

Article REVIEW

Philip Deery. “Malaya, 1948: Britain’s Asian Cold War.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9:1 (Winter 2007): 29-54. doi:10.1162/jcws.2007.9.1.29. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2007.9.1.29> .

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Published by H-Diplo on 15 June 2007

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/Hack-Deery.pdf>

Did the Communist Party of the Soviet Union instruct the opening of a new Cold War front in Asia in 1948? Did the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) have a “plan” for armed insurrection by mid-1948? On both counts Philip Deery suggests not. This commentary will tackle his argument as follows. First, it will outline the events and Deery’s thesis on these. Second, it will show that Deery is wrong to characterise recent historiography as exaggerating the Soviet role and MCP planning in 1948.¹ In fact the historiography increasingly de-emphasises both.² Third, the commentary will dip into the sources to show that the real “revisionist” case to be made today is based upon two assumptions: that the Soviet role needs to be given at least some weight within nuanced, multicausal models of the outbreak of the “Asian Cold War”; and that the MCP did have a programme intended to end in armed revolt within months, even though the British precipitated this.

The main events are clear enough. In late 1947 to mid-1948, the Communist Party of India adopted a radical stance, and communist parties in Burma, Indonesia, and Malaya became mired in revolt. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in particular became embroiled in the Malayan Emergency starting from June 1948.

Surely, many reasoned, this wave of revolution had to have one common origin. British officials were soon explaining events as part of a Soviet-inspired extension of the Cold War to Asia. By 1949, they agreed that the “two-camp” line, expounded by Zhdanov at the inaugural meeting of the Cominform, in September 1947, had helped persuade regional parties to replace “united front” tactics with violent revolt. This version of events was then reflected in academic writing in the 1950s and (according to Deery) still remains predominant.

¹ Deery constructs his supposedly dominant historiography by taking too many citations from the 1950s-60s rather than from the late 1980s onwards, downplaying people such as Harper and Stockwell as “exceptions (his p. 33, fn 15-16) when they are mainstream; and generously citing recent authors of marginal importance to scholastic debate, notably including military enthusiasts.

² The most authoritative and cited recent works are those by Anthony Stockwell, Anthony Short, Richard Stubbs, and, more recently, Karl Hack and C.C. Chin. The key work is Anthony Stockwell, “‘A Widespread and long-concocted plot to overthrow the Government of Malaya’? The Origins of the Malayan Emergency,” *Journal of Commonwealth and Imperial History* (1993), 66-88. For a survey of the main Emergency authorities see Karl Hack, “Iron Claws on Malaya”: The Historiography of the Malayan Emergency”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 30:1 (1999): 99-125. My *Defence and Decolonisation: Britain, Malaya and Singapore, 1941-68* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), p. 116, already came to more nuanced conclusions. Since then the major works of note also do not support picture. These are C.C. Chin and Karl Hack, *Dialogues with Chin Peng: New Perspectives on the Malayan Communist Party* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1999), especially pp. 116-43, n.b. en 2, 9, 14, 15, 25-26. Tim Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), and Chris Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain’s Asian Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), e.g. p. 415.

Deery describes the “still widespread” orthodoxy he wishes to attack as follows.³ First, Soviet instructions were disseminated at two conferences in Calcutta in February 1948: one organised by the World Federation of Democratic Youth and International Union of Students; the other involving the Communist Party of India (CPI). According to Deery, the prevailing consensus remains (with “exceptions”) that these instructions passed to parties including the Malayan Communist Party (MCP).⁴ One messenger was the Communist Party of Australia General Secretary Lance Sharkey, who dropped in on Singapore en route back to Australia. Thus instructed, the MCP decided (in March and May 1948) to reverse its former united front strategy. Central Executive meetings determined that the ultimate form of struggle would be “people’s revolutionary war”, and, that the people should now be prepared by a new emphasis on illegal means. Hence, in June 1948, violence reached such proportions that the British declared a state of Emergency, locally on 16 June, nationally by 18 June 1948.

