

**The Role of Propaganda in the
Malayan Emergency:
Lessons for
Countering Terrorism Today**

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Aims of Talk

- **To Examine how the British Colonial Government in Malaya Employed Propaganda in the CT campaign against the Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA) 1948-1958**
- **To Identify Possible “Lessons” for CT Today**

Quick Definitions

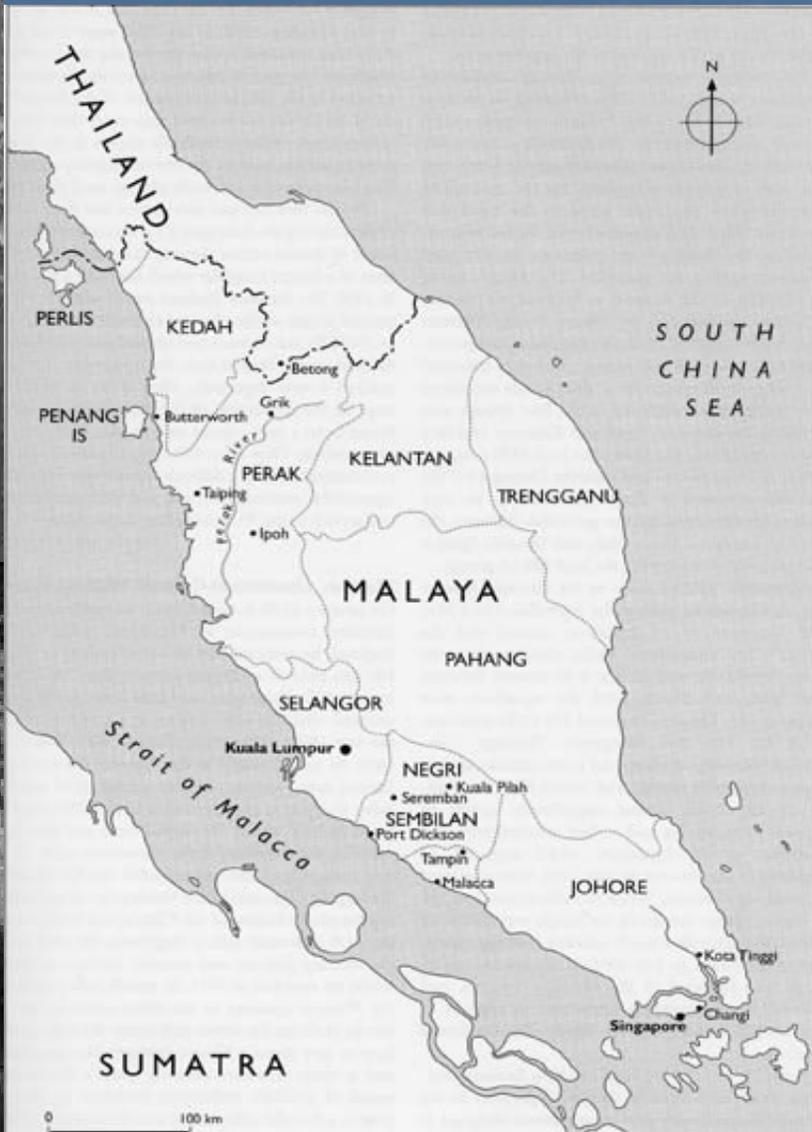
- **Terrorism is a very controversial phenomenon with no universally accepted legal definition**
- **Working definition of Terrorism: the employment, or threat of employment, of extra-normal violence by an organized group against noncombatants - in order to compel the wider community to comply with the organized group's political agenda**
- **Insurgency: an armed campaign organized and directed by a group of counter-elites seeking to transform the political status quo in desired ways**
- **Counter-elites often direct their insurgent forces in guerrilla warfare against police and military targets eg. Hit-and-run attacks on urban/rural police and outposts; ambushes of security patrols; sabotage of ammunition dumps and supply depots etc.**

Quick Definitions

- **Counter-elites often permit their insurgent forces to use terrorism as a method in their armed campaign eg. Urban bombings, assassinations of politicians, government officials and government-linked civilians in cities and town centres**
- **This is why the Malayan Emergency may hold certain “lessons” for CT operations today**

Malayan Emergency (1948-1960)

