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The origins of the Asian Cold War: Malaya 1948

Karl Hack

From the 1970s most scholars have rejected the Cold War orthodoxy that the Malayan Emergency (1948–60) was a result of instructions from Moscow, translated into action by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). They have instead argued that local factors precipitated violence, and that the MCP was relatively unprepared when the Emergency was declared. This article puts the international element back into the picture. It shows that the change from a ‘united front’ to a ‘two camp’ international communist line from 1947 played a significant role in deciding local debates in favour of revolt. It also demonstrates how the MCP had plans for a graduated build-up to armed revolt before an Emergency was declared. This article therefore offers a model for a dynamic, two-way relationship between the international and local levels of Cold War.

By early 1948 the high levels of violence that had stalked Malaya since the end of the Pacific War appeared to be ebbing a little. In January and March 1948, murders in Malaya reached a post-war low: seven in each month. Strikes were below their postwar peak.¹ The Malayan Security Service had little new to say about communist plans in the first three months of 1948, for the simple reason that Malayan Communist Party (MCP) strategy had changed little over the previous year.² Up until early 1948, the MCP Central Committee still supported a policy of open and legal political and union activity, frequently in cooperation with bourgeois parties. The MCP Central Committee meeting of 20–26 March 1948 was to change all this.

In April 1948 strikes proliferated, attended by increased violence, intimidation and murder. Murder incidents had fallen from 1946 to 1947 (from a yearly 421 to 220) but in 1948, they shot up to 470, almost entirely due to a surge in and after

Karl Hack lectures in History at the Open University, United Kingdom. He specialises in insurgency, imperialism and decolonisation in modern Malaysia and Singapore, and on Singapore’s history in general. His email address is k.a.hack@open.ac.uk. The author would like to thank the British Academy for their support, which made possible the Asian-based travel, research and networking on which the writing of this paper was dependent.

1 Karl Hack, *Defence and decolonisation in Southeast Asia* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), p. 116, citing *Annual Report of the Federation of Malaya, 1948* (Kuala Lumpur), pp. 8 and 124–5.

2 See Oxford University, Rhodes House Library (henceforth RHL), MSS Indian Ocean s251, Malayan Security Service (MSS) Political Intelligence Journal (PIJ), Supplements for Jan.–Mar.1948. MCP plans started to change radically only from 20 March, hence impacting on subsequent monthly reports. For some background on the MSS, see Leon Comber, *Malaya’s Secret Police: The role of the Special Branch in the Malayan Emergency* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008).

April.³ By May and early June, murders of Asian (Europeans were as yet rarely targets) labour contractors, employers and MCP opponents had increased markedly.

Events came to a head in June. The MCP was increasing its labour action. On 1 June a police baton charge, aimed at evicting workers from their Johor estate, left seven workers dead. The MCP 'defence' of workers intensified, culminating in the events of 16 June.⁴ Until then, political murders had been growing, but still averaging less than one a day. But on this one day three European estate managers and two Asians were killed. Growing exasperation at the government's inability to counter the threat now exploded on to the front pages of the press. The next day, the *Straits Times* thundered that High Commissioner Edward Gent should 'Govern or Get Out'. On the 18th, Gent declared a national state of emergency: one that would officially last until July 1960, and involve up to 8,000 insurgents on one side, and up to 40,000 troops, 70,000 police and 250,000 Home Guards on the other. In the hours and days that followed the declaration of an emergency, more than 1,000 left-wing and union activists were detained without trial under Emergency powers. But that did not save Gent's career or, indirectly, his life. Recalled to London for talks, he was killed when his aircraft crashed near London early in the following month.

What is to be explained: The transition from united fronts to Asia-wide revolts

We need to explain this dramatic change in Malaya, which can be dated to between February and June 1948. The suddenness of the change naturally leads to questions about the role of MCP planning. Given the radical change in the MCP stance over the course of early 1948, how did this occur and what role did it play in the outbreak of the Malayan Emergency?

Yet MCP planning cannot be seen in isolation. The contrast between the local situation in late 1947 and late 1948 is astonishing for many Asian countries, not just for Malaya. In mid-1947, left-wing parties in India, and across most of Southeast Asia, were either in a state of uneasy truce with governments, or engaged in open, constitutional politics. The priority was rebuilding after the war, ending shortages and winning independence, which would come in a wave of decolonisation to India and Pakistan (15 August 1947), Burma (4 January 1948) and Ceylon (4 February 1948). In Indochina, the Viet Minh continued to control much of the north of the country, briefly negotiating with the French, while in Indonesia the main contest was not ideological but rather between nationalist Indonesian Republicans on the one hand, and the Dutch on the other. The Soviet Union itself still supported an international communist line of pursuing 'united front' tactics with anti-colonial bourgeois parties.

Yet in 1948 such 'united front' tactics were abandoned in almost all these areas, with armed communist uprisings occurring in that year in Malaya, Burma, the

3 Hack, *Defence and decolonisation*, p. 116, citing *Annual Report of the Federation of Malaya, 1948* (KL), pp. 8 and 124-5. Historians often seem to assume violence and strikes were at a peak or increasing in early 1948, whereas this most obvious of sources – the Annual Report – shows the surge in violence was consequence not cause of the MCP's March decisions. Despite the Emergency, some categories of crime (housebreaking, theft) *still fell in 1948 as a whole*. The MCP's problem was not rising violence they had to tap, but declining postwar disorder.

4 Hack, *Defence and decolonisation*, p. 117.

Philippines and Indonesia, and the Franco-Viet Minh partial truce breaking down. Inevitably, this raises the additional question of whether 1948 saw the calculated opening of an Asian front in the wider, international Cold War. Hence the second major issue to be investigated is whether the Communist Party of the Soviet Union instructed or influenced the opening of a new Cold War front in Asia, including in Malaya, in 1948?

We now have two main questions. Firstly, did the MCP have a 'plan' for armed insurrection by mid-1948? Secondly, did the Soviet Union prompt the dramatic changes in many Asian communist parties policies between mid 1947 and late 1948?

The Cold War orthodoxy: International directives, MCP plan for revolt

In the late 1940s to early 1950s, a Cold War orthodoxy on these questions emerged, which held (in public at least), that the Soviet Union did issue instructions, that these were conveyed to Southeast Asian communist parties, and that these instructions caused the dramatic change in MCP policy and behaviour outlined above. The 'instructions' were said to have been first shaped at the inaugural meeting of the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform) of September 1947, and in Soviet theorist Andrei Zhdanov's speech to it. This speech, later reproduced in the first edition of Cominform's journal, signalled the end of the period of 'United Front' political tactics, by which communist parties worldwide had tried to enter parliaments and form alliances with bourgeois parties. Zhdanov instead announced the arrival of an era of two camps – the democratic led by the Soviet Union and the imperialist led by the United States – with conflict between them increasingly inevitable. This gave impetus to communist parties worldwide to move to more combative positions, whether removing non-communists from coalitions (as in Prague in February 1948), or becoming more aggressive in opposition. The suspicion that this new line was disseminated to the Southeast Asian parties at the Calcutta conferences held in February 1948,⁵ thereby sparking the proximate revolts across Southeast Asia, was a natural one.

After some initial confusion in British official circles in mid-1948,⁶ this was the conclusion towards which British officials veered. In the words of a 1957 British military summary of the Emergency: 'In June 1948, on the instructions of the Cominform issued at two conferences in Caccutta four months earlier, the MCP started a campaign of murder, sabotage and terrorism designed to paralyse the Government and develop into armed insurrection.'

In short, the Malayan Emergency was a local branch of the Asian Cold War, which was in turn a Moscow-directed extension of the Western Cold War.⁷

5 These two conferences were the South East Asia Youth and Student Conference hosted by the World Federation of Democratic Youth, a Moscow-inspired movement (19–24 Feb.), and the Second Congress of the Indian Communist Party (28 Feb.–6 Mar.). Both were attended by representatives from a range of Southeast Asian communist parties.

6 A.J. Stockwell, 'A widespread and long-concocted plot to overthrow government in Malaya', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 21, 3 (1993): 66–88, discusses the British debates over how far the Emergency which commenced in 1948 was locally rooted, and how far internationally.