Deery argues that the truth is rather different: that the Calcutta Conferences of 1948 did not disseminate instructions; there was not a centrally concocted plan for revolt in Malaya itself; and local conditions favoured revolt anyway. Now, most of Deery’s individual statements are true. The MCP Secretary General Lai Tek did abscond in March 1947, taking with him most of the party funds. His unveiling as a triple agent (he had worked for the British, and for the occupying Japanese) destroyed almost any credibility the party’s “united front” strategy still had. With employers and the government fighting back against MCP-run unions, younger, more gung-ho MCP leaders took decisions to increase violent action. But even then, they were far from launching a full revolt by June. Many cadres were arrested before they could flee. In addition, some British officials did later present events as if they were simplistically caused by instructions relayed from Moscow and through Calcutta, whether for internal or external propaganda reasons, or sometimes because they honestly came to believe such simplifications.⁵

The problem is that what Deery presents as his revisionism – the idea that the MCP stumbled into revolt largely for local reasons with Calcutta playing little role, has been the orthodoxy for decades. It is true that some scholarly 1950s and 1960s works, and less careful and more purely military works afterwards, continued to propagate the more simplistic interpretation. But most university-based academics specialising on Malaya and the Emergency have long since abandoned them.⁶ The real mainstream, academic historiography developed in the following manner.

In 1958, Ruth McVey argued that what mattered was not the Calcutta Conferences, but the gradual dissemination of the change in international communist line from September 1947. For her, the Calcutta Conferences merely added tinder to the fire. There were also debates about how far the MCP planned

³ Deery, p. 45, “contrary to the still-widespread view that the revolt occurred only because the MCP received Soviet “instructions” to that effect at the Calcutta conferences of February-March 1948”.

⁴ Deery, p. 33-5, 38, and p. 33 n17.

⁵ Stockwell’s “‘A Widespread and long-concocted plot’”, p. 80-83, dealt with such issues.

⁶ Hence his p. 33 reference to being “in line with relatively recent interpretations” will not do, as these stretch from 1975 at least, and in many ways from 1958, and he fails to acknowledge that these are the academic mainstream. There is no need to restore local agency, as it has been there for decades.

the revolt, and how far instead British repression drove events. Anthony Short's classic 1975 work already recognised that the issues were complex and ambivalent.⁷

By the 1980s to 1990s authors such as Stubbs and Stockwell favoured complex, multicausal explanations, which blended British actions, MCP leadership problems, and to a decreasing degree, international changes.⁸ It is true that military historians were slower to come round.⁹ Anthony Stockwell then anticipated much of Deery's line of attack in a vital 1993 article, which suggested rising MCP violence had multiple causes, and that by mid-1948 the MCP was not yet at the stage of fully planned rebellion.¹⁰ In the late 1990s, Tim Harper argued the MCP did not choose to jump, but was pushed by its own supporters. He presented it as responding to rising violence on the forest frontier, where the state was trying to push its main supporters, the rural Chinese squatters, off ecologically vulnerable or Malay-reserved land. For Harper, both Government and MCP were responding to forces from below.¹¹

More recently, MCP Secretary General Chin Peng has gone further, and argued that the MCP did not start the Emergency, the British did, both by prior repression of MCP political and union activity, and by declaring a state of emergency in June. His implication is that the MCP merely took ad hoc steps in reaction to increasing British repression, culminating in using violence to support strikes.¹² So, as Anthony Stockwell recently wrote in the *Journal of Royal Asiatic Studies*:

given that Malaya experienced endemic violence throughout the immediate post-war years, it is difficult to pinpoint the start of the armed struggle. Working from suspect intelligence the colonial authorities had no doubt that the Malayan communists planned a rising and, in the febrile atmosphere of the Cold War, it was easy to jump to the

⁷ Anthony Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya, 1948-60* (London: Frederick Muller, 1975). Reissued as *In Pursuit of the Mountain Rats* (Singapore: Cultured Lotus, 2000). See pp. 46-49 for Calcutta sounding "an uncertain note" with "a lot of hard matching" to be done locally.

⁸ Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare: The Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 60. Even in 1989, Stubbs was pushing it when he presented his downgrading of Calcutta as novel. Short had already shifted the ground.