- Refers to the post-WW2 COIN/CT campaign waged by the British colonial government and later the independent Malayan government against the MRLA
- By the time the Federation of Malaya was inaugurated in Feb 1948, the country was a plural society – the British preserved the political dominance of the Malay feudal elites as well as the privileged political status of the Malays; strict citizenship requirements for Chinese and Indians
- The MRLA was basically the Communist party of Malaya (CPM) in “battledress” – evolved from the MPAJA, that had operated with the British Force 136 during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya (Feb 1942-Sep 1945)
- MRLA sought, through force of arms, to vanquish the British from Malaya and set up a Communist Republic of Malaya based on the Maoist model – many CPM/MRLA members had strong emotional connections with the CCP
- At its 1951 peak of terrorist activity, MRLA had about 8000 men under arms, plus supported by a logistics network scattered throughout the jungle fringes of western Malaya the so-called 50000-strong Min Yuen – drawn largely from the rural Chinese community – timber workers, squatter-farmers, rubber estate workers, tin miners – the key constituency in relation to the COIN aspect of the Emergency



Early British COIN/CT Approach to MRLA: Coercion the Key

- Security Force strength by 1950s: 23 battalions, 60 000 police, 250 000 Home Guards
- From 1948-1952, adopted a hard-line COIN /CT approach:
- Forced resettlement of rural Chinese from exposed jungle fringe to defended but ill-equipped Resettlement Areas near towns
- Mass detentions and deportations of rural Chinese communities deemed guilty of non-co-operation with authorities
- Collective punishment/fines on villages and small towns suspected of colluding with terrorists

One Big Reason for the Hard-Line COIN /CT Approach: British Imperial Policing Habits

- **“Irish” Model of Policing – originated in British imperial context where Colonial Office in London needed to control far-flung colonies**
- **Key senior imperial police officers came from the 1920s paramilitary Royal Irish Constabulary in Northern Ireland**
- **Many imperial police personnel recruited from ranks of soldiers and had a “military mindset”**
- **Lacked cultural affinity with population to be policed**
- **“Irish model” transmitted to Palestine 1930s, then Malaya 1940s-early 1950s**



The Other Reason for the Hard-Line COIN /CT Approach: : Racial Stereotypes

- **Rural Chinese terrified of Malayan Police – European officers and Malay police rank and file and “Special Constables”**
- **Assumption by non-Chinese speaking European officers that every Chinese was a potential Communist**
- **The Chinese had a “secret society complex” thus have to use hard line with them**
- **Perceived need to have a “strong hand” with the Chinese – Police Commissioner Nicol Gray – thousands detained, deported to China; collective fines; 22-hour curfews; mass rural Chinese alienation**



One of the horrifying souvenir photos that should have shocked Britain but didn't.²¹

The Daily Worker newspaper published this photo on May 10, 1952, with an accompanying report pleading that Britain save her honour by ending the war in Malaya. In the political climate of the time, the newspaper's series of shocking reports and harrowing pictures was regarded as mere communist propaganda and ignored by the British public at large – much to the relief of the Colonial Office.



COIN Turning Point: 1952 Onwards

- Arrival of High Commissioner and Director of Emergency Operations LG Gerald Templer and Commissioner A.E. Young from City of London Police



- Community policing approach – “police must be part of the people and people part of the police”; Young launched massive retraining programme of Malay police and Specials; Europeans attended Cantonese/Hokkien language courses
- Operation Service launched at end-1952 – Police as “Friend of the Public”
- By end-1954/early 1955 – increasing rural Chinese confidence in Police and Government

A Note on “Propaganda”

- Refers to *any* relevant mass communications that influence the thinking and behavior of a target audience
- In Malaya Propaganda covered not just “words” – speeches by Surrendered Enemy Personnel (SEP), radio broadcasts, mobile film unit exhibitions in the countryside; leaflets dropped along jungle path by patrols and aircraft; voice aircraft broadcasts
- But also *deeds*: both planned and unplanned

A Note on "Propaganda"

- In Malaya, the following *also* represented positive "propaganda of deeds" to the rural Chinese community:
- Templer's ending of hugely unpopular mass detention and deportation policy, end of collective punishment as well
- The upgrading of Resettlement Areas into well-guarded, properly sited, well-equipped "New Villages"
- The inauguration of so-called "White Areas" in Sep 1953, where ordinary people could move around freely and live normally without Emergency restrictions

More Positive “Propaganda”