7 See, for example, the 1957 report on the Malayan Emergency issued under the name of the British Director of Operations held in The National Archives (henceforth TNA): Air20/10377, 'Review of Emergency in Malaya June 1948 – August 1957', including the quotation on p. 3; and for a secondary source of the era, J.H. Brimmell, *Communism in South East Asia; A political analysis* (Oxford: Oxford

The revisionist interpretation: No international directives, no plan

Recent scholarship is sceptical about this 'Cold War orthodoxy'. The pre-eminent expert on British colonial records for Malaya, Anthony Stockwell, argued strongly against both propositions in a 1993 article. In 2006 he gave a succinct summary of his position, writing in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* that:

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 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.⁸

The 'others' referred to presumably include Tim Harper, who had argued that British attempts to remove illegal rural squatters – most being communist supporters – from the forest fringe produced a welling up of violence from below in 1947 to 1948.⁹ The problem with this latter argument is that, as the opening to this article demonstrated, violence was decreasing, not increasing immediately before the MCP's March 1948 decisions. The subsequent increase in violence was at MCP behest, not merely a despairing attempt by the leadership to harness forces from below.

Stockwell, meanwhile, does not quite pin down what did cause the change in MCP tactics, but does unequivocally reject the notion that the party was simply Moscow's puppet. For convenience sake, we will dub this and other works which reject the Cold War orthodoxy 'revisionist'. As I have discussed elsewhere, most scholarly, specialist accounts from the 1970s follow this line.¹⁰

This mainstream, 'revisionist' academic historiography developed roughly as follows. In 1958, Ruth McVey argued that what mattered was not the Calcutta Conferences, but the gradual dissemination of the change in the international

University Press, 1959), pp. 255–63. This was the predominant line from the late 1940s to the 1950s at least, though even then there were sceptics. For example, see below for a discussion of the doubts of scholars such as Ruth McVey from the late 1950s.

8 Anthony Stockwell, 'Chin Peng and the struggle for Malaya', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 6, 1 (2006): 279–97; Stockwell, 'A widespread and long-concocted plot to overthrow government in Malaya'.

9 Tim Harper, *The end of empire and the making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 94–114. See also Hack, *Defence and decolonisation*, p. 153, fn. 42 for analysis of the claim. Harper's theory is plausible, but not borne out by government statistics for the period prior to the crucial MCP decisions.

10 See Philip Deery, 'Malaya, 1948: Britain's Asian Cold War', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 9, 1 (2007): 29–54, and review of same by Karl Hack, last accessed on 31 Oct. 2008 at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/Hack-Deery.pdf>. The parent URL for both pieces is: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/jcws/jcws2007.html>.

communist line from September 1947. For her, the Calcutta Conferences merely added tinder to the fire.

Now, one way of interpreting McVey would be that people were looking for the wrong 'murder weapon': for 'instructions', when the real weapon was an international communist line. But that is not, unfortunately, how most subsequent scholars have proceeded. Instead, working on the assumption that the international factor was peripheral, they have stressed how internal processes drove events, and ultimately caused the local revolts in general, and the Malayan Emergency specifically.

The tendency has been to cite increasingly varied local reasons, pictured as coalescing to where revolt was all but inevitable by early 1948. As early as 1975, Anthony Short's classic work, *The communist insurrection in Malaya*, argued the issues were complex and ambivalent. According to him they included, for instance: tightening British labour legislation; and MCP reaction against the united front policy of its former leader Lai Teck, who had absconded in March 1947. Lai Teck was exposed as having betrayed his party to the Japanese during the occupation, and to the British before and after the war. As his treachery was gradually unveiled to lower and lower echelons of the party, the former 'united front' line he had championed was poisoned by association. It was also failing of its own accord, since in 1947 to 1948 the British ignored protests which the MCP launched in coordination with the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the embryonic Malayan Democratic Union and other organisations. These protests campaigned against new citizenship laws which restricted the number of Chinese granted citizenship, and against the new Malayan Federation constitution which re-entrenched Malay Sultans as sovereign in their states, and as guardians of Malay interests. These moves seemed to them retrogressive, and to signify a British retreat to reliance on conservative Malay forces represented by UMNO. Hence when the Malayan Federation was inaugurated on 1 February 1948 (to replace the Malayan Union of 1946–48), the MCP was very frustrated indeed.¹¹

It is not surprising, given the varied problems the imperial archive reveals the MCP faced by early 1948, that academics increasingly concentrated on domestic explanations. By the 1980s, authors such as Stubbs and Stockwell clearly favoured complex, multicausal explanations, which blended MCP reaction to increasing British labour controls, MCP leadership problems and, to a decreasing degree, international changes.¹² Inevitably some military and non-specialist historians were slower to come round, but they were outside of the mainstream of academic 'revisionist' literature. The latter is reflected in Stockwell's seminal 1993 article, the substance of which was very recently restated by Deery in his 2007 piece for the *Journal of Cold*

11 Short's book (Anthony Short, *The communist insurrection in Malaya, 1948–60* [London: Frederick Muller, 1975]) was written some years earlier, but delayed when the Malayan government, who commissioned it, declined to publish it. It was reissued as *In pursuit of the mountain rats* (Singapore: Cultured Lotus, 2000). See pp. 46–9 for Calcutta sounding 'an uncertain note' with 'a lot of hard matching' to be done locally.

12 Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and minds in guerrilla warfare: The Malayan Emergency, 1948–1960* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 60. Even in 1989, Stubbs presented as novel his downgrading of the Calcutta factor, even though Short had already shifted the ground.

War Studies.¹³ Stockwell's 1993 article suggested rising MCP violence had diverse causes, and that by mid-1948, it was not yet at the stage of fully planned rebellion.¹⁴

I have used this approach myself in the past, describing the Emergency's origins as multicausal, its outbreak as 'over-determined'. That is, when the MCP took its decisions to prepare the ground for 'people's revolutionary war', during the March and May 1948 Central Committee meetings, it was faced with the treachery of its former Secretary General, a record low of post-war violence around February 1948, a decline in strikes, government clearing of 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'.¹⁵

In these circumstances it might appear that any few of the many factors might have been sufficient to provoke the MCP change of strategy. This current consensus is not only strong, but has deep roots. As long ago as 1960, McLane was saying much the same, that given so many reasons, no one factor (including the international) could be deemed a necessary cause. He wrote that:

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].¹⁶

This 'provocation' included British coercive measures, in particular, increasing control over labour matters and trade unions. The argument that the MCP was pushed into a corner and given little choice by these was put most strongly by New Zealand scholar Michael Stenson.¹⁷ Stenson lists a formidable battery of British measures. There included use of trespass laws to remove union organisers from rubber estates and other commercial property from late 1947, thus giving the appearance that they were siding with employers. In the same period, police fired on strikers and demonstrators on a number of occasions, with resulting fatalities almost entirely on the protesting side. There was also the selective use of banishment orders in Singapore against union and communist organisers alleged to have encouraged sedition, or violence, and who were not born locally. Finally, the MCP became aware in early 1948 that the government was discussing more restrictive union legislation, which ultimately arrived in the form of the Trade Union Ordinance of 31 May 1948.

13 See earlier footnote for the full reference to this.

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

15 Hack, *Defence and decolonisation*, p. 116.

16 McLane, *Soviet strategies*, pp. 388–9.

17 M.R. Stenson, *Industrial conflict, or repression and revolt: The origins of the 1948 communist insurrection in Malaya and Singapore*, and 'The Malayan Union and the historians', *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 10, 2 (1969): 344–54. See also M.R. Stenson, 'The 1948 communist revolt in Malaya: A note on historical sources and interpretation', and 'A reply' by Gerald de Cruz, both in the Institute of South East Asian Studies, Occasional Paper No. 9, 1971.

The Ordinance banned Federations of Trade Unions, except those organised by trade. This was aimed against communist control of the Pan Malayan Federation of trade unions in Malaya, and the Singapore Federation of Trade Unions. It ordered that Trade Union officials should have three years trade experience, again, attempting to rule out many of the communists' semi-professional organisers.

More recently, MCP Secretary-General Chin Peng has developed a similar line. The background to this is Chin Peng's emergence since the end of the Cold War. In December 1989 the MCP signed a peace accord with Thai and Malaysian representatives. Since then, Chin Peng has waged a campaign to publicise his version of events, notably at an academic seminar in Canberra in 1999, and through a book. The latter comprises Chin Peng's story as told to Ian Ward and Norma Mirafior, *Alias Chin Peng: My side of the story* (2003). According to Chin Peng's version of the Emergency origins: 'The decisive factor was the internal situation', in other words British repression. He emphasises the British refusal to listen to protests against the dropping of more liberal citizenship proposals and of the Malayan Union Constitution of 1946 and refusing to listen to the 1947 protests,¹⁸ the increase in repression of labour organisation, and the new Trade Union legislation of May 1948.¹⁹

Elsewhere he states that 'the prominent factor that influenced us, when we decided to take up arms, was the British policy at the time. We felt we were being cornered, gradually backed into the corner. We had nowhere to move. ... Of course, the international factor played some role, but not as decisive as that.'²⁰ He argues that, after the 'two camp' theory was published in the Cominform journal of November 1947, they nevertheless decided in December to continue the 'united front' policy. The communal divisions in Malaya, and the people being 'thirsty for peace', made a change seem wrong, despite the fact that it was the disgraced Lai Teck's policy.