⁹ Deery, p. 39, especially fn. 46. Deery has either failed to update Clutterbuck's views, or quoted too selectively. Clutterbuck does imply there is likely to be *some* relationship between Calcutta and regional revolts, but by 1984 he follows it with the caveat that "While there were other powerful reasons ... the Calcutta Conference no doubt played some part in prompting the MCP".. Some of Deery's treatment of other sources is also problematic. For example, he cites (p. 39 fn 48) McLane, *Soviet Strategies*, pp. 390, 399. But those pages ask if Chinese influence was not greater on the MCP than Zhdanov, Calcutta etc. McLane's own view, on pp. 388-89, treats "The usual British view" analytically rather than uncritically.

¹⁰ A. J. Stockwell, "A widespread and long-concocted plot to overthrow government in Malaya".

¹¹ For more of this historiography, see: Ruth McVey, *The Calcutta Conference and the South-East Asian Uprisings* (Ithaca, 1958); M. R. Stenson, *Repression and Revolt: The Origins of the 1948 Communist Insurrection in Malaya and Singapore* (Athens, Ohio, 1969); and Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, pp. 94-148.

¹² Chin Peng, with Ian Ward and Norma Mirafior, *Alias Chin Peng: My Side of the Story* (Singapore: Media Masters, 2003). For a more critical view and a reliable, short biographical chapter, see also C.C. Chin and Karl Hack (eds.), *Dialogues with Chin Peng* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004).

conclusion that the Malayan disturbances were the culmination of a long-concocted plot orchestrated by the Soviet Union. Historians, however, have long since abandoned the view that the Malayan Communist Party mounted a revolution in obedience to instructions transmitted from Moscow via, first, a London conference of Commonwealth communists in late 1947 and, then, the Calcutta Youth Conference of February 1948. Some have argued that the MCP's decisions were shaped primarily by Malayan circumstances; others have suggested that the Party reacted to events, instead of determining them, and thus stumbled into revolution.¹³

So Deery is pushing at an open door, so open that readers of H-Diplo and the *Journal of Cold War Studies* might wonder if the pendulum has now swung too far. Do we now need a revision of the impression that everyone drifted into armed conflict “in a fit of absence of mind”, with neither the British nor Chin Peng planning for mid-1948, and all the regional insurrections clustering by mere coincidence?

We might – for the sake of argument – develop such a thesis as follows. Even at the time some British officials had a more subtle view, which did not assume a straightforward following of Moscow's orders. Some officials traced how regional parties aligned with a change in the prestigious international communist line over a period of months, tailoring this line to local conditions. In November 1948, Britain's premier regional centre – the Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia's headquarters in Singapore – sent the Foreign Office a detailed summary. This claimed that Zhdanov's report to Cominform of September 1947, “For a Lasting Peace, For a People's Democracy”, as published in the Cominform journal of November, was soon disseminated in India, Malaya, and Burma. It particularly noted local parties' accepting Zhdanov's criticism of optimistic illusions in the three to four months afterwards. Additionally, it attached a chart with over 30 stages of dissemination. To take just a selection:¹⁴

1. 10. 11.1947. Zhdanov's report on the International Situation is published in the first issue of the Cominform Journal – having been developed end September.
3. 7.12.47 Communist Party of India (CPI) accepts paper on “Present Policy and
-17.12.47 Tasks of the CPI” and criticises former “opportunistic illusions”.
5. 25.12.47 Mao's report to Central Executive Committee (CEC) echoes Zhdanov's report ...
8. 1.2.48- Communists from all over the world arrive for in Calcutta for the Southeast Asia Youth and Student Conference.
10. Feb. – probably the 1st. Politburo of Burma Communist Party decides to adopt a policy of “open resistance”.

¹³ Anthony Stockwell, “Chin Peng and the Struggle for Malaya”, *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 6:1 (2006), pp. 279-97.

¹⁴ The National Archives, UK (TNA): FO371/69695, Commissioner General's Office (Singapore) to Southeast Asia Department, 24 November 1948, including 10 November 1948 memorandum and attachments.

11. 19.2.48 Southeast Asia Youth Conference opens.

21. 20.3.48- Central Executive Committee of MCP approves plan for armed revolt. Produces thesis “The Existing Situation”...