- Improved police training and PR campaigns to turn Malayan Police from a paramilitary force into a community policing service
- Civics Courses in which government brought busloads of ordinary rural folk to urban centres to see at close hand how Govt worked, closed the “emotional gap” between the rural Chinese and the police and district officials – gradually remove rural Chinese fear of the so-called wicked, corrupt “*mata-mata*”
- Templer moving around in armed motorcades, in order to “project power” and assure rural communities of Govt protection from MRLA atrocities - “Tuan Governor’s” calculated ubiquity

Tuan Governor's Calculated Ubiquity



Negative “Propaganda”

- In Malaya, the following represented negative “propaganda of deeds” to the rural Chinese community:
- Poor policy: mass detentions, deportations, collective punishments, forced resettlements into poorly developed Resettlement Areas early on
- Overly harsh, unprofessional Security Force behavior toward the rural Chinese – “fear of Police” was a key driver of young Chinese decamping to the jungle to join MRLA in 1948/49
- Large-scale military operations, aerial bombing sorties that created collateral damage amongst rural Chinese civilians and paradoxically, “battle inoculation” for MRLA guerrillas, or “CTs”
- Sir Robert Thompson quote: “One bomb that misses its target and kills a child will create a thousand new enemies” – importance of “minimum force”

Young's Philosophy

- Importance of “minimum force” – whole idea was to behave well, control use of force, win public confidence and spark intelligence flow on CTs – police, not the military, should be the “sharp end of the stick” in COIN/CT operations
- To get information, soldiers and paramilitary police tended to use harsh interrogation methods and impose curfews that won few friends and created new enemies
 - Contemporary axiom? See Joshua Key's *The Deserter's Tale*, about US army deserter in Iraq
- Young wanted more of friendly neighborhood “bobby on the beat” model rather than paramilitary police no different from regular army

Young's Philosophy

- **Soldiers were trained to make up minds fast so as to act quickly – and sometimes they believed that a wrong decision was better than none at all.**
- **Police had to take more time, “because the important thing wherever the law is involved is to be *right* from the start”.**

In Short, in Malaya...

- The British Colonial Government began to slowly turn things around in the COIN/CT campaign when it recognized that the most important thing was *to deny the MRLA the hearts and minds of the key community* – in this case the rural Chinese.
- This meant that “all-of-government”, not just the Malayan Police, but the Army, the District Officers on the ground, had to be more community-oriented, more politically sensitized – in DGIS Alec Petersen’s phrase: everybody had to be “propaganda-minded”.

Lessons for CT Today?

- **Today's Religiously-Inspired Terrorism is an Extreme Form of Identity Politics**
 - **Political ideology couched in religious language**
 - **Because the terrorists exploit religion for political purposes, they *do* have sources of support in the wider religious community**
 - **CT operations in order to eliminate the terrorist threat - *without* alienating the wider community from which the terrorists emerge - are *very* critical**

Law Enforcement Errors that May have Adverse Political Consequences

- **Over-reliance on force in dealing with individual terrorists; they have families and siblings that may be motivated by revenge to join the terrorists as well;**
- **Mistakes in arresting or worse, killing individuals suspected of terrorist involvement**
- **Lack of sensitivity in securing information from the religious community; disrespect in searching homes, places of worship – all fuel the religious extremists' Storyline of a religious community being treated like "2nd-class citizens".**

“Propaganda-Minded” CT Policy the Key

- Train officers and men not merely in police procedures with respect to terrorists and the wider community of support but ALSO in the *potential political consequences* of the application of those procedures in the context of the war on terrorism.
- *Sensitize* security personnel and make them “propaganda-minded”.
- Ensure that officers and men are able to win confidence of the wider religious community through eg. language training, basic courtesy in dealings with people, ability to explain unpopular policies

“Propaganda-Minded” CT Policy the Key

- **Create a “Brains Trust” on a “whole-of-government” basis tasked with promoting propaganda-minded CT policy across the broad, drawing in police, military, NGOs, religious bodies and all other relevant agencies.**
- **In short, take deliberate and conscious care to avoid generating “political oxygen” that can inadvertently fuel religious extremist Storyline and ensure more recruits**

Conclusion

- The Malayan Emergency offers us a couple of lessons:
- Not only what we say, but equally what *we do*, constitutes propaganda – for both good or ill
- Effective CT policy in urban settings – which must seek to drain the swamp of community support for urban terrorism-must ensure that in the final analysis, the message emanating from Government's *rhetoric* is consistent with that emanating from its actual *deeds*.
- An integrationist propaganda-minded approach is essential to ultimate success in the CT operations in urban settings