Chin Peng goes further, and dates the first real questioning of MCP policy to 31 January to 1 February 1948, when an unnamed 'Politburo member'

raised the question ... in Kuala Lumpur ... He said I'm doubtful. Why? After three years of peaceful struggle even though we could succeed in mobilising the masses, to organise *hartal*, general strike and universal stoppage of shops and business. We even succeeded to that extent, unprecedented in Malaya, the first time. We couldn't force the British to make a bit of concession. So what is the usefulness of continuing the peace struggle. That sounded quite convincing. So all of us agreed to discuss the point he raised, not raised by me. And next day, February first, in the process of discussing, we heard the booming from the *Padang*, the artillery celebrating the set up of the Federation. We continued to discuss, at last, more or less agreed we had to make a formal review of this policy. But that was close to Chinese New Year, so we adjourned the meeting.

18 Notable amongst these was a front (All Malayan Council of Joint Action-Putera, Putera representing leftwing Malay groups) against the new Malayan Federation constitution, which launched a widespread *hartal* (strike/business closure) on 20 Oct. 1947. This was in support of a more democratic 'People's Constitution'.

19 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 *Dialogues with Chin Peng*, ed. C.C. Chin and Karl Hack (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), specifically p. 121 for the above point.

20 *Dialogues*, p. 117.

So according to Chin Peng the meeting recommenced after Chinese New Year, and finally decided Lai Teck had been wrong to halt the armed struggle. Hence they called a March Central Committee meeting to discuss it. He further argues that the 'internal situation' predominated at the 17–21 March meeting, by which time they knew of the Government's proposed new Trade Union legislation (the 31 May Ordinance).²¹ He acknowledges, as we will see below, that they also discussed international changes, particularly the Indian Communist Party's change to a more militant line (taken at its Second Congress in February to early March). However, he interprets these as not the primary concerns.

He argues also that the MCP's decisions, taken in March and then at the May 1948 Central Executive Committee meetings, were fundamentally 'defensive' and reactive. For instance, he turns on its head the orthodox Cold War interpretation of Australian communist leader L. Sharkey's attendance at the MCP's March 1948 meeting. The orthodox interpretation was that Sharkey – the leader of the Communist Party of Australia – transmitted Comintern instructions on the 'two camp' thesis and the need for armed revolt. While Sharkey, *en route* from Calcutta to Australia did attend the March MCP meeting, Chin Peng argues that he did not transmit any instructions received in Calcutta. Instead, Sharkey's most effective contribution was to suggest a solution to the MCP's labour failures based on Australian experience. Indeed, if taken literally, Sharkey becomes almost the main culprit for the Malayan Emergency. In Chin Peng's words:

We launch many strikes but every time we failed. Either suppressed by the police, or because we lacked funds to continue. So we were discussing whether we could adopt certain forms of violence to deal with the scabs. In that meeting, if Sharkey was not there to provide certain advice to us, we would not have adopted the tactic to get rid of the scabs.²²

According to Chin Peng the Central Committee was divided, and Sharkey's advice was decisive, given the Australian Communist Party's reputation for being able to sustain labour disputes.²³

The March meeting therefore decided on 'defensive violence' to support labour disputes. The May Central Committee meeting went further, and concluded that the result of this policy would be increasing British repression — for instance the proposed May 1948 Trade Union Amendment. It therefore called for gradually increasing defensive violence up to and including an inevitable final people's war. By June, therefore, the MCP were preparing their supporters for the ultimate 'full-scale' British attack. In his words, 'So we had to get our armed forces ready, our nucleus ready before September. Not launching our armed uprising in September but get ready before September. So when the full-scale attack happens, we can react.' In the meantime, another Central Committee meeting was to be held in July or August, in time

21 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 134.

23 It is interesting to read Chin Peng 'against the grain'. On the one hand, the internal situation was overwhelmingly decisive, on the other hand he – as did some Surrendered Enemy Personnel (SEP) – describes the Central Committee as 'divided'. It was divided, but the external communist line, detailed first and in full in the Central Committee's March decisions and seemingly validated by events in Czechoslovakia, would usually have been one source of authority in deciding such issues.

(by the MCP's reckoning) to make more detailed plans. These, it was expected, would include a move to set up a headquarters in the fairly inaccessible interior of Pahang, and a liberated state in mountainous parts of the northeastern state of Kelantan which had harboured the MPAJA during the war.²⁴

Chin Peng's version therefore fits the 'revisionist' position fairly well, in arguing that there was little international influence. He modifies it in accepting there was an MCP plan of sorts, but sees this as a series of intended 'defensive' responses to increasing British repression. Chin Peng's version of events forms a bridge to the next sections, which re-examine the historiography against original documents, mostly from 1948 itself, and reads Chin Peng's statements and actions 'against the grain'. These two sections deal firstly with the international communist line, and secondly with the question of what MCP plans were in 1948.

New documents and approaches: Were there international communist directives?

This section re-examines the sources in order to demonstrate that the 'revisionist' case of communist international influence in 1948 is misplaced. The revisionist case is that there were no communist instructions for armed revolt, and that no such instructions were disseminated at the two Calcutta conferences of February 1948. But that case is a crude rebuttal of a Cold War orthodoxy that McVey punctured as early as 1958. It is outmoded – indeed should have been outmoded even in the 1960s – and naïve about how international communism worked in 1948.

I therefore propose a 'neo-orthodox' or 'post-revisionist' case that the change in the communist international line was critical in causing a clustering of local revolts in 1948. At the most, we could argue the communist international line ensured revolts where otherwise they would not have happened that year (perhaps in India, Burma and possibly Malaya too). At the least, we must insist that the Soviet role needs to be given greater weight within nuanced, multi-causal models of the outbreak of the 'Asian Cold War'.

This is not, of course, to deny that much of what the revisionist line claims is useful. It is certainly true that the MCP felt under multiple pressures in early 1948, from the defection of Lai Teck, new labour legislation, its failure to persuade the British to drop the federal constitution, and more. It is true that, despite the decisions of March and May, the MCP was far from ready to launch a full revolt by June 1948. In fact, many cadres were arrested before they could flee. In addition, it is true that some orthodox Cold War accounts of the Emergency origins did portray events far too simplistically as caused by 'instructions' relayed from Moscow and through Calcutta, whether for internal or external propaganda reasons, or sometimes because they honestly came to believe this.²⁵

But the starting point for re-evaluating events is the realisation that the Cold War orthodoxy on 'instructions' is an irrelevance, doubted by some even at the time. Worse, it leads to scholars asking the wrong questions about 1948, notably: were there instructions from Moscow for a revolt? Even in 1948, some British officials were groping towards a more subtle view than the full Cold War orthodoxy: one

24 See *Dialogues*, pp. 135 and 136–7 for the plans.

25 Stockwell, 'A widespread and long-concocted plot', pp. 80–3, dealt with such issues.

that did not assume a straightforward dissemination of Moscow's orders through Calcutta or anywhere else. Officials in the office of Britain's Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia (located in Singapore) – Britain's premier regional centre – are interesting in this respect. In late 1948 they traced how regional parties aligned with a change in the prestigious international communist line over a period of months. They tried to show how local parties tailored their lines to local conditions, starting even before the Calcutta meetings.

The best illustration of this sort of analysis is a little-used November 1948 document from the Commissioner-General's Office. In November 1948 the Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia sent the Foreign Office a detailed summary. This claimed that Soviet theorist 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, in the following three to four months, Zhdanov's criticism of optimistic illusions. Additionally, it attached a chart with over 30 stages of evidence of such dissemination. What follows are just a few of the key dates the chart traces:²⁶

1. 10. 11.1947. Zhdanov's report on the International Situation is published in the first issue of the Cominform Journal – having been developed at end September.
3. 7.12.47-17.12.47 Communist Party of India (CPI) accepts paper on 'Present Policy and Tasks of the CPI' and criticises former 'opportunistic illusions'...
5. 25.12.47 Mao's report to Central Executive Committee (CEC) [of the Chinese Communist Party] echoes Zhdanov's report...
8. 1.2.48- Communists from all over the world arrive in Calcutta for the Southeast Asia Youth and Student Conference...
10. Feb.48 Probably the 1st Politburo of Burma Communist Party decides to adopt a policy of 'open resistance'.
11. 19.2.48 Southeast Asia Youth Conference opens....
13. 22.2.48 (1) Lawrence SHARKEY, President Australian CP, passes through Singapore en route to 2nd Party Congress of CPI, Calcutta.
(2) Burma CP delegates leave Rangoon for Calcutta.
14. 28.2.48 2nd Party Congress CPI opens in Calcutta – numerous foreign delegates present. THAN TUN of BCP states his party striving to forge links with Chinese CP...
16. 5.3.48 (1) 2nd Party Congress of CPI passes main political resolution at closed session, calling for new policy of opposition to Nehru Government.
(2) In Rangoon, BOC Workers' Union, under chairmanship of its leader, a prominent communist agitator, decided to strike from 9.3.48. H.N. GHOAL believed to be in Rangoon directing action.

