

# Assessing the British Counter-Insurgency Effort in Malaya

Written by James Flint

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The Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) has been popularly mounted upon a high pedestal. It has become symbolic as a victory standing bold and near alone amidst a sea of unpopular and failed small-wars fought by the great powers during the withdrawal from empire. Bathing in the glory of Malaya has particularly been the case when the Emergency has been placed in the contrasting light of the first (French) and second (American) Indo-China Wars. This essay proposes a new assessment of the British counter-insurgency campaign in Malaya in the belief that the popular conclusions from the historiography can only benefit from reappraisal. The essay argues that the effort was a success. However, in agreement with Karl Hack (1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2009), analysis reveals that credit for the success may be weighted towards the Briggs Plan and not with General Templer. Briggs' emphasis on 'population control', or in more contemporary jargon, 'human geography', arguably won the initiative. But the road to victory was a rocky one, with early strategy proving erroneous and to the detriment of the campaign. This essay further forwards that attempts to compare Malaya with other counter-insurgency campaigns such as the Vietnam War or Afghanistan War are limited in value, and risk dangerous over-simplifications.

The essay commences by discussing the nature of insurgency, before leading into the origins of the Malayan Emergency within the greater context of the early Cold War 'wave of terrorism'. The essay then details the British effort, and brings the discussion towards concurrent academic debate. The popular comparison with Vietnam is investigated, prior to deeper analysis into the peculiarities of Malaya's context and the 'population control' effort. The essay concludes with reference to implications for current counter-insurgency in Afghanistan. The paper adopts a qualitative research design. While both primary and secondary sources are utilised, focus has been levied upon secondary, peer-reviewed academic sources. Due to the historic nature of the Malayan Emergency, a considerable analytical literature base exists, in addition to governmental reports. A selection of the more prominent works on Malaya and counter-insurgency theory, including both articles and reports from the period alongside more recent examples are utilized in this essay. This compiled literature is, where appropriate, used in conjunction with further primary source material in the form of contemporary military counter-insurgency manuals, in order to demonstrate interpretations of lessons learned.

The act of insurgency itself can be construed to be an asymmetric, bottom-up challenge to the legitimacy of government, what was traditionally known as "revolutionary guerrilla warfare" (Fall, 2009: 369-370, Hoffman, 2006: 35). Whereas states may be legitimised through legal recognition by other states within the international community (Willems, 2001: 360), governments (especially democratic governments) are legitimised through the polis of their nation(s). When peoples object to the status-quo by means other than those available within the system, terrorism or insurgency become alternative options. Insurgency being the act of revolt or uprising aimed against the existing state authority for political ends (Murden, 2010). As Nagl observed, they "are fought with ideas as much as they are contested with weapons" (2005: 196). Thus, countering insurgency can take numerous different forms, spanning a spectrum of theoretical models that include; 1) political, 2) criminal justice, and 3) war. Whereas the French and Americans traditionally leant towards the war model, Britain held a tendency towards the criminal justice model, depending on astute colonial governance over force of arms (Mackinlay, 2007: 35), perhaps as a result of experience policing the Empire.

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The occurrences within the Malayan Emergency were well documented by the likes of Northcote Parkinson (1954) and Anthony Short (1974, 1979) during tenures at the University of Malaya, and by their contemporaries such as Robert Tilman (1966), and require little summation. The Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), having never fully demobilised, exhibited grievances which were facilitated through the post-World War II availability of weapons, labour unrest and unknown levels of foreign support (Tilman, 1966: 409), resulting in renewed insurgency under the banner of the Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA). The actual rationale of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in turning to open violence can only be speculated upon. However, the Emergency occurring during a 'wave of terrorism', dominated by Maoism as well as nationalism and separatism (Hoffman, 2006: 43), perhaps provides credibility to the notion of societal causes of terrorism. During this period, Britain alone was also fighting terrorism in Kenya, Cyprus, Aden, and the Radfan amongst lesser disturbances.

Amidst this early Cold War 'wave of terrorism', the British counter-insurgency effort in Malaya was subjected to diktats and boundaries levied by the greater geo-political context. With the hegemonic ascension of the United States (US), including as the central power of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) since its inception in 1949, and being a state Britain was financially indebted to, the US held significant sway over the Empire, and applied anti-colonial pressure (Ambrose and Brinkley, 1997: 36). However, with the insurgency in Malaya being Maoist, U.S. support was guaranteed. This was especially so given early speculation over a Soviet-led conspiracy to incite global revolutions, led by states' resident communist parties (Morrison, 1948: 281). Despite this, a British withdrawal from east of Suez was inevitable, and this helps to explain the counter-insurgency's effort culminating in independent Malaysia (1957). This was vital for the effort's success; the promise of Malayan independence stonewalling MCP attempts to manipulate the insurgency into an anti-colonial struggle (Harper, 1999: 347).

