‘A very salutary effect’: The Counter-Terror Strategy in the Early Malayan Emergency, June 1948 to December 1949

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ABSTRACT The counter-insurgency lessons commonly drawn from the Malayan Emergency ignore strategy in the opening phase or dismiss it as characterised by mistakes committed in a policy vacuum. This article argues that the British army pursued a deliberately formulated counter-terror strategy until circa December 1949, aiming to intimidate the civilian Chinese community into supporting the government. Mass arrests, property destruction, and forced population movement, combined with loose controls on lethal force, created a coercive effect. The consequences of these policies were mounting civilian casualties, which the government allowed to continue because its intelligence assessments suggested they were militarily effective.

KEY WORDS: Counter-insurgency, Malaya, Brutality

Drawing lessons from the Malayan Emergency is a familiar practice in counter-insurgency studies. Admiration for ‘minimum force’ and ‘winning hearts and minds’ redounds, while failings by the security forces are often marginalised and ascribed to ineptitude.¹ Political scientists have bolstered the campaign’s didactic position in showing how the discriminate use of force causes strategic success.²

These studies draw on an established sub-genre in the field which constructs ideal-type models for winning based on the juxtaposition of supposedly inherent American incompetence in counter-insurgency with an equally assumed British superiority. Yet there is a discrepancy here with the historiography on the Emergency, which acknowledges the practice of a ‘counter-terror’ by the government. This article argues that social scientific studies on the targeting of civilians, and counter-insurgency, should take into account historical interpretations of the campaign’s opening phase.

Expecting to eradicate brutality from any war is unduly hopeful; but this does not preclude exploring the dialectic relationship between restraint and excess. There are many ways to investigate non-combatant suffering. Scholars have explored the subject from the perspectives of ethics, international law, social psychology, organisational culture, and policy. To a large extent, the perspective adopted depends upon the source material available. The release of new archival evidence on the opening phase in Malaya allows a re-appraisal of the nexus between intelligence and strategy in government efforts to defeat the rebellion. Official management of historical records, and the limitations imposed by largely relying on one category of source, mean such an approach can never pretend to be the final word on the subject. Hopefully, future studies ‘from below’, and from ‘the other side of the hill’ will qualify the arguments presented here.

This article explains the treatment of Chinese squatters (about 500,000 people, or a quarter of the Chinese population of Malaya)

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6A helpful overview is contained in: Kalyvas, Logic of Violence, 52–86.


living in the jungle fringe during the opening phase of the Emergency from the perspective of government counter-insurgency strategy. Before outlining the arguments put forward, it is helpful to briefly explain the opening phase’s place within the context of the entire Emergency. The campaign broadly evolved in three phases.

In the first phase, from the Emergency’s declaration in June 1948 up to around December 1949, the security forces deliberately aimed to coerce the population into supporting the government with mass arrests, property destruction, and forced population movements, including deportation. At the same time, lethal force was controlled in a loose manner. A transition then occurred, up until around March 1950, as a strategic re-evaluation decided military measures alone would fail, while increasing discrimination in the use of force and population control would succeed.

In the second phase, the Briggs Plan started to place the Chinese community under tighter administrative control and protection from the insurgents. This involved mass resettlement and the use of collective punishments which were, however, increasingly accurately applied and less severe.

In the third phase, from December 1952 to the end in 1960, so-called hearts and minds measures, comprising improved social provision and intensified propaganda, were applied to the population. The insurgents were effectively isolated from the population and gradually reduced in number by offensive action.9

This article presents new evidence on Phase One, developing the argument in four parts.10

The first section summarises existing accounts in the historiography on the Malayan Emergency, arguing they tend to downplay the strategic dimension of the counter-terror.

Section two examines how a dual intelligence failure influenced the decision to adopt a policy aimed at intimidating the whole Chinese population in Malaya into submission. Existing studies rightly emphasise the organisational problems faced by the intelligence apparatus in 1948–49. Compounding this mechanical flaw, the cognitive appreciations about what threat the government faced, how the Chinese would react to pressure, and self-assurance about policy strengths served to promote and perpetuate the coercive approach.