26 TNA: FO371/69695, Commissioner-General's Office (Singapore) to Southeast Asia Department of FO, 24 November 1948, including 10 Nov. 1948 memorandum and attachments.

17. 6.3.48 Closed session of CPI Party Congress passes resolution criticising past policy of CPI.
18. 7.3.48. Open Session of CPI Congress deposes JOSHI and elects BT RANADIVE as new General Secretary of CPI. WICKRAMASINGHE, leader of Communist Party of Ceylon, announces his party has made similar mistakes to those of CPI...
21. 20.3.48– Central Executive Committee of MCP approves plan for armed revolt. Produces thesis ‘The Existing Situation’...²⁷

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 17–21 March 1947. This repeated the ‘two camp’ Zhdanov formula and pronounced cooperation with the British Labour Party useless. ‘Under these circumstances’, the paper demanded full independence (not the self-government previously demanded) and pronounced ‘the people’s revolutionary war’ to be ‘inevitable’, with ‘armed struggle’ of particular significance. In addition, the Malayan Security Service reported (contrary to Chin Peng’s later claims) that CCP advice from Chou En-lai had been that revolt was ultimately necessary in colonial territories.²⁸

It is difficult to understand just how loyal the document is to the logic and language of the new international line without seeing the document as a whole. But some highlights can easily demonstrate that the international line was far from peripheral. The document ‘The existing situation’ began with the words ‘A fundamental change has taken place in the post-war international situation...’. It proceeded to a detailed recounting of the ‘two camps’ thesis of Zhdanov, and how the colonial territories could play an important part in preventing capitalist countries from preparing for war or going to war. It then added that:

Under these circumstances, it is imperative that a new method must be adopted for the colonial people’s struggle. This is by establishing a united front with the lower stratum of workers and peasants as its foundation, by abandoning and delivering a blow to those few renegades of the upper stratum and by a widespread rallying of the masses, by means of practical action, to defeat the Imperialist policy and strive for complete independence and emancipation. And under the many phases of the situation, and armed struggle (i.e. *the people’s revolutionary war* [my emphasis]) is inevitable...²⁹

27 The shorthand ‘plan for an armed revolt’ could mislead: what it produced was a plan for defensive labour action, which it was believed would also help prepare the ground for an eventual, inevitable armed struggle.

28 RHL: MSS13/1948, 15.7.48, p. 500, and MSS Supplement 7/1948, 15.7.48. MSS Supplement 7/1948, 15.7.48, has one secret source saying an MCP representative went to Hong Kong (this would presumably be Chin Peng) and saw Liao Sen Tzu. Liao cabled Chou En-lai who replied that for a communist revolt in a colony bloodshed was the only means of success. The informant supposedly heard this at a meeting of Perak officials in May when reorganisation plans were discussed.

29 TNA, UK (TNA): FO371/69695, Commissioner General’s Office (Singapore) to Southeast Asia Department of FO, 24 Nov. 1948, including 10 Nov. 1948 memorandum and attachments.

The decisions as a whole were firmly anchored in, and justified by, the changing international communist line. Armed rebellion was thus presented – in March – as the inevitable end result, but the emphasis was for the moment on preparation, on preparing a front of the lower workers and peasants. This last reflected the conclusion that the alliance with the bourgeoisie, in the AMCJA-Putera front of 1947 for instance, had failed.

The same language was repeated in a statement published in the Chinese-language paper *Voice of the People* on 20 April 1948, which sought to explain and justify the new policy to the rank and file. Entitled ‘Understand the situation, master the orientation’, this began by arguing that the previous illusions of the British Labour Party had been stripped away, revealing it for the tool of international capitalism and the imperial force that it was. In trying to argue that the party’s supporters were strong – by implication strong enough to ‘continue their struggle along the bloody footprints of those who had gone before’ – the document also emphasised that ‘the broad masses of the Malayan people are part of the world anti-imperialist democratic camp’. This document, however, being intended for consumption by a broad base of supporters, gave over more time to addressing the particularities of British policy, countering doubts, and making suggestions for correct policy and reliance on the working classes. Despite that, it was in effect a reassurance that a drift to violence accorded with international circumstances.

In addition to the MCP’s secret decisions of March, and its public statement of April, a close reading of the documentation casts doubt on Chin Peng’s spin on Sharkey’s role at the March Central Committee meeting. Chin Peng claims Sharkey had little influence over this meeting, except to suggest a means of strengthening mass organisation in this next stage: an anti-scab policy including murder. But at least one Surrendered Enemy Personnel (SEP — an official term for surrendered communists) claimed to have seen more explosive advice. In November 1948 this Leong Yat Seng told his British interrogators that there was

a letter from the President of the Australian Communist Party criticising the MCP in its Trade Union Policy. The letter said that the MCP should adopt the same tactics as the Communist Party of Indochina viz, Liberation War.³⁰

We cannot know whether such advice was given, but even if it was not, it seems likely that Sharkey’s presence in March, combined with his supposed practical knowledge, was being used to help justify the shift to more violent tactics. The argument that a risky shift to violence was supported by other world figures, and fitted with world communist policy, was not unimportant when the actual conditions in Malaya – particularly in terms of deep communal differences – were so unripe for revolt.

Another informant knew of no ‘instructions’ nor of a Calcutta conference even, but did know that Sharkey (identified by his post) had criticised the MCP for missing its opportunity immediately after the war when the international situation

30 RHL, Brewer papers, interrogation of Leong Yat Seng on 23 Nov.1948, section on ‘Influence of Foreign Communist Parties’. Leong Yat Seng was a rather talkative (English-speaking) surrendered communist. He made no attempt to hide his efficiency as a communist organiser, using this to provide ferocious levels of detail.

was discussed.³¹ This and early June articles in communist newspapers lauding the Indochina example, raise questions. The Singapore Intelligence Far East (SIFE) organisation also had Sharkey as one of the people criticising the Indian Communist Party at its Second Congress in Calcutta in February 1948, just before the latter changed General Secretary and adopted a more aggressive policy.³² The others criticising CPI policy were Than Tun of Burma and Wickremasinghe of Ceylon/Sri Lanka, suggesting almost an emerging consensus that communist parties should harden their policies towards bourgeois leaders, and rely more on workers and lower bourgeoisie (a shift to a 'united front from below' as opposed to the former 'united front from above').³³ Then Sharkey turned up in Singapore at the March MCP meeting, and the MCP shortly afterwards adopted motions in similar 'two camp' language, with a similar acceptance that violence was inevitable. In short, if we abandon 'Orthodox Cold War' notions of Sharkey and others bringing orders, we can see that nevertheless by February to March 1948 there was almost a regional consensus – or at least conversation – on the import of the changed international line.

While we can still argue about how far the changing international line – and its discussion and reception across Asia – caused or merely coloured events, and how far the consensus was manufactured in Asia itself, it would be difficult to deny that it provided the language in which the critical decisions were debated.

We should also note that the May 1948 Central Committee meeting confirmed the need to prepare for eventual armed revolt. That was a working out of the consequences of the March policy in action, as British repression increased and a new Trade Union ordinance was about to be published (end of May, effective mid-June). The May Fifth Plenum of the MCP's CC adopted a 12-point 'plan of struggle', emphasising illegal work from then on, using strikes to disrupt the economy, assaulting the democratic parties and bourgeoisie including the Kuomintang (Guomindang), and proposed measures to attract peasant and intellectual support.³⁴

I want to suggest a model for the influence of the Soviet line, and for its role in the outbreak of the Malayan Emergency. It helps if we remind ourselves again that most 'revisionist' literature (that is, almost all the relevant specialist literature on Malaysia of the last two decades) starts with the wrong question, being: 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? They therefore arrive at the easy answer: No.

