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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Alternative Narratives: The Danger of Romanticising the Other**

By Ong Weichong

### **Synopsis**

*Alternative narratives do lend a more balanced view but romanticising the other is a potential pitfall.*

### **Commentary**

IN HER Straits Times Review article *In Search of the Other S'pore Story*, Clarissa Oon highlighted the growing interest in Singapore's alternative history and posed the big question 'does it really matter'. In answer to this, several academic historians posited that there is a necessity to come to terms with the complexities of Singapore's history that includes alternative narratives to the state-centric version of events. While recognising the complex diversity of Singapore's multi-layered and multi-faceted leftist past, Singaporeans should also remember that the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) later known as the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) was responsible for acts of violence and subversion that undermined the security and independence of post-colonial Singapore and Malaysia.

### **Remembering CPM Violence**

Singapore's left-wing movement was a complex milieu of actors ranging from labour unionists to intellectuals and student activists. This does not, however, hide the fact that the CPM did attempt to overthrow the Malaysian Federation through armed violence and prepare the ground in Singapore for an urban insurrection during the so-called 'Second Emergency' (1968-1989).

The crafting of alternative narratives is necessary to inject greater breadth and depth into Singapore's historical landscape. But we should be careful in romanticising the actions of those that employed violence in their attempt to overthrow the elected governments of Singapore and Malaysia -- and in so doing took and threatened the lives of innocent civilians on both sides of the Causeway.

In a hallmark CPM 'flag-display' marking the anniversary of the outbreak of the Malayan Emergency, a number of communist flags and banners were found throughout Singapore in the week of 17 June 1974. On 20 June, a banner-attached booby trap exploded without causing any casualties. The danger posed to the civilian population by CPM booby-traps was however very real. In the mid-1970s, the infiltration of factories with the hope of recruiting support and sabotage, as well as the assassination of selected individuals at 'appropriate times' were CPM objectives in urban Singapore.

In Malaysia, the violence perpetrated by communist insurgents and the communist underground was far more devastating. On 4 June 1974, Tan Sri Abdul Rahman bin Hashim, the Inspector-General of Police, was assassinated in Kuala Lumpur by a breakaway faction of the CPM, the Communist Party of Malaya Marxist Leninist Faction (CPMML). Between 1974 and 1978, at least 23 police personnel were assassinated by so-called 'mobile-squads' of the main CPM and its other two break-away factions. Targeted assassinations and grenade attacks also claimed the lives of retired security personnel and civilians – segments of the Malaysian population with little link to the conflict between state and insurgent.

Recently declassified British and Australian archival material suggests that despite certain reservations, the British and Australian governments recognised the necessity of the counter-insurgency, counter-subversion and nation-building efforts adopted by the Singaporean and Malaysian governments to contain the CPM threat. Many of these documents have yet to be thoroughly analysed but when they do, chances are that they would be read against the grain by academic historians seeking to challenge the narrative of the state.

### **Academic Trends: The Right Benchmark?**

In academic history, alternative narratives have become the norm rather than an exception. For example, research councils in the United Kingdom and the United States are more likely to fund projects that look at marginal or alternative narratives instead of those with state-centric agendas. In the field of historical scholarship, challenging the state up to the point of post-modern fragmented incoherence has become the intellectual 'in-thing'.

This intellectual fad in looking between the interstices and challenging state-centricity, however, does not always challenge what we already know. Moreover, even renowned academic historians are not immune to character-assassination of political figures and romanticising the deeds of their opponents. In short, just like the official state version of events that it seeks to challenge, mainstream academic history does possess its own set of credibility problems.

Alternative histories written by academic historians do not come with a 'bias-free' guarantee. Like official histories, academic works do carry the biases and the agendas of their authors. More often than not, young Singaporean historians are prone to the intellectual trend of challenging the state-centric narrative albeit in a critical way. This trajectory however presents an important question: Should scholars in Singapore be given a free rein in the crafting of alternative histories?

Critical alternative narratives do enrich the understanding of Singapore's past and goes a long way in explaining what it means to be Singaporean. In this endeavour, academic historians play an important role in plugging the gaps left by the state. The state however has to be the gatekeeper on contemporary historical issues that still present a threat to national security or social cohesion. The conviction of David Irving in 2006 under Austria's Volksverhetzung (incitement of the people) law for his trivialising of the Holocaust is an example of how shoddy historical scholarship can be contrary to national interests and social cohesion.

Critical academic freedom is a privilege to be respected, but it cannot be at the expense of national security and social cohesion. Singapore's historical narrative would be poorer without a more nuanced view of the leftist heritage in its nation-building past. But any attempt to romanticise the actions of violent revolutionaries that claimed the lives of Singapore and Malaysian security personnel and civilians alike would demean the sacrifices of those who gave their all to protect the independence and security of their respective countries.

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