
Cynthia Hannon and Anna Robert

A Successful Counterinsurgency

The British and the Malayan Emergency

In the days following the end of World War II, the Malayan Communist Party staged an uprising to free Malaysia from colonial rule. The subsequent conflict, known as the Malayan Emergency, ended with a decisive British victory. This is one of the only examples of a successful counterinsurgency in the 20th century, a success which was due to several factors, including racial divisions in Malaysia, superior British resources and military strategy, and mounting pressure from the West to suppress the Communists as the Cold War developed. The legacy of Britain's retaliation manifests today in the form of harsh discrimination against multiple ethnic groups in Malaysia, which began with the British dividing different ethnic groups and pitting them against each other during this period of insurgency.

The British Empire colonized Malaysia in the late 1700s, wresting control from the Dutch. They then proceeded to rule the region until Japan's invasion in 1942, after which the Japanese Empire occupied the country.¹ At the end of World War II, a defeated Japan pulled out of Malaysia. However, in the twelve days between Japan's retreat and Britain's reclamation of the colony, the Malayan Communist Party took control of the country.² They would clash with their returning British rulers from 1945 until 1963, a period referred to as the Malayan Emergency.³ Ultimately, Britain oversaw one of the only overwhelmingly successful counterinsurgency movements in the 20th century, retaining their authority without destroying their colony, even as the insurgents sought to overthrow them. During the same period, several major powers failed in their counterinsurgency attempts. The French were unable to defeat rebels in Algeria, Portugal

lost Angola, Guinea, and Mozambique; and the United States abandoned the struggle in Vietnam. Despite similarities in tactics among both colonizers and insurgents across these conflicts, as well as similar geography in some cases, Britain stands alone as a rare success story of counterinsurgency in the 20th century. Unlike other occupiers, Britain owed its victory to extreme racial divisions in the population of Malaysia, which, due to its extraordinary ethnic diversity, was unable to unite against the British occupation. Moreover, the British possessed superior resources vis-a-vis the Malaysian insurgents, and were spurred on by mounting pressure from the West to suppress the Communists, in keeping with the Cold War's containment mentality. The impact of Britain's success persists today in the form of significant ethnic divisions. Muslim Malays are favored by government policies over Chinese-Malays, Indian-Malays

and Austronesian (indigenous) Malays.

Britain's primary advantage over the insurgents came from exploiting Malaysia's ethnic diversity. This diverse population came as a result of centuries of trade. The Strait of Malacca was a popular trade passage between the East and West, bringing many Arab, Chinese, and Indian traders into the region for over 1500 years.⁴ These circumstances resulted in a highly diverse population reflected by the current demographic situation: 50.4% of Malaysia's population is Muslim Malay, 23.7% is Chinese, 11% is indigenous Malay, 7.1% is Indian, and 7.8% is comprised by other ethnic groups.⁵ Ethnic identities and ethnic group relations are shaped largely by historical experience and should be viewed in the context of the historical development and formation of an ethnic group. While objective components, such as language or customs are components of ethnic identity, the subjective experience of ethnic identification defines ethnic group relations. An analysis of the ethnogenesis of a few of the diverse ethnic identities reveals the way in which the British exploited tensions between the ethnic groups that continue today.

Prior to 1946, Malays were divided geographically and identified with the domains of their respective sultanates. In order to centralize control over these disparate Malay states, the British facilitated Malay nationalism in an attempt to unite the different regions through the Malayan Union scheme. This strategy ostracized non-Malay ethnic groups, such as the Chinese-Malays, and gave Malays political dominance over other ethnic groups. Today Malays in Malaysia identify as one ethnic group, the Melayu, tracing their ethnogenesis to the nationalism constructed and encouraged by the British. On the other hand, the Chinese-

Malay ethnogenesis was a response to the political dominance of the Malays. Early Chinese immigrants were politically oriented towards China rather than Malaysia and separate ethnic groups, such as the Hokkien and the Cantonese, actually competed with each other. In fact, intermarriage between the groups was looked down upon. However, the competing groups integrated to create a meta-ethnic group in response to British sponsored Malay dominance and now identify as Chinese, or Huayu.

