



Rebecca Kenneison. *The Special Operations Executive in Malaya: World War II and the Path to Independence.* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. 256 pp. \$115.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78831-389-6.

Reviewed by Richard Duckett

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

For anyone anticipating a blow-by-blow account of the Force 136 operations in Malaya, this review should probably start by stating that that is not what this book is about. The aims of the book, as set out in the introduction, are threefold: first, to reveal the impact of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) upon the capability and expectations of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP); second, to cast new light upon the political ambitions of the MCP both during and after the war; and third, to assess the nature of imperial intelligence gathering in the period between 1945 and the Emergency of 1948. The overall trajectory of the book is to use the SOE archives to provide a clearer understanding of the causes of the Malayan insurgency than has hitherto been available.

One of the major criticisms of the previous historiography provided by the author is that, until now, “the consensus has long been that the only armed resistance body of any significance was the MPAJA [Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army]” (p. 7). Other groups such as the Malay guerrillas and the Overseas Chinese Anti-Japanese Army (OCAJA) have had little attention, to the extent that the MPAJA has been written about as “the only” opposition in Malaya. Claims that the OCAJA were nothing but gangsters, it is argued, are “highly misleading.” By examining SOE’s oper-

ational reports, one of the main conclusions of the book is that the MCP and its military wing, the MPAJA, were preparing to challenge the colonial authority throughout the wartime period and up to the 1948 Emergency. That challenge should have come as no surprise to London or colonial officials in Malaya; that it did, the author argues, was due to the inability of British officials to use the wealth of information they had available as intelligence.

The book has seven chapters, and starts with an overview of SOE’s early organization in the Far East, known as the Oriental Mission. The Oriental Mission has been perceived as achieving very little, not just in Malaya but throughout the Far East in the lead-up to the Japanese War and up to 1942, when it ceased to exist.[1] This interpretation is challenged, partly by revealing that up to 165 MPAJA guerrillas were trained at Oriental Mission’s Special Training School, which was established in Singapore during 1941. This gave the MPAJA “a good start” (p. 25) and allowed the later SOE mission in the Far East, known as Force 136, to reestablish contact with those MPAJA guerrillas its Oriental Mission personnel had trained. The training of these and other parties for “stay behind” operations, if it had happened earlier, could, the author argues, have conceivably saved Singapore from being surrendered. Nonetheless,

the main argument from this chapter is that the “first steps were taken along the road to the Malayan Emergency” (p. 28).

Chapter 2 focuses on the establishment of the Malay Country Section of SOE in the Far East. Most of the men who staffed it were those that the Oriental Mission had enabled to escape from Singapore. This nucleus of men was essential to the thirteen operations and 320 men who were eventually sent into Malaya, where they trained and armed approximately 5,222 guerrillas by the time of the Japanese surrender. The interesting take-away from this chapter is the examination of the different motivations of indigenous personnel for joining Force 136, and the interservice rivalry between the Allies. This is something of a foundational chapter, which finishes by promising “startling new insights” (p. 49) in the following three chapters, which deal, in turn, with the MPAJA, the Malay resistance, and the OCAJA.

These three central chapters are really the guts of the book. It is here that the book succeeds in its central aim of revealing new insights into the nature of the wartime resistance movements in Malaya. One interesting allegation is that both Mountbatten, as supreme commander in Southeast Asia, and Colin Mackenzie, the head of Force 136, were less than honest with London with their knowledge of the MCP and MPAJA. This was for two reasons: first, because they were worried about relations with Chiang Kai-Shek; and second, because SOE had short-term military objectives aimed at winning the war and an invasion of Malaya would benefit from as much assistance as it could get. Perhaps significantly, this thread is not weaved into the later chapter on British intelligence failures leading up to the Malayan Emergency.

The MPAJA signed the Blantan Agreement with Force 136 in December 1943 to secure food, medicine, arms, and training. It was also a calculated move, Kenneison argues, to ensure that the MCP had some political leverage beyond the end

of the war. The Malay resistance also worked with Force 136 for these reasons, but a more immediate reason was to ensure that they were not suppressed by the MPAJA. Five of Force 136’s operations were to the Malay resistance; one was betrayed within days but the other four all reported friction with the MPAJA. Perhaps the biggest “reveal” in these chapters, however, is the “war within a war” between the MPAJA and the OCAJA, who had established a “proto-state” (p. 89) where they “controlled a population of around 100,000 people” (p. 94). Such was the determination of the MPAJA and its political masters in the MCP to dominate the guerrilla movements that the OCAJA and Malays began to cooperate against the MPAJA. The conclusion is that the Emergency started during the war, when Malays, overseas Chinese, and British worked together to prevent the MCP/MPAJA from dominating the postwar political scene.

The final two chapters detail, respectively, how the MCP/MPAJA used the period between the surrender of Japan and the return of the British colonial authorities to further prepare for a revolutionary attempt at power, and how the British singularly failed to recognize the coming threat. A concluding chapter makes several judgements regarding the MCP/MPAJA on the one hand, and British intelligence failures on the other. In summary, the MCP/MPAJA-sponsored Malay Emergency was a long time coming and the British authorities should have noticed it because they had all the information they required, not least from the multiple postoperational reports of Force 136 officers who had been involved in the thirteen Malay operations. The final verdict is that, like elsewhere that SOE operated, it was responsible for developing postwar conflict within countries liberated from the Axis.

Rebecca Kenneison has succeeded in her aim of using the SOE archive to further our understanding of the origins and development of the Malayan Emergency of 1948. The role of the Spe-

cial Operations Executive in developing the post-war insurgency is compellingly argued, and her conclusions will necessarily become part of any further work in the area of decolonization, intelligence, and SOE studies. There remains room, however, for a detailed study of the thirteen SOE operations in Malaya during World War II, since this book has focused upon their impact on Malayan politics in the postwar period.

Note

[1]. Charles Cruickshank, *SOE in the Far East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

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