The British counter-insurgency effort was evolutionary in strategy, as seen in Simon Murden's (2010) notion of a triangular overlay of counter-insurgency (between the three points of armed force, hearts and minds, and governance). Here Murden portrays how the heavy handed counter-terror strategy of 1948-1950, where colonial authorities "favoured large-scale traditional operations such as formation sweeps on very limited intelligence" (Kiszley, 2006: 17), gave way to the 'population control' strategy under Thompson and the Briggs Plan, prior to the arrival of General Templer in February 1952, and his coined 'hearts and minds'. Murden's diagram accredits coherent organisation, leadership and implementation to Templer. However, it should be noted that Briggs (acting as Director Operations (DO) from 1950) instigated the state and district war executive-committee system and federal war council, linking military and civilian organisations, as well as the 'new village' forced relocations of ethnic Chinese 'squatters' (Hack, 1999b: 102, Ladwig, 2007: 60-61).

These 'population control' measures were aimed to "secure and protect the population; win their active support via psychological, political, economic, and social programs; and actively cultivate intelligence sources within the community" (Chin, 2008: 124). Assimilation of the ethnic Chinese insurgent community also dated before Templer's arrival, from initiatives led by Gurney shortly prior to his assassination and the arrival of Briggs (Hack, 2000: 393). What Templer brought was leadership, his combining the positions of DO and High Commissioner (HC), empowering Templer to coordinate and implement all aspects of the Briggs Plan without hindrance (Ladwig, 2007: 62-65). It is also popularly cited that Templer interjected energy and confidence into the campaign (Short, 1979: 62-63), while his coinage of 'hearts and minds', the carrot side of 'population control' strategies, requires no introduction.

Academic research on the Malayan Emergency has progressed beyond the post-conflict narratives of the likes of Parkinson and Short with the interjection of revisionist and counter-arguments. This essay perceives the most important of which to be what we could term the 'Hack-Short debate'. Anthony Short (1975, 1979) iterated the popular argument of the winning impact of Templer and 'hearts and minds' during the period 1952-1954, focussing on Templer's leadership role. Short (according to Karl Hack, (1999b: 100)) pursued the pro-Templer perspective after Parkinson in his 1954 book *Templer in Malaya*; Parkinson teaching at the University of Malaya prior to Short. More recently, Richard Stubbs has reiterated this argument in his 1989 book on the Emergency, focussing on the impact of 'hearts and minds', while lambasting the British effort up until 1951 (1989: 133-140). Other contemporary scholars, such as Kumar Ramakrishna, have also adhered to the popular consensus, seen in Ramakrishna's article '*Transmogrifying' Malaya: the Impact of Sir Gerald Templer (1952-54)*' (2001), with its focus on Templer's psychologically inspired confidence.

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On the other side of the debate, Hack (1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2009) has championed a revisionist stance, diminishing Templer's personal contribution. Hack advocated that the turning-point came in 1951, as a ramification of the 'population control' approach already adopted prior to Templer's arrival (1999b: 101); as demonstrated by the MCP's defensive orientated 'Iron Claws' directives (Hack, 2000: 392). More recently, other scholars have followed suit in critiquing the popular consensus; Bennett (2009) disputing that prior to 1950 there was a complete absence of strategy; reasserting that a counter-terror strategy was tested as part of a trial and error process, as Hack had also noted (1999b: 103), thus further de-emphasising the popular focus on Templer.

A separate dimension of the historiography surrounding the Emergency is the popular comparison with the Vietnam War. Why is comparing and contrasting Malaya with Vietnam so popular? Shallow analysis may depict the two conflicts as being very similar, both conflicts exhibited a guerrilla insurgent enemy who never fully demobilised at the end of World War II; both were set amidst jungle terrain, and both contained a Maoist ideological element. However, Vietnam is not a suitable yard-stick by which to assess the British effort in Malaya, nor vice-versa. More in-depth analysis does not need to dig deep to show that further similarities are all but absent. As early as 1966, when the Vietnam War was still escalating, Robert Tilman in *The Non-Lessons of the Malayan Emergency* argued the fallaciousness of such a comparison, citing the uniqueness of Malaya, declaring "the sooner this fallacy can be laid to rest the better it will be for policy-maker and critic alike" (1966: 407).

Sadly for Tilman, despite Malaya's uniqueness the British effort has been evoked in a multitude of insurgencies since. This can be observed in the likes of Walter Ladwig III's article *Managing Counterinsurgency: Lessons from Malaya* (2007), a concise narrative of the Emergency, which he proceeds to compare to the more recent American military counter-insurgency field manual, *FM 3-24*, with clear connotations to contemporary Afghanistan and Iraq. Such transferrals of 'lessons learned' are best approached with caution.