The full account interweaves events across South and Southeast Asia, trying to demonstrate a discernable shift, with the language of that shift reflecting the “two camp” line. For instance, it attached the key MCP paper “The Existing Situation”, as tabled at the critical MCP Central Executive Meeting of 17 to 21 March 1947. This repeated the “two camp” Zhdanov formula and pronounced cooperation with the British Labour Party as being useless. “Under these circumstances” the paper demanded full independence and proclaimed “the people’s revolutionary war” to be “inevitable”, with “armed struggle” of particular significance. The emphasis was now on preparing a front of the lower workers and peasants. The May 1948 meeting put the gloss on this, notably with Chin Peng enthusiastically adopting Sharkey’s espousal of using violence in support of labour. While we can argue how far the changing international line – and its discussion and reception across Asia – caused or merely coloured events, it would be difficult to deny that it provided at least the language in which the critical decisions were debated.

There is not space here to work out these problems in full, but I do want to suggest a model for the influence of the Soviet line, and for what the MCP’s role was in the outbreak of the Malayan Emergency. In both cases, it helps if we start with the wrong question.

Wrong question number one: did Moscow issue directives, passed on at two Calcutta conferences in February 1948, which caused the opening of a new, Southeast Asian front in the Cold War? No, what happened was that Zhdanov’s “two camp” line was being disseminated amongst Asian parties by late 1947.¹⁵ The CPSU’s “international line” and criticism of past optimism and united front policy was influential, and discussed region-wide. As such it had weight when local parties debated their next actions. In some cases, perhaps in Burma (and despite Burmese independence in January 1948), the international line may have helped swing debate in favour of armed revolt.¹⁶ But as Mao reportedly told Chin Peng, local parties had to interpret the international line in the context of local conditions.¹⁷ This interpretation of how the “international line” worked was long ago explained by Ralph Smith, though for a slightly later date.¹⁸ That is, local parties drew strength not just from the prestige and success of the Soviet Union (the People’s Republic of China too from 1949), but from being part of a scientific world movement. As such, any international “line” propagated by the CPSU had to be engaged with.

¹⁵ McVey, *The Calcutta Conference*, p. 1-24.

¹⁶ See for instance Harper, *Forgotten Wars*, pp. 379-80; McLane, *Soviet Strategies in Southeast Asia*, passim; and TNA, FO371/69695.

¹⁷ Chin and Hack, *Dialogues*, p. 133-34, 142n25.

¹⁸ “China and Southeast Asia: The Revolutionary Perspective, 1951”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 19:1 (1988), 97-110.

In Malaya, as noted by authors as far apart as McLane in the 1960s and Hack in 2001, the outbreak of violence was nevertheless “over-determined”. When the MCP took its decisions to prepare the ground for “people’s revolutionary war”, in March to May 1948, it was faced with the treachery of its former Secretary General, a record low of postwar violence around February 1948, a decline in strikes, the government clearing its squatter supporters from the jungle fringe, looming trade union legislation, and a communist international line now rejecting previous over-optimism. Hence, “the resort to violence was massively over-determined.”¹⁹

In other words, any few of the many factors might have been sufficient to provoke the MCP change of strategy. Given so many reasons, no one factor (including the international) can be deemed a necessary cause. Furthermore:

However one may weight the evidence of British “provocation” *versus* the evidence of a calculated strategy by the party leadership, the mood of the Malayan Communists in the spring of 1948 was such that an insurrection not very different from the one that broke out in June would doubtless have developed before the end of the year ... short of a major shift in world communist strategy British “provocation” ... did no more than hasten [events].²⁰

Again, international changes appear mainly as permissive. McLane suggests that only a hard international stance for continuing united front tactics could have counteracted other forces for revolt.

This second quotation also leads us to our second helpfully inappropriate question. Did the MCP have a plan to begin armed violence in June 1948? The answer is again no. But its March and May 1948 decisions did provide a programme of violent preparation, intended to prepare the ground for armed insurrection sometime after September 1948.

One good way to demonstrate that there was a plan or programme intended to achieve armed revolt is to look at Chin Peng’s words. In 1989, the MCP signed a peace accord with Thai and Malaysian representatives. Since then, MCP Secretary General Chin Peng has waged a campaign to publicise his version, most notably at an academic seminar in Canberra in 1999, and through a book. The latter is Chin Peng as told to Ian Ward and Norma Mirafior, *Alias Chin Peng: My Side of the Story* (2003). According to Chin Peng’s version on the Emergency origins: “The decisive factor was the internal situation”, in other words British repression.²¹ His words certainly suggest internal developments were foremost, and the MCP reactive, though we should still exercise care. Chin Peng’s aims include showing the MCP were a vital part of the nationalist struggle for independence, and acknowledging external influences does not sit well with this aim. The March 1948 documents, by contrast, were written in the language of international communism and the Cominform.