We need to ask a different question, namely: what influence did the international communist line have in 1948? This results in a very different answer. We see that Zhdanov's 'two camp' line was being disseminated amongst Asian parties by late

31 RHL, MSS Supplement 7/1948, 15.7.48.

32 TNA FO371/69694, SIFE paper of 23 Apr. 1948, 'Review of communism in Southeast Asia', no. 12, 15 Apr. 1948.

33 Lee Soong, the NDYL (New Democratic Youth League) leader who attended the Calcutta Youth Conference, did not attend the March CC meeting, and is on this matter a red herring not worth further space. The SIFE paper did not detect any similar change in Malaya. With Lai Teck gone, it seems it sometimes took some time for communist directives to be uncovered. The same paper noted the Indian and Burmese parties had changed policy dramatically and simultaneously. This led to the banning of the CP in West Bengal, and strikes and then the banning of the BCP on 27 March.

34 Charles McLane, *Soviet strategies in Southeast Asia*, p. 387, summarises.

1947, causing at first a tentative reappraisal and, by February 1948, a widespread and dramatic reappraisal of policies in parties across much of Asia.³⁵ The Communist Party of the Soviet Union's 'international line' and criticism of past optimism and united front policies was influential, and discussed region-wide. As such, it had weight when local parties debated their next actions, particularly where local conditions had previously been thought unpropitious for armed revolt, or local parties were in a state of ambivalence following setbacks.

In some cases, where local conditions had been thought ambivalent at best, the international line may have played a critical role that year. Perhaps in Burma (and despite Burmese independence in January 1948), the international line may have helped swing debate in favour of armed revolt.³⁶ It is true that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reportedly told Chin Peng that local parties had to interpret the international line in the context of local conditions, but that was little more than a truism.³⁷

This interpretation of how the 'international line' worked was long ago explained by Ralph Smith, though for a slightly later date.³⁸ 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, indeed was often eagerly engaged with. We should perhaps go further, and add that local players were not passive recipients. Harry Poeze's article on Indonesia in this issue, for instance, raises the question of how far Indonesian communist Muso was an emissary of a strict line or instructions from Moscow in August 1948, or how far he was perhaps over-enthusiastic, in taking on the role of bringer of the new international line. This obviously suited his desire for eminence after a long exile, and probably reflected the infectious enthusiasm of his communist hosts in Prague, who had taken more complete control of their own country in February 1948. It is certainly the case that some officials in Moscow were not entirely sure whether he might overdo it, and alienate people locally. Unfortunately for the Indonesian party, he was all too successful in firing them up, and alarming opponents, with dreadful results at Madiun in September.³⁹ The question is therefore not just how a Moscow line was transmitted, but which individuals and groups locally took up and used that line in their own debates, and to serve their own needs. Moscow could not always predict what local reception would be, and it seems in some instances may have been diffident about advising on situations it knew it did not fully comprehend.⁴⁰

35 McVey, *Calcutta Conference*, pp. 1–24.

36 See, for instance, Harper, *Forgotten wars*, pp. 379–80; McLane, *Soviet strategies in Southeast Asia*; and TNA, FO371/69695.

37 Chin and Hack, *Dialogues*, pp. 133–4, 142 n25.

38 Ralph B. Smith, 'China and Southeast Asia: The revolutionary perspective, 1951', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 19, 1 (1988): 97–110.

39 See 'The Cold War in Indonesia' by Harry Poeze in this issue.

40 See 'Did the Soviet Union instruct Southeast Asian communists to revolt?' by Larisa Efimova in this issue.

New documents and approaches: Was there a communist plan?

The 'revisionist' approach to MCP planning also begins with the wrong question. It asks: 'Did the MCP have a plan to begin armed violence in June 1948? As with the revisionist approach to international communist planning, the obvious answer is no. But then the question is itself flawed. The real questions we should be asking are: what were the MCP's plans, as laid out in its March and May 1948 CC meetings, and afterwards? What were their implications? These open questions are far more useful than the leading one which invites a simple yes/no answer.

What I want to do now is to start with Chin Peng's interpretation of MCP plans, and then afterwards examine communist documents from the period in question, before answering this new question. Chin Peng has emphasised that the MCP were unprepared for revolt in June 1948. He has presented the MCP as pushed reluctantly into revolt by government repression. He accepts that its March and May 1948 decisions did provide a programme of preparations for violence, but argues this was a 'defensive' posture in response to increasing British repression, and closing down of democratic space. He also accepts that the MCP anticipated that action and reaction between the two sides was expected to lead to large-scale armed conflict, though only in or after September 1948.

Here it is best, perhaps, to let Chin Peng speak for himself. Here is his most relevant exchange with historians in Canberra at the 1999 gathering:

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 March 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 full-scale 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.⁴¹

Chin Peng further insisted that: 'The decisive factor was the internal situation', which he specifies as British repression of labour activism, and unwillingness to respond to protests against the new Malayan Federation.⁴² But we must take into account Chin Peng's

41 Chin and Hack, *Dialogues*, pp. 135–6, passim. The *Dialogues* have three advantages. First, in them Chin Peng is questioned, allowing more than one viewpoint. Secondly, at Canberra (where the conversations which the *Dialogues* record took place) 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*. Thirdly, *Alias Chin Peng* not only builds on Canberra, but integrates work by Ian Ward as co-writer. However, *Alias Chin Peng* is detailed. The two books should be understood as part of an ongoing process of creating and critiquing Chin Peng's version of the events.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

aims. These include showing that the MCP were a vital part of the nationalist struggle for independence, and so acknowledging external influences does not sit well with this aim. As we have already seen, however, the March 1948 documents were written in the language of international communism and of Cominform's 'two camp' theory.

Chin Peng's version of events thus fits into the broad 'revisionist' interpretation of 1948, in denying significant outside influence, and in denying the communists had firm plans for the events which gave rise to the Emergency.⁴³ Within this paradigm, he takes Stenson's argument for the MCP being reactive to British control of labour policy, and closing down of political space, one step further. For instance, he emphasises that, when the MCP CC took its May 1948 decisions to prepare for defensive war, they already knew that the new Trade Union Ordinance of 31 May 1948 was pending.

In short, there may not have been a formal, written document or finalised MCP 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 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 discounting the two Asian assistants murdered at the same time, but elsewhere) prematurely triggered the final stage. Chin Peng's version is thus that by May 1948 the British fully intended to increase pressure on the MCP, and the MCP had a 'defensive' programme of action, which it was anticipated would both prepare the people and gradually provoke greater British repression. The MCP 'plan' or rather loose programme, was therefore for a series of defensive moves which, it was anticipated, would result in 'defensive' resort to full armed revolt in or shortly after September 1948. Trigger factors would include the banning of the party. The MCP would meet sometime before September – probably in July or August – to finalise their plans for the last 'defensive' stage.

The question then is: Do documents from 1948 confirm the revisionist emphasis on the MCP not having a firm plan in June 1948? Do they alter Chin Peng's 'revisionist + defensive plans versus increasing government repression' interpretation? Or, alternatively, do they suggest a more aggressive MCP stance, and more concrete MCP plans?

The March 1948 MCP Central Committee decisions (discussed above) are of relatively little help to us in this respect. They were indeed heavily couched in the 'two camps' language of Cominform, with its assumption of inevitable conflict. Yet the immediate plans appear to have concentrated merely on increasing control of labour, and preparing the masses. The question is whether this was Chin Peng's 'defensive' stance, or a more aggressive preparation of mass control for later revolt.

It is worth noting the events of June 1948 involved a change in the scale of intimidation – from violence to murder – rather than something entirely new. The Malayan Security Service (MSS) noted that the Workers' Self Protection

43 Chin Peng, with Ian Ward and Norma Miraflor, *Alias Chin Peng*. See also, *Dialogues with Chin Peng*.

Corps – who used violence to ‘protect’ union activities – had been a fixture before March 1948.⁴⁴ Chin Peng’s version has this as a defensive move — and certainly the government had used the police to break strikes where there was violence or occupation of property, sometimes with loss of life. But at the same time, there are indications that as this policy got off the ground in April, it was far from merely a defensive use of violence against *kongchak* (labour thieves or scabs) and notorious employers. Instead, it seems to have been an attempt to consolidate control over labour and populations through eliminating or intimidating opposition.

Hence the MSS detected an attempt to use the Singapore Harbour Labour Union for politically motivated strikes in April, to be followed by a 1 May mass rally of 100,000. In the words of an MSS report this was intended to be:

A mass assembly and procession of 100,000 labourers through the streets of Singapore, controlled and directed by the Malayan Communist Party marshals and the Singapore Worker Protection Corps. It was their intention that the whole of the centre of Singapore would be under the control of the Communists and any interference by the Police would be met by violence. The experience of the funeral procession of the notorious Communist LIM AH LIANG in August 1947 gave the party every reason to be confident of their success. The result of the show of force would intimidate the population of Singapore and would be followed by sympathy strikes from the Harbour workers which would spread ... culminating in the complete stoppage of all essential services, shipping, transport, etc. ... to coincide with further incitement to violence in the Federation of Malaya.