The American Colonel Nagl has demonstrated how such comparative ventures can reveal intriguing findings, as seen in his book *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (2005). However, his is a study of institutional learning, not a comparison of the respective efforts Tactics Training and Procedures (TTPs) alone. The British General Kiszley later pursued and expanded upon this notion of institutional learning, with instances such as the perceived failure of the British Army to transfer institutional lessons learned in Malaya to Cyprus a few years later (Kiszley, 2006: 17). However Kiszley somewhat missed the point; Nagl was not arguing for lessons to be learned and transferred, but for them to be contextually re-learned. The British effort in Malaya benefited because of the institutional understanding that "different wars fought in different locations might well require completely different methods of training and organization" (Nagl, 2005: 194). The de-centralised organizational culture of the British Army, accustomed to policing the Empire with the 'thin red line', allowed for the correct case-specific methods to be rapidly adopted.

As Nagl noted, the conflicts in Malaya and Vietnam were of very different scope and intensity (2005: 192). In sheer scale, the number of insurgent combatants and support forces in Vietnam were estimated to outnumber those in the Malaya by more than seventeen to one (Tilman, 1966: 417). This is while the narrow peninsular of Malaya was surrounded by natural water barriers, with only one land-border with Thailand, a state friendly to Britain (Tilman, 1966: 413). These factors aided the British effort. However, the uselessness of the Vietnam comparison and 'lessons learned' methodology in assessing the British effort in Malaya is perhaps best demonstrated where 'lessons learned' have been applied. Here the yard-stick approach which superficially makes the British effort shine, does the very opposite through the effort's 'new villages' being implemented in the Vietnam War, by aid of the very same British officers in the Strategic Hamlet Scheme of 1962 – which utterly failed.

Unsurprisingly, as Mockaitis noted, "unfortunately, then as now the formula for defeating insurgents is far easier to state than to apply" (2003: 21). Blame can be spread across numerous reasons: the number of peoples to be relocated (seven million in Vietnam compared to half a million in Malaya), that the Vietnamese had stronger ties to the land compared to the Chinese 'squatters', ethnic issues, or levels of trust in respective governments (Neu, 2005: 54, Tilman, 1966: 416). The ramification being that assessing the British effort in Malaya through comparison with Vietnam is akin to trying to push a square peg through a round hole.

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In assessing the British effort in Malaya, it should be noted that through competing perceptions, “there is no view from nowhere” (Nagel, 1986: 70). It is popularly noted that ‘one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’, or conversely perhaps that ‘one man’s legitimate authority is another man’s state-led terror’. Indeed, dependent on the eye of the beholder, the MRLA insurgents were not the only terrorists; the heavy-handed approach of the British colonial authorities fighting the Emergency during the early counter-terrorist phase, as well as the forced relocations under the Briggs Plan could no doubt be perceived as state-led terror against the colonial citizens. Had ‘new villages’ floundered in Malaya as they later did in Vietnam, awkward parallels with the original concentration camps of the British Boer War would likely take little stretch of imagination. This notion of perspective can be construed as a negative side of the British effort in the Malayan Emergency. As Dahl observed in his thoughts on *Polyarchy*, occupying powers risk incurring a ‘boomerang effect’; the wrath of those they occupy, when applying ‘massive coercion’ (1971: 199). Considering the nature of insurgency, the co-opting of the polis is a necessity in legitimising government, and thus succeeding. Further, from the British perspective, the early effort was generally mired in stalemate (Short, 1979: 62-63), leaving the end not justifying the means. Dahl’s ‘boomerang effect’ was felt in the early escalating intensity of the insurgency, prior to Briggs’ involvement, showing “brutality is always counterproductive in the long run” (Mockaitis, 1990: 192).

Adopting the Briggs Plan after the erroneous counter-terror strategy transformed the effort. This is depicted in the clear ‘bell-curve’ of terrorist incidents in Malaya peaking in September 1951 (AIR20/10377, 1957), prior to Templer’s arrival, and thus substantiating Hack’s revisionist assessment. The sudden down-turn of insurgent action occurred January 1951–January 1952; too soon to be an impact of Templer alone. The plan transpired to be well tailored to meet Malaya’s geo-political and social peculiarities, of which Templer, while enjoying command, was not alone in implementing. The colonial authority’s extraordinary control of Malaya could not be easily duplicated (Mockaitis, 1990: 192). This was aided by the promise of Malayan independence, and with elections in 1955 won by the Nationalist Alliance, (rallying Malay nationalism) (Carnell, 1955: 315-316), provided the Malay majority with no reason to dissent.