In a similar way, in order "to avoid being edged out economically and politically in an emerging new state," indigenous groups called for unity in response to the politically and economically well-established Malay and Chinese. The British unification of Malaysia highlighted these ethnic differences and created incentives for Malaysians to identify as members of distinct ethnic groups. The nature of economic and political development following the formation of the Malaysian state benefited certain ethnic groups, forcing others to consolidate and seek government acceptance and approval. The British aggravated these divisions to their advantage during the counterinsurgency, contributing to their eventual victory.⁶

The different ethnic groups were wary of each other and could not unify behind either the Malayan Communist Party guerrilla fighters or the British Commonwealth soldiers. The seeds for this disunity were sown in the 19th century. Under British rule, ethnic groups were significantly and intentionally divided. Starting in the mid-1800s, "primary and secondary school education was almost entirely ethnically segregated" by the British government.⁷ Different groups were socialized to distrust the others. Much of this distrust came through stereotypes that the British built up,

such as Malays being “lazy liars” and the Chinese “greedy pigs.”⁸ Ethnic tensions were exacerbated by Britain’s explicit stereotyping and creation of social hierarchies among the groups. The British grudgingly respected Chinese businessmen, but considered them untrustworthy and their culture inferior. They were still ranked socially higher than Malays, who were in turn higher than both Indians and indigenous Malays.⁹ Japan’s 1942 takeover changed this status quo. The Indians and some Malays rose in power, the former because the Japanese wanted to be on good terms with India and the latter because they needed locals to serve in administrative roles after the invasion. For the first time since falling under a foreign nation’s rule, these groups were able to participate in their own governance.¹⁰ The Japanese invasion did not benefit all ethnic groups. Reflecting Japan’s antagonism towards China in World War II, Japanese occupying forces rounded up many Chinese-Malaysians and slaughtered them, with an estimated death toll of 400,000.¹¹

The deep divisions between ethnic groups is the primary difference between the Malayan Emergency and other attempted insurgency movements. For example, the French Algerian insurgency possessed a far more homogenous population, which allowed them to muster a unified front against the French as they fought for dominance in the 1950s and 1960s.¹² In the Vietnam War as well, similarity in ideology and race allowed the Viet Cong insurgency to fight on without worrying about internal divisions. A similar situation occurred during the Portuguese Colonial War, where relatively nationalist insurgencies in Angola, Guinea, and Mozambique were able to expel the Portuguese colonial regime.¹³

On the other hand, the lack of

unification among the Malay population was a major boon to the British counterinsurgency. The majority of Malaysia’s Chinese supported the communist takeover, tempted by the taste of power they felt under the British yet resentful of their mistreatment under both the British and Japanese regimes. Some Indians, indigenous Malays, and Malays also supported the communist insurgents for similar reasons. There was a popular willingness to try any form of government that provided an alternative to the oppressive British regime. However, while most Malays opposed Malaysia’s status as a colony, some did not believe communism was the proper channel for Malaysia to escape British rule and flourish as its own nation.¹⁴ Other factions within the ethnic groups simply preferred British rule to Communist rule and supported the counterinsurgency for its own sake. The British knew that success could be achieved by further dividing the population. In 1949, two years after the Malayan Emergency began, Britain sent General Harold Briggs to

“Other factions within the ethnic groups simply preferred British rule to Communist rule and supported the counterinsurgency for its own sake.”

put down the insurgency. He implemented the Briggs Plan, which further divided the population. Its purpose was to defeat the Malaysian Communist Party (MCP) by cutting it off from its supporters. To accomplish this goal, they relocated certain ethnic groups, mainly the Chinese and some of the indigenous Malays, to camps called “New Villages.”¹⁶ This

forced migration was a significant blow to the insurgents, as the population became even more divided. This artificial physical separation of the different ethnic groups in the 1950s created the geographic separations we see today in Malaysia. The Chinese and indigenous Malaysians were specifically targeted throughout the 1950s because they made up the bulk of the insurgents as both guerrilla fighters and as farmers providing the fighters food and shelter.¹⁷ Without the support of other groups, the rebels, hiding in the jungles, began to starve.

