008).
- [22] Hople, G. W., 'Intelligence and Warning: Implications and Lessons of the Falkland Islands War', *World Politics*, 36, 3 (1984), p.342; see also Betts, R., *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1982).
- [23] Foreword to Choon, *Absent History*, p.viii.
- [24] Rosati, J. A., 'The Power of Human Cognition', p.59.

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[25] Dixon, *Singapore Patrol*, pp.142-3.

[26] Melman, B., 'The Terrorist in Fiction', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 15, 3 (1980), pp.559-576.

[27] Bernal, 'The Nghe-Tinh Soviet Movement', pp.148-168.

[28] The Bantam Report, in Benda and McVey, *The Communist Uprisings of 1926-1927*, pp.65, 42; Report of the Commission d'enquête, p.26, quot. in Foster, A. L., 'French, Dutch, British and US Reactions to the Nghê Tinh Rebellion of 1930-1931', in Tonnesson, S., and Antlov, H., (eds), *Imperial Policy and Colonial Revolt: Southeast Asia 1930-1957* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1995), p.67.

[29] Rosati, J. A., 'The Power of Human Cognition', p.59.

[30] Governor-General's Report of January 1927, in Benda and McVey, *The Communist Uprisings of 1926-1927*, p.1.

[31] Quot. in Choon, *Absent History*, p.vii.

[32] French Minister of Colonies Paul Reynaud to Chambre des députés, 23 February 1931, *Débats Parlementaires*, Assemblée Nationale, quot. in Foster, 'French, Dutch, British and US Reactions', p.67.

[33] Spit, H.J., Directeur van Justitie in *Volksraad*, 10 July 1929 (*Handelingen van den Volksraad 1929-1930*) p.775, quot. in Mzarek, R., 'From darkness to light: the optics of policing in late-colonial Netherlands East Indies', in Rafael, V., (ed.), *Figures of criminality in Indonesia, the Philippines and colonial Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

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[35] Dixon, *Singapore Patrol*, p.104.

[36] Supplement to *PIJ* (1934) no.2.

[37] Onraet, *Singapore – A Police Background*, p.72.

[38] Guha, R., 'The prose of counter-insurgency', in Dirks, N. B., Eley, G., and Ortner, S. B., (eds), *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.337.

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[41] Andrew, C., *The Defense of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

[42] Hopple, 'Intelligence and Warning', p.361.

[43] Chan, 'The Intelligence of Stupidity', p.177.

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[44] Dixon, *Singapore Patrol*, p.133.

[45] Ibid, p.133.

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