At the same time, Chin Peng has emphasised that the MCP were not prepared for revolt in June 1948. His aim here is to present the MCP as pushed reluctantly into revolt by government repression, but despite this his words do reveal MCP planning. This is obvious in the following exchange at Canberra in 1999:

¹⁹ Hack, *Defence and Decolonisation*, p. 116.

²⁰ McLane, *Soviet Strategies*, pp. 388-89.

²¹ Chin and Hack, *Dialogues*, p. 121.

Chin Peng: ... At that time, before the Emergency, we expect the British to step up their attack, to the extent of banning the trade unions and banning our party ... Because we use violence in the strike [the May 1948 decision to step up labour violence]... of course the government will react.... Then, how to respond? In the last resort, we have to launch armed struggle.

Anthony Short: But *Min Sheng Pau* [a communist-run newspaper] was talking about armed struggle in early June. Why would they?

Chin Peng: That was to prepare public opinion. ... we estimate, the earliest the Government will launch the attack is in September... So we had to get our armed forces ready, our nucleus ready before September. Not launching our armed uprising on September. So when the fullscale attack happens, we can react...

...Guerrilla warfare was the best form. And why we didn't make a plan but only a very rough idea, no plan was made? We planned to hold a meeting before September".²²

In short, there may not have been a formal, written document or finalised plan. But there was an outline programme or informal plan by mid-1948, one intended to end in armed rebellion. This aimed to prepare the ground by increasing labour violence and targeting enemies of the workers such as European planters. Small platoons were also to be mobilised as the basis for later guerrilla expansion. After Government repression, they would finally begin full mobilisation, establish a Pahang headquarters, and liberate certain isolated areas of Kelantan, in the north.

Thus it is not strictly true to say there was no MCP plan for revolt. When Chin Peng later called the three murders of European managers of 16 June a "mistake" (they happened in his own state of Perak), what he meant is that they went too far for that particular time. That is, these "three" murders on one day (actually five, most people discount two Asian assistants murdered at the same time, but elsewhere) prematurely triggered the Emergency. In short, by May 1948, the British fully intended to increase pressure on the MCP, and the MCP had a programme of action intended to end in full armed revolt within months. But neither side planned, was ready for, or wanted, full scale combat when it happened, in June 1948.

In conclusion, it is clear that the language of the Cominform, and changes in the international communist line, did colour internal communist party debates within Asia in late 1947 to 1948. It is clear that the MCP and other parties regarded themselves as part of an international as well as a local communist movement, and listened with interest to Soviet and later to Chinese lines. Detailed reception varied from country to country, and in Malaya it is true that armed revolt in 1948 was over-determined. Deery is right to suggest for Malaya a conjunction of international line and local needs, though in this as much else he confirms rather than contradicts the predominant historiography of the last twenty years.²³

²² Chin and Hack, *Dialogues*, pp. 135-36, passim. The *Dialogues* have two advantages. In them Chin Peng is questioned, allowing more than one viewpoint. At Canberra (which the *Dialogues* record) Chin Peng tried out parts of a first draft for his memoirs, and seems to have included insights from those sessions (and background papers) in revising them for *Alias Chin Peng*. Also, *Alias Chin Peng* not only builds on Canberra, but integrates work by Ian Ward as co-writer. However, *Alias Chin Peng* is detailed and superbly written. The two books should be understood as part of an ongoing process of creating and critiquing Chin Peng's version.

What is needed now is more sophisticated analysis in two areas. First, the interaction of various Soviet and Chinese lines, their reception by local parties, and their effect on local party debates and language at critical junctures. Second, the precise way in which the MCP planned a programme of action intended to culminate in insurrection, not in June 1948, but in the few months afterwards, and after provoking sufficient British repression to prepare the ground and justify the action.

Deery, therefore, does us a favour in provoking renewed debate in these areas, and pointing readers to many of the documentary streams. His organisation is boldly clear, and he sketches in the background succinctly and sometimes powerfully.

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Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

²³ Deery, p. 48.