One disadvantage the British faced was a lack of familiarity with the territory compared with the fighters on the side of the Malayan Communist Party. Additionally, many insurgents possessed training in guerrilla warfare, skills learned during their efforts to repel the Japanese invaders. Chin Peng, the leader of the MCP, had even received some British military training. Thus, the Malaysian insurgents were somewhat familiar with British strategy, creating a relatively level playing field at the tactical and strategic levels.¹⁸ Some might even say the Malaysians held a significant strategic advantage much like the Viet Cong did in the Vietnam War due to their superior knowledge of the terrain – the British soldiers were not used to fighting in jungles and were susceptible to various diseases.

However, the adaptive nature of the British fighting forces neutralized the primary advantages of the insurgents. The British Commonwealth troops' superior training allowed them to conduct themselves in more organized formations, though they were not overly rigid in their military tactics. They were highly adaptive when it came to approaching different situations.¹⁹ They learned that attempting head-on fights would be useless against the MCP guerrilla fighters. They got faster at responding

to sneak attacks. General Briggs realized that the 13 infantry battalions stationed in Malaysia would not be enough to enforce the Briggs' Plan. Thus, reinforcements were called in from the Royal Marines, the King's African Rifles, and the Special Air Services (SAS).

Britain's superior resources provided another advantage over the communists. The British possessed more food, manpower, and means of communication, all key assets in fighting long-term battles. In total, about 40,000 British soldiers were deployed, facing approximately 8,000 insurgents at the Malayan Emergency's peak.²⁰ With the addition of more soldiers, air support, and spies, as well as the introduction of more military leaders with jungle-fighting experience, British forces pushed the Malayan Communist Party further back into the jungles and cut them off from their supply routes. The British also leveraged superior communication methods such as radios to coordinate troops; a tool the rebels did not possess. The British also scattered pamphlets across particularly conflict-ridden regions, offering monetary rewards to rebels who turned in their weapons. Some pamphlets also encouraged Malays and indigenous tribes to report to British troops to receive medical aid and food, thus drawing their support away from the insurgents.²¹

The Malaysian insurgents were forced to rely primarily on word-of-mouth to communicate, whether between guerrilla forces or between people in towns. They had no continuous access to printing presses to spread propaganda, let alone military radios. Communication was an even greater problem for the insurgents after the forced migrations. The "New Villages" were remote, and information could be scarce. The increased allocation of troops and especially the continuous segregation

of ethnic groups under to the Briggs Plan proved to be a highly successful counterinsurgency strategy. Additionally, due to the variety of opinions and the groups' ingrained mistrust of each other, they could not unify against the better-organized, more powerful British. Had it not been for this segregation, Malaysia's future may have followed Guinea's, where Guinean insurgents successfully fought for their freedom from France in an asymmetric conflict.¹⁵

What makes the British success even more surprising is the fact that it took three years of communist insurgency before there was a significant investment in a counterinsurgency. Britain did not bother to send in any military leadership or even more troops until 1949. Even as the insurgents attacked British soldiers, killed British plantation owners, and then vanished into the jungle, British colonial representatives were left to flounder without military support for two years. Finally, General Briggs was appointed to Malaysia and the urgency to defeat the Malayan Communist Party insurgents heightened dramatically.²² This rapid change in approach towards the Communists is likely due to the advent of the Cold War. 1947 is commonly considered the year that relations between the West and the Soviet Union began to sour. The United States and its allies, including Britain, began viewing the Third World as a battleground against communism. George Kennan's theory of containment was published during those first two years of fighting in Malaysia, further spurring the necessity of action being taken to prevent communism worldwide. The MCP's attempted revolt was finally taken seriously by Britain as the Cold War increased tensions between the East and West. This convinced the British government to appoint one of their top generals, Briggs, and assigned

thousands more soldiers to their rogue colony. The Commonwealth troops' newfound sense of urgency and ferocity caught the rebels off guard. While the conflict would last another two decades, the Red Scare lent an essential intensity to the British counterinsurgency. By 1960, it was clear that the counterinsurgency had won.²³