Surrendered Enemy Personnel such as Leong Yat Seng confirmed this. Leong had become a communist in February 1947, a member of the Open Section of the Naval Base Harbour Union, and during the Emergency, joined the Liberation Army. He describes April to May plans to hide many organisers, and press strikes. He said it had been intended ‘at the appropriate time ... to join forces with other organisations in Singapore, and to burn down godowns, blow up ammunition dumps and obtain supplies of food, money, etc. for the forces up-country’. Arrests had intervened, persuading him to flee up-country, ‘guided by a lady with one eye much bigger than the other’.⁴⁵

This particular MCP plan was cut off by selective banishments of labour leaders, arrests of protection corps members, a 22 April order banning the procession, and then further arrests of SHLU leaders who threatened to defy the ban. The SHLU called off the procession on its eve. The Singapore government policy was to banish any non-British subject (Chinese persons born in Singapore were British subjects) who was implicated in labour intimidation or violence. Intimidation now included sporadic use of grenades.⁴⁶

44 RHL, MSS Indian Ocean s251, MSS PIJ, Supplement 11/1948, 15 Aug. 1948, pp. 3–4.

45 RHL, Brewer papers, interrogation of Leong Yat Seng on 23 Nov. 1948, section on ‘Influence of Foreign Communist Parties’.

46 RHL, MSS Indian Ocean s251, MSS PIJ, Supplement 11/1948, 15 Aug. 1948, pp. 5–7. A grenade was thrown into a coffee shop near the Singapore Harbour Board on 26 Apr. a tactic later popular in the Emergency to terrorise MCA supporters.

There was, in short, an escalating battle for labour control, in which MCP use of violence was met by government banishments and arrests, and the latter were followed by increasing arson and selective strikes in April to early May.

But the real question is how far, and how soon, the MCP strategy became much more ambitious in its scope. The MSS analysis, albeit of August, was that the aim had been to secure union control by violence, and use labour control to soften up the population. In other words, it was a way of preparing the ground for full-scale revolt. But other evidence suggested, rightly or wrongly, much worse.

A 23 June statement by a detained Chinese MCP Area Representative (Political Section) in Perak certainly suggests a more aggressive, proactive policy preparing the ground. Under the title of 'MCP Organisation and Policy', the prisoner stated that:

They have realised that Britain will never give up Malaya after losing India, while a self-government under Britain is of no use at all in the MCP opinion. It must be an absolutely independent communist state. To attain their object, they have decided that the first thing is to eliminate all opposition. Anyone not for the MCP is against the MCP and must be eliminated – hence the recent killings. The common phrase 'Kong Chak' (labour thief) is used for all those against the MCP. By eliminating all opposition, MCP would get full support of the people, and a democratic government could be formed.⁴⁷

A later source — an interrogation of SEP Tan Ah Leng from late 1948 (a Singapore-born Hokkien rubber tapper, aged 24), fleshed out the techniques he had seen used in the 1946–48 labour movement. First of all, apparent elections would be fixed, with those to be elected decided by the MCP beforehand

By careful propaganda and persuasion those ... selected will be elected. Should the workers not wish to have those men ... the Communist Party will start a campaign of propaganda ... to persuade them to reject their original choice ... If for example a chairman is elected by workers contrary to expectations ... he is allowed to stand, but is invited to join the MCP. If he becomes a member he is sworn to secrecy ... Should he reveal a secret he will be court-martialled and shot. If he does not become a member he is marked down for execution.

According to Tan Ah Leng, the workers 'clearly understood' that it was in their best interests to 'follow the men who make the speeches'.⁴⁸ This corroborates the source quoted above, that 'the first thing is to eliminate all opposition ... Anyone not for the MCP is against the MCP and must be eliminated – hence the recent killings', with contractors as prime targets. Other sources talked of gradations of warnings for opponents to cease, leave or, as the last resort, face punishment.⁴⁹ At some point, then, Chin Peng's 'defensive' violence against labour thieves, supposedly

47 Selection of MCP documents and related intelligence attached to TNA F0371/6843845, Commissioner General's Office (P.S. Scrivener) to South East Asia Department, FO, 24 Nov. 1948, Enclosure on 'Re-orientation of communist policy in South East Asia – Sequence of events'. The interpretation here fits with Chin Peng's discussion of Sharkey, and the March decision to adopt a 'scab' policy.

48 RHL, Brewer Papers, Interrogation of Tan Ah Leng, 1948.

49 RHL, MSS Supplement 7/1948, 15. 7, 48, A2 source on *kongchak*. See also TNA: CO537/4246, 'Senai Documents', found on detainee Tan Siew Hoe when arrested at Senai, Johor.

encouraged by Sharkey, transmuted into a violent struggle to control the entire labour movement, and also to eliminate others who stood in the way of the MCP, including KMT sympathisers.

We cannot be sure exactly how the transition was made from selective violence in support of labour control to more widespread assassination. What we do know is that in May 1948 the MCP CC met and issued the new orders described above, which were more practical measures to prepare for revolt.

This coincided with an increase in murders, culminating in 19 cases of murder or attempted murder in the first two weeks of June.⁵⁰ The end of May was also important in that this was the month that Lai Teck's betrayal was finally announced to rank and file members.⁵¹

As early as June, MSS sources suggested that the MCP aimed at an eventual all-out attack, but with three stages to prepare the ground. To quote the MSS summary of its intelligence:

7. The [Central Committee] has decided that in the present campaign the MCP will attack all out. There will be three main phases. They are (20/6/48 [the date the information was secured]): –
 - i. the organisation of labour unrest [evident from April 1948]
 - ii. terrorism-murder of labour contractors, traitors, capitalists, members of the KMT, kepalas, planters, tin-miners and 'key' Government officials [this intensified in May and June, leading the British to declare the Emergency]
 - iii. when the chaos resulting from (ii) above has been completed, then armed revolution, supported by strong forces of guerrillas from the hills.⁵²

According to this MSS assessment, 'During the second stage the MCP hope to weaken Government considerably. They intend to murder detectives, police, MSS, and other key Government personnel, which they hope will wreck the morale of the remainder.'⁵³

Simultaneously with phase ii, the MCP had set up 'secret' State Committees by April. A report from the end of April suggested the successor to the wartime MPAJA organisation was already compiling fresh lists of names, to facilitate any emergency call up. By early June – before the Emergency declaration – it was calling up ex-MPAJA and others to form small mobile groups, which could later form the platform for guerrilla groups. Some SEP reported being warned to go underground before May.⁵⁴ Registration itself was reportedly complete by 14 June. By that point its 'secret' members had already been mobilised as mobile units or special service corps, though not its open members. The MSS was getting intelligence on where specific area mobile units were based.⁵⁵ On 11 June the ex-MPAJA leadership met in Kuala Lumpur under President Lau Yew. They ordered preparations to be made

50 RHL: MSS supplement 15/1948, p. 14.

51 RHL: MSS PIJ 12/1948, 30.6.48, p. 12, in a document dated 29 May 1948.

52 RHL: MSS PIJ 12/1948, 30.6.1948, Appendix A, p. 3.

53 Ibid.

54 RHL: Brewer papers, interrogation of Leong Yat Seng on 23 Nov. 1948.

55 RHL: MSS PIJ 12/1948, 30.6.1948, Appendix A, p. 4 and 7.

to sell all its property, the destruction of records and preparation for mobilisation to the hills, and all future orders to be given verbally. The banning of the MCP and satellite organisations was to be the signal for general mobilisation, and a 14 June report suggested 500 men could be mobilised in Selangor within three days of the order coming.⁵⁶

On 15 June a *Min Sheng Pao* editorial on 'Complete exposure of the cruel countenance', described British policy as imperialist, fascist and anti-democratic, supposedly making union work impossible, adding that: 'Today what Imperialism wants is the gun and not the law ... The Malayan history will repeat once more that of 1942–1945. Imperialism has openly declared war on the people and pointed its guns at their chests.' The message was stark: 1948 was 1942, and the people 'will remember the methods used against the Fascists'.⁵⁷

The MCP plan was wrecked, since Chin Peng and his colleagues failed to anticipate the early British declaration of an Emergency, locally on 16 June and throughout Malaya by 18 June. They had already ordered key personnel to move into secret locations, or at least not to stay in one place, but nevertheless they were pitched into the full-scale stage half-prepared.⁵⁸ Hence the MSS quickly realised that the MCP would not complete mobilisation until September 1948, and the three-stage guerrilla strategy for the war itself was hastily improvised. By July 1948 this was already known to involve a classic Maoist three stage strategy of:

- i. Guerrilla warfare and demoralisation of the country;
- ii. Establishment of a Communist regime in 'liberated country areas', including the Gua Musang/Pulai area in the mountainous region of the northeastern state of Kelantan (a wartime stronghold).
- iii. Attacks on towns and the amalgamation of towns with the 'liberated areas'.⁵⁹

This ambitious policy was proposed by a party which, in December 1947, had still been doubtful that objective conditions in the country suited revolt, and concerned about how to inform members that the party's former Secretary General was a traitor and had fled with party funds in February to March 1947.