The colonial governance also won positive public-relations further afield. As per Britain favouring the criminal justice model, Malaya was always downplayed as an ‘emergency’, not a ‘war’, or ‘rebellion’, while there was never any ‘enemy’ (Harper, 1999: 151). Thus there was no legitimate opposition. In fortunate contrast to Vietnam, the ‘first media war’, Britain was able to dominate the propaganda war, even devoting Royal Air Force bombers to leaflet dropping rather than bombing (Cassidy, 2005: 56; Harper, 1999: 153). The Emergency was limited enough in scale so as to avoid the mass media attention Vietnam was subjected to; despite early blunders there was no Walter Cronkite ‘we are mired in stalemate’ speech equivalent (which caused President Johnson to not stand for re-election, such was its influence) (Willbanks, 2007: 205), nor “casualty phobia” (Gelpi et al, 2009: 24) at home.

With positive relations abroad and with the majority of Malay’s, the British effort was able to target the insurgent minority. Briggs’ ‘new villages’ were viable as a result of the MCP fuelling the insurgency being mostly ethnic Chinese (Cassidy, 2005: 57; Harper, 1999: 149), and identifiable through profiling. This avoided the common American and French problem of terrorists disappearing, dispersed into the mass population; only 38 percent of Malay’s being ethnic Chinese, and not all of dubious loyalty (McCuen, 2008: 109, Tilman, 1966: 408). These ‘new villages’ allowed the British colonial authorities to ply the ethnic Chinese with land rights and aid, while protecting them with small numbers of security forces (mostly colonial battalions and Malay home guard units) (Mockaitis, 1990: 9). This held the dual benefits of facilitating intelligence gathered from the supportive population, while freeing military small-units to hunt the insurgents amidst a developing civil-military-political strategy (Cassidy, 2005: 56, Nagl, 2005: 191). As a result of the favourable, isolated geography of Malaya, the hunted insurgents had little opportunity for supply or refuge, in contrast to the safe havens of Cambodia and Laos which sheltered the Viet Cong throughout the Vietnam War (McCuen, 2008: 109-110).

The Briggs Plan was not replaced by Templer’s ‘hearts and minds’, but in part implemented by it. The ‘population control’ approach entailed the separating of insurgents from the greater population, followed by the development of legitimate government authority (‘clear and hold’), while targeting the insurgents. It can be discerned that ‘hearts and minds’ is a stratagem, a causal mechanism in co-opting the population, not an alternative phase of its own as it is often depicted. Templer was a competent DO/HC; however the ‘personality cult’ which has developed around him is

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perhaps more a product of British popular legend than fully deserved. As Templer said in his initial address to the Malay peoples, “the solution lies not in the hands of any one man... It is in the hands of all of us, the peoples of Malaya and the governments which serve them” (Templer, in Nagl, 2005: 197). Thus the core lesson from Malaya is the focus on ‘population control’, the polis or greater human geography as a whole, not on ‘hearts and minds’ or any other stratagem alone. This realisation is perhaps identifiable in latter doctrine on Afghanistan, as seen in the declaration that the commander’s intent of the British effort in Helmand province was to ‘reconcile, capture, kill’ insurgents, ‘engage, enfranchise’ tribal groupings, while winning the ‘consent’ of the Afghan people (MoD, 2008: 2); focus falling on the human geography. Officers from the British effort in Afghanistan have observed, as with Vietnam, that the Afghan insurgency “will not be overcome by a doctrine that resembles a ‘stretched version of the Malaya Campaign’” (Mackinlay, 2007: 34).

In conclusion, the British counter-insurgency effort in Malaya was a success. However, the assessment herein concurs with the revisionist argument coined by Karl Hack; that the initiative was won through the Briggs Plan. Popular consensus on the importance of Templer is exaggerated out of proportion from any possible impact, while the focus on ‘hearts and minds’ is small-fry compared with the greater human geography concerns of ‘population control’. This assessment has unearthed negative as well as positive elements, as in the guise of the early heavy-handed approach pursued, which was found wanting in both effectiveness and the means involved. A revision of strategy was required; fortunately the Briggs Plan encompassed the peculiarities of Malaya and recognised the true emphasis on the peoples in which the ‘insurgent fish’ swam. However, with regards to TTPs, mounting Malaya on a pedestal symbolising ‘best practice’ amidst counter-insurgency campaigns is a mistake. There is likely no single winning formula. As assessment of Malaya demonstrates, unavoidable contextual peculiarities’ associated with insurgency need to be tackled on a case-by-case basis. This line of thought should be remembered with regard to contemporaneous counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan and those which doubtless shall follow.

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