On the whole, the British counterinsurgency in Malaysia is generally considered a success. However, victory for the British colonial government did not come cheaply. Malaysia's economy was nowhere near as strong as it had been prior to the conflict. Chinese and Indian workers made up most of the agriculture labor force, and as the British moved people into the "New Villages" the farming industry was disrupted. Domestic food production dropped, and the economy began to fall with it.²⁴ However, it was better off than the aftermath of the Philippine-American War, an insurgency in the 19th and 20th centuries in which an estimated 4,200 Americans and 265,000 to 1 million Filipinos died.²⁵ By contrast, only about 1,800 soldiers and police officers and 6,000 communists and their supporters died during the Malayan Emergency.²⁶

Still, both sides knew if they continued fighting, it would only lead to unnecessary bloodshed that would last for years to come. In the late 1950s, Britain began to push Malaysia towards independence.²⁷ The British did not want to deal with this sort of drawn-out fight in the region again. The counterinsurgency drained resources Britain wanted to focus against the USSR. Malaysia gained independence from Britain in 1957. The Malaysian government modeled their administration after Britain's, as illustrated by the dual power of the Prime Minister and a constantly rotating king, with a new one chosen every five years from one of nine

existing royal families from different regions of Malaysia.²⁸ This dual power comes from the need to bridge the separations felt between the ethnic groups as they scrambled to form a single nation, a task made even more difficult by Britain's forced migration.

The effects of the British Counterinsurgency are still felt in Malaysia more than half a century later. The aforementioned "New Villages" have grown into towns and cities, mainly populated by the Chinese who were originally placed there.²⁹ Discrimination and segregation of ethnic minorities is still rampant, due to continuing government policies that discriminate in favor of Malays in areas ranging from employment to education. Affirmative action procedures used by universities, backed by Article 153 of the Malaysian Constitution, ensure the majority of the student population is Malay and that the majority of scholarships go to Malays, leading Chinese-Malays, Indian-Malays, and indigenous Malays to protest this ethnic discrimination.³⁰ The New Economic Policy (NEP) is also a point of contention with many in Malaysia. The NEP guarantees a 7% discount on housing for Malays, while non-Malays receive no housing assistance. Other economic policies in Malaysia follow similar patterns of discrimination.³¹

The political situation in Malaysia reflects current ethnic relations, an extension of the ethnic relations established under British rule and exacerbated during the counterinsurgency. The Democratic Action Party (DAP), an ethnically Chinese party, is challenging the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the party that has ruled the country since independence. This comes after the dissipation of the Pakatan partnership, a coalition made up of the DAP; the People's Justice Party (PKR),

a multi-ethnic party; and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), a religious ethnic Malay party. The fragility of this partnership and the division of the political parties along ethnic lines reveal the ethnic tensions that still exist in Malaysia today, tensions which trace their roots to British colonial policies during the Malayan Emergency.³²

Colonial history inevitably leaves its mark on postcolonial countries. However, in the 20th century, Britain left a very unique stamp on Malaysia's history – compared to the colonial wars of other contemporary empires, Britain's actions in Malaysia represent one of the only examples of a successful colonial counterinsurgency. Its victory in Malaysia resulted in a complete reclamation of control from the rebels, while ensuring that the colony survived the process more or less intact. Even at the end, Britain's decision to establish Malaysian self-rule came from the knowledge that it would simply step down in name, but would still hold tremendous political and economic sway over the nation, retaining de facto control over the former colony. ♦

¹ "Timeline: Malaysia's History - Malaysia Elections," *Al Jazeera*, May 1, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/malaysiaelections/2013/04>.

² Noel Barber, *The War of the Running Dogs; the Malayan Emergency: 1948-1960* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 2007), 172.