Conclusion

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 did regard themselves as part of an international as well as a local communist movement, and listened with interest to Soviet and later to Chinese lines. The precise interpretation

56 Ibid., Appendix A, p. 5.

57 TNA: CO537/4246, Translation of *Min Sheng Pao* editorial of 15.6.1948, signed by 'Ng Khin Gee'. The British fell into the MCP trap by failing to ensure minimum force when responding to MCP and worker organisation, with deaths resulting from police intervention on estates in early June. See also translated *Min Sheng Pau* editorial 4 June 1948. Interestingly, though, a sub-theme in this and other MCP documents was that of the imperialists dropping their 'gentlemen-like masks'.

58 RHL: MSS PIJ 12/1948, 30.6.1948, Appendix A, p. 5.

59 RHL: MSS 13/1948, PIJ, 15.7.48, p. 479.

and impact varied from country to country, and in Malaya it is true that many scholars have argued, or implied, that armed revolt in 1948 was over-determined. When scholars such as Stockwell stress the interaction of the international line with overriding local needs they thus confirm the revisionist line, and parts of Chin Peng's recent testimony.⁶⁰

However, re-reading the full range of contemporary documents available in British archives (in combination with reading Chin Peng's testimony 'against the grain') it does seem that this revisionist line will need adjusting both for our understanding of how international communism impacted on local events, and on what sort of plans the MCP had made by mid-1948.

It is still difficult to be precise about the role of international changes in the Emergency's origins. Even at the time, the Malayan Security Service vacillated between suggesting external influence, and accepting that the 'immediate cause' could possibly have been internal, for instance over Lai Teck, union controls and the inauguration of the Federation. In this situation it is certainly safer to fall back on the argument that revolt in Malaya was 'overdetermined', but that in addition the 'revisionist' line posed the wrong questions and so needs revising to allow more international impact as part of this 'over-deterministic' bundle.⁶¹ That said, the evidence does suggest that changes in the international communist line were a more integral part of decisions and events, and perhaps more necessary to the final outcome, than even this new position might allow.

An alternative model, designed to better capture the significance of the international dimension, might work as follows. It might first insist that current 'revisionist' historiography of the origins of the Malayan Emergency is flawed. That is, it asks 'were there communist instructions for revolt in 1948' and, 'did the MCP have plans for full-scale revolt for June 1948'. These questions were dictated by opposing a Cold War orthodoxy that held there were instructions, which did lead to MCP plans for revolt in mid-1948. But in reality the questions are misplaced: they are a case of looking for ghosts rather than thieves. We now need new questions, based on a more realistic understanding of how international communism worked in 1948, and of what the MCP's plans and intentions were. This approach could run roughly as follows, adjusting our understanding of 1948 in at least two ways.

1. The international communist line should be accepted as influential in 1948.⁶² The question asked should now be: 'What was the international communist line, when did it reach particular communists, how did local individuals and factions incorporate it into their own plans and debates, and hence what was its reception?' For 1948 this is helped by the fact that, as yet, the CPSU was still the undisputed main centre of dissemination for an international communist line. By 1950 it becomes more complicated, as there are then multiple centres of ideological inspiration (CPSU, CCP, and tangentially Yugoslavia). But in 1948 it was clearly the Soviet line that dominated. Only after the decision to move towards armed conflict was taken did the repertoire or archive of guerrilla techniques derived from wartime and CCP

60 Deery, 'Malaya, 1948: Britain's Asian Cold War', p. 48.

61 Hack, *Defence and decolonisation*, p. 116. See also RHL, Supplement 8/1948, 31.7.48, p. 21.

62 Smith 'China and Southeast Asia: The revolutionary perspective, 1951'.

Maoist experience help constitute tactics on the ground. It was a case of Moscow for strategy, China increasingly for guerrilla and later for political tactics too, and local experience for adjustments.

The change from a united front to a 'two camps' line in late 1947 patterned events across much of Asia in 1947–48, and shaped the language of change. Only this can explain why even parties in newly independent countries, and where much of the local leadership had previously acknowledged conditions as not propitious, turned to armed revolt at proximate times. Only this can explain the clustering of events and dramatic contrast during these two years. Even in Malaya, where there were multiple pressures for a change of policy (especially growing British controls, and the failure to reverse the Malayan Federation policy), it was helpful if not vital in overcoming doubts about the conditions for revolt, and consequent divisions within the MCP's CC. It allowed some CC members to suggest, with a realistic chance of being listened to, a change of line even though the December 1947 CC meeting had accepted that conditions were not propitious for armed revolt.

The same December 1947 meeting had arrived at that cautious conclusion despite coming just months after Lai Teck's disappearance, and after they knew their protests against the Malayan Federation were going to fail. While it is true that the MCP may have been aware of the November 1947 Cominform journal at this point (as Chin Peng claims), the full impact of that policy would not yet have been absorbed. Yet almost simultaneously the new line was being debated in India, Burma and Ceylon. Between late 1947 and February 1948 the communist parties in these areas were moving towards a more aggressive stance. The debates, meanwhile, were sometimes internal to the individual parties, sometimes through individuals, and sometimes through meetings such as those in Calcutta. We need a more diffuse model of how such a line worked at this time.

We should also remember that just because a communist party perceived the prospects of open, legal politics and unionism as becoming weaker (as the MCP did by late 1947 and even more so by early 1948), did not mean it would automatically respond by armed revolt. This is where Chin Peng's interpretation of early 1948 is weak. Other possibilities, such as increased cell organisation, entryism, direction of open organisations by secret and unacknowledged members, organisational work and recruiting, intensified work to better penetrate non-Chinese communities, and subversion, were all possible. That the MCP chose instead in March 1948 to move towards open revolt, through phased increases in violence to prepare the population, does still need explaining.

It particularly needs explaining as few perceptive MCP members could have been unaware that inter-communal suspicions were running very high. The British had to proceed very tentatively indeed to get conservative Malay and Chinese leaders together in the Communities Liaison Committee in 1949, and that committee was at first characterised by bitter arguments over citizenship and Chinese economic dominance. It was 1952 before Malay and Chinese leaders first formed an effective political partnership in the Alliance. The MCP's particular choice of response may therefore have been significantly influenced, if not caused, by the international line and context. Yes, the internal situation strongly suggested the need for a change. But no, the internal situation did not determine one necessary form for that change.

The evidence for this is chronological (their December 1947 decision showed continuity and fears that the objective conditions were not right); contextual (their policy changes replicate those of other parties in relatively unpropitious circumstances, such as India and Indonesia); conflictual (supposedly there was opposition to the change)⁶³ and documentary and textual (the March 1948 CC decisions, for instance, start and are dominated by a reading of the international line, replicating the two camps discourse). As late as April, when the Central Committee issued and published a statement in the *Voice of the People* to justify its more aggressive stance, it included a whole paragraph on common objections, as follows:

There are some who believe that the masses in Malaya, especially the working class, are still, backward; that Malaya is dominated by 'races and abroad' (or even claim that Malaya has no indigenous racial group), and that as their motherland [China] consciousness is strong, they are unwilling to participate in any anti-imperialist struggle in Malaya. Some claim that the Malayan revolution is of a long-term nature and that the national-democratic revolution should proceed at a slow pace; some even consider the future of the revolution in Malaya to be uncertain and the chances of victory slim. They suggest that it is only necessary to wait till victory in Chinese revolution before proceeding to liberate Malaya. All these ideas are harmful ... Those ... have no fortitude to face the bloody realities.⁶⁴

All these objections were in fact valid, and the MCP's rejection of them could only really make sense in the context of a broader change of international communist line and events. The statement elsewhere emphasised that opposition to the British was now inevitable, because the British Labour Party had proved itself imperialist, intent on intensifying exploitation for its own profit, and in support of America. The point is, though, that the above objections are precisely the sort the Deputy Secretary General Yeung Kuo expressed on 21 March 1948, and which could have, with a different international line (and a more cautious Secretary General), resulted in a different outcome.⁶⁵ For in the end, Yeung Kuo's objections were to prove accurate. Malaya was not ready for revolution, and its 'national' question would prove insuperable, as Chin Peng willingly admitted to scholars in 1999 interviews.⁶⁶

The international line was thus one vital background factor. The changed international context that had helped to shape the new Soviet stance in the first place was

63 This area needs much more research. How much opposition was there, who by? It is mentioned in the Special Branch 'Basic Paper on the MCP' of 1950, as cited by John Coe, 'Beautiful flowers and poisonous weeds' (D. Phil., Queensland, 1993), p. 153. One section apparently argued armed revolt would fail. See also Chin Peng, *My side of history*, p. 206, which mentions Yeung Kuo and one other as having doubts.