³ Australian Department of Veterans' Affairs, "Causes and General Description of the Malayan Emergency," Australian Involvement in South-East Asian Conflicts, Australian Government: Department of Veterans' Affairs. 2009. Accessed 14 Jan. 2014. <http://se-asia.commemoration.gov.au/background->

- toCynthia Hannon and Anna Robert Autumn 2015 23 malayan-emergency/causes-anddescription.php.
- ⁴ Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- ⁵ “The World Fact Book,” *Central Intelligence Agency*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/my.html> (Accessed February 5, 2014).
- ⁶ Tan Teng Phee, “Oral History and People’s Memory of the Malayan Emergency (1948-60): The Case of Pulau,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 27, no. 1 (2012): 84-119.
- ⁷ Fakhri R. Khader, “The Malaysian Experience in Developing National Identity, Multicultural Tolerance and Understanding through Teaching Curricula: Lessons Learned and Possible Applications in the Jordanian Context,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 2, no. 1 (2012): 270.
- ⁸ Azlan Tajuddin, *Malaysia in the World Economy (1824-2011): Capitalism, Ethnic Divisions, and “Managed” Democracy*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012).
- ⁹ Khader, “The Malaysian Experience in Developing National Identity, Multicultural Tolerance and Understanding through Teaching Curricula: Lessons Learned and Possible Applications in the Jordanian Context,” 2012.
- ¹⁰ Barber, *The War of the Running Dogs; the Malayan Emergency: 1948-1960*, 2007.
- ¹¹ Tan, “Oral History and People’s Memory of the Malayan Emergency (1948-60): The Case of Pulau,” 2012.
- ¹² Martin Evans, *Algeria: France’s Undeclared War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- ¹³ Peter Abbott, *Modern African Wars: Angola and Mozambique 1961-74*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1988).
- ¹⁴ Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board, “Who Are Malaysians?” *Kaleideculture*, 2006, <http://www.geographia.com/malaysia/cultures.html>.
- ¹⁵ Peter Abbott, *Modern African Wars: Angola and Mozambique 1961-74*, 1988.
- ¹⁶ John A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons From Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002).
- ¹⁷ Barber, *The War of the Running Dogs; the Malayan Emergency: 1948-1960*, 2007. Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board, “Who Are Malaysians?” 2006.
- ¹⁸ Barber, *The War of the Running Dogs; the Malayan Emergency: 1948-1960*, 2007.
- ¹⁹ Australian Department of Veterans’ Affairs, “Causes and General Description of the Malayan Emergency,” 2009.
- ²⁰ Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons From Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 2002.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² “Timeline: Malaysia’s History - Malaysia Elections,” *Al Jazeera*, 2013.
- ²³ Tajuddin, *Malaysia in the World Economy (1824-2011): Capitalism, Ethnic Divisions, and “Managed” Democracy*, 2012.
- ²⁴ Emil Guillermo, “A First Taste of Empire,” *The Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee), February 8, 2004.
- ²⁵ National Army Museum, “The Malayan Emergency,” *National Army Museum*, (London: Accessed 2 Mar. 2014), <http://www.nam.ac.uk/exhibitions/onlineexhibitions/malayan-emergency>. A Successful Counterinsurgency 24 Vol. 6 - No. 2.
- ²⁶ “Timeline: Malaysia’s History - Malaysia Elections,” *Al Jazeera*, 2013.
- ²⁷ Joseph Sipalan, “Understanding the Powers of the King,” *The Star Online*, June 2, 2012, Accessed 14 Feb. 2014, <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2012/06/02/Understanding-the-powers-of-the-King/>.
- ²⁸ Tan, “Oral History and People’s Memory of the Malayan Emergency (1948-60): The Case of Pulau,” 2012.



- ²⁹ Equal Rights Trust, *Washing the Tigers: Addressing Discrimination and Inequality in Malaysia*, (London, UK: Equal Rights Trust, 2012).
- ³⁰ “A Never Ending Policy,” *The Economist*, April 27, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21576654-elections-may-could-mark-turning-point-never-ending-policy>.
- ³¹ “The Trouble with Trebles: Malaysia’s Opposition Becomes Unstuck,” *The Economist*, June 20, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21654621-malysias-opposition-comes-unstuck-trouble-trebles>.

Cynthia Hannon is a junior at the University of Washington pursuing a BA in International Studies and Economics. This paper was originally written for JSIS 201, taught by Professor Migdal in the winter of 2014.

Anna Robert graduated in 2015 from the University of Washington with a major in Political Science and a focus on Political Economy. Her research interests include international law, women’s development policy and health policy. Anna also served on the editorial board of the Jackson School Journal as both an editor and social media coordinator.

Edited by Francis Wilson and Anna Mikkelsen