64 Statement issued by the Central Committee of the Malayan Communist Party in April 1948, later published in *Voice of the People*, 20 Apr. 1948, supplied and translated by C.C. Chin.

65 Chin Peng, *Alias Chin Peng*, p. 206. Deputy Secretary General Yeung Kuo walked into the Queen Street headquarters in Singapore just after the key decisions and according to Chin Peng said 'I'm still doubtful. Are we really prepared for this? Perhaps we should reconsider our position' before questioning whether 'conditions' were 'ripe' for armed struggle. Yeung Kuo and a second CC doubter 'finally accepted' Chin Peng's position on sticking to the decisions. See p. 201 by contrast for CC member Ah Dian supporting change.

66 Chin Peng, *Dialogues*, pp. 225–32.

also relevant. Together these made 1948 seem an appropriate time for armed revolt. Indeed, the effects were immediate. The change in communist actions, such as the communist takeover of government in Prague and ousting of non-communist partners there, the changed tone in Soviet propaganda, and heightened violence in Malaya too from April, increasingly convinced British policy-makers that the Cold War was coming to Southeast Asia, and that as such their regional authorities needed to design and coordinate coherent anti-communist policies.

Hence by February 1948 British regional authorities in Singapore had set up a 'Special Planning Committee' to address the increasing communist threat, which reported back to the regional British Defence Coordinating Committee (Far East).⁶⁷ In May, this Committee recommended a concerted approach, including: better propaganda, stabilising governments, reducing racial discrimination, improving labour relations and conditions through new labour codes, better trade union advice and conciliation procedures, supporting centre-left parties, better school control through registration and more inspectors, and more support for youth movements such as Guides. Direct suppression was ruled out both as intolerable to London, and counter-productive in driving communists underground where they became more difficult to control, but it was suggested that governments 'ensure that there was legislation in readiness for suppression should it be needed'. By May, Singapore had already taken the lead in appointing its own territory-specific committee.⁶⁸ Regional communist movements were increasingly seen less as slightly misguided left-wing nationalists, and more as a part of a worldwide movement determined to destroy western values. This British reaction to the international communist drift away from open, united front politics of course further cemented MCP beliefs that the united front from above approach had failed.

Captured communist documents, meanwhile, confirm that good use was being made of the international context in MCP literature. This was variously claiming the MCP would be striking a blow (*Iskra* or 'spark' style) against the Western economies by hitting British dollar earnings, and that conflict between the two camps was now imminent, even if 'World War Three' did not break out.⁶⁹ The clear implication was that skipping a first-stage bourgeois revolution, and revolting when local conditions were constrained, might still work because of its place in, and possible impact on, the overall international context. In a sense, the MCP was making the same sort of calculation that Lenin had suggested in his 1916 work *Imperialism*: that enough

67 TNA: CO537/4246, Third Conference under the Chairmanship of His Excellency the Commissioner-General for the United Kingdom in South East Asia, held at Bukit Serene, 16 May 1948. This listed 10 points of evidence behind the committee's formation including 'The growing strength of Communist dominated world organisation such as the World Federation of Democratic Youth', communist successes in China, a new Russian legation in Bangkok, Czech events.

68 Ibid. Some measures, such as removing communists from sensitive posts (something announced for the UK in March 1948) were merely following more general, emerging, 'Cold War' practices.

69 RHL MSS PIJ 12/1948, 30.6.1948, Appendix A, p. 2, information based on intelligence. This stated that the campaign was 'probably inspired from outside (MSS reports tended to waver on this), but that reasons given locally included: (i) No political progress over three years; (ii) Members losing revolutionary spirit and needed to act immediately or fail; (iii) British economic problems with Malaya, its last dollar-earning asset. Malaya could help wreck this money-earner, bring Britain to its knees, and prevent it entering any third world war; (iv) The British Labour government being weak; and, possibility of help via pressure from communist parties of other governments.

sparks would bring down the superstructure, and so make local socialist revolution possible in fairly unlikely places: such as Russia and Malaya.

In terms of the international line, we therefore need now to construct more sophisticated chronologies and understandings of the web-like interconnections between events. We need to better understand how international communist connections and lines worked, and how they interacted with local interpretations of the developing international context. I suggest, at least for the sake of argument, that the revisionist approach previously favoured sometimes bordered on being naïve about the nature of communism, and at its worst set up largely irrelevant straw men to knock down (such as specific communist directives for armed insurrection passed through Calcutta). We have long known that that model is simplistic, so it is time to stop holding it up as the target. Interestingly, in a world of al-Qaeda and networked terrorist groups, an approach emphasising international lines, multiple, overlapping loose networks, and local reception, all meshing together, seems more relevant than ever. In short, the international aspect mattered, and matters.

2. The second area where a 'post-revisionist' or neo-orthodox approach can change our interpretations is on the MCP's precise roles, plans and responsibility for events in 1948. Again, we replace the artificial 'revisionist' question (was there an MCP plan to launch armed revolt in mid-1948) with more useful ones: Did the MCP have a plan or programme of action intended to culminate in insurrection in 1948 itself? What was the impact of such MCP plans as there were?

One answer is that the MCP did develop a plan of action, though not a map of the precise means to carry it out, for staged preparations for revolt. The March 1948 decisions, citing the changed international line, pointed to the use of violence and murder in support of building up control of the masses, especially in labour relations. It was a plan to shape the objective conditions on the ground so they would come to favour a revolt, with the latter seen now as inevitable. This part of the plan was executed from April, with mixed success and with the result that the British increased union legislation, banishments and arrests. The May 1948 CC meeting therefore anticipated a gradual move towards fully armed revolt, with the earliest date being September. It is true that the MCP did not have a full strategy for the post-armed-revolt stage in place, as they intended to call another meeting in July or August. But they did have a plan for a staged preparation for that revolt, with armed violence seen as an inevitable outcome.

Though in part motivated by a feeling that the British had closed down most alternatives (the inauguration of the Federation on 1 February being a milestone), the MCP's tactics were far from merely 'defensive'. To call them that is an insult to the many labour contractors, employers, and others intimidated, and in some cases murdered. Shooting these people – who were overwhelmingly not government employees – throwing grenades and committing arson were not merely defensive acts. They were intended to create fear, remove opposition, provoke government reaction, and so prepare the ground for armed rebellion proper. To claim the MCP did not have a plan for revolt, simply because it did not have a plan for the stage of full-scale revolt in June – the date the British declared an Emergency – is wrong.

That the British could not find hard evidence of communist directives for armed revolt by mid-June, and therefore of MCP plans to execute such revolt, has been a red

herring. That Chin Peng has happily endorsed this revisionist line, while adding his own gloss that the MCP's motives and actions were mainly defensive, may partly reflect his views at the time.⁷⁰ But serious questions remain about why he does not address the language in which the March 1948 decisions were couched – that of the two camps – why he blames Sharkey for the *kongchak* tactics, when similar but less violent tactics had been practised previously, and how he explains the MCP changing its mind over the unsuitability of conditions in Malaya for revolt, without coming up with any analysis that suggested concrete changes on the ground. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that his memory, though apparently sharp when he gave interviews and drafted his memoirs in the 1990s, was either self-consciously selective, or suffered from convenient amnesia.

It seems, therefore, that from the British and MCP perspectives, the Cold War did mature in Malaya in early 1948. From the Soviet perspective, and even Chinese perspective, this was significant in that it had the potential to weaken imperialist powers, even though both these powers and the United States declined to become more than very marginally involved themselves. This was not so much a proxy war, as a Cold War with great powers in absentia. As Geoff Wade discusses in this issue, whether you date the beginnings of the Cold War in Malaya, and Southeast Asia generally to 1948, depends on how you define 'Cold War'. If that requires direct great power engagement this was not yet 'Cold War' in its full sense. On the other hand, both Britain and the MCP were thinking in terms analogous to 'Cold War' by 1948, and this context shaped their actions, and so the commencement of repression and revolt in June 1948. In the case of other areas, such as Indochina and Korea, it could even be claimed that local actors dragged great power Cold War actors into their arenas for their own purposes, rather than being victims of external manipulation.

70 RHL MSS PIJ 12/1948, 30.6.1948, Appendix A, p. 3 describes Chin Peng as 'one of the few moderates remaining on the CEC'.