The third section assesses strategy formulation, finding that the government adopted a distinctive plan from the Emergency’s start. With

little usable intelligence, the government reverted to the default strategy for quashing rebellion in British colonial history – inflicting collective punishments and hoping the population would squeeze out the insurgents themselves. Thus discriminating between civilians and combatants assumed a low priority, as reflected in the highly permissive Emergency Regulations put in place, which effectively legalised extant practice. The decision to exempt the security forces from criminal investigation and prosecution brings into question the widely held view that British counter-insurgency operated within meaningful legal constraints.

The fourth section analyses how the security forces translated sometimes ambiguous strategic guidance into actual tactical practice. The official guidelines on shooting those ‘attempting escape’, namely those whose identity as either civilian or combatant was unclear, were vague. New evidence suggests Batang Kali was not unique, yet the government failed to clarify the rules or investigate thoroughly. On the other hand, quite a large number of those attempting escape were captured instead of shot dead. The variation seen here is explained with reference to the ambiguity in the guidance given and the absence of clarificatory disciplinary proceedings. However, mass arrests and forced population movements were quickly articulated as specific official tactics. Evidence is presented to add to our understanding of how these practices evolved in the opening phase. Therefore, the article concludes by positing that besides the usual exploitation of Malaya for lessons on how to win in counter-insurgency, it also offers important insights into ‘how not to do it’.11

The Historiography of the Malayan Emergency

The historiography of the Malayan Emergency coalesces around the recognition that in 1948 and 1949 the counter-insurgency approach consisted of a ‘counter-terror’.12 In order to adjudge the new archival evidence’s significance, it is necessary to outline existing interpretations about what happened in the opening phase and why.13 The majority of studies follow Anthony Short’s lead, partly due to his access to official papers. Men who ran from the security forces and failed to stop were regularly shot, without incriminating evidence ever being found.14

The most infamous incident of this kind happened in Batang Kali, Selangor, in December 1948, when a patrol from 2nd Battalion The Scots Guards shot dead 24 suspects, who apparently tried to escape. However, he carefully qualifies this observation with three assertions. First, the police and Army were trying to operate within the law. Second, ‘people were not shot out of hand as a matter of policy’ and third, such instances were ‘the exception’. It is logically incoherent to hold that a phenomenon is simultaneously commonplace and a rarity. Short also celebrates the absence of more killings, and is self-exculpatory in criticising the American military in Vietnam. These techniques for downplaying British shootings have influenced some other writers. For example, Ramakrishna describes Batang Kali as an ‘indiscretion’, and a ‘misdemeanour’. There is greater clarity where less controversial acts are concerned. A consensus exists on the normality of mass arrests, deportations, and the burning of villages as a central part of the government’s opening phase counter-terror.

In explaining the counter-terror, the historiography proposes four interwoven factors.

16For example, Bayly and Harper, Forgotten Wars, 455.
17Short, Communist Insurrection, 160. The emphasis on legality is also evident in Keith Jeffery, ‘Intelligence and Counter-Insurgency Operations: Some Reflections on the British Experience’, Intelligence and National Security 2/1 (Spring 1987), 119.
18Short, Communist Insurrection, 160.
First, the government came under pressure from a fearful European settler community to act against an insurgency that killed civilians and damaged property.\textsuperscript{21} In their desire to eradicate the communists rapidly, the security forces retaliated. When the insurgents had launched particularly injurious attacks, the security forces vented their frustrations on those nearby, with little concern for culpability.\textsuperscript{22} The tendency to punish civilians for the insurgency was influenced by beliefs about the Chinese community. Because they only understood force, using the military instrument against them made sense.\textsuperscript{23} General Sir Neil Ritchie, commanding Far Eastern Land Forces, in September 1948 ordered units in Malaya to maintain a constant offensive.\textsuperscript{24} On the ground this meant large-scale sweep operations; on occasion, fleeing civilians were shot.\textsuperscript{25}

Thus the second explanation, articulated by Ramakrishna, is that massacres such as Batang Kali resulted from a ‘bashing the Chinese mentality’.\textsuperscript{26}

Third, most accounts propose the inevitability of such an approach given the lack of alternatives. Discrimination would require either doing very little (difficult considering the demands for action), or a sophisticated intelligence system. In June 1948, the intelligence apparatus was in a woeful condition. The system had little contact with the community and could not generate the information needed for selective military operations.\textsuperscript{27} The government failed to understand the effects of its counter-terror campaign on the population.\textsuperscript{28}

Finally, the historiography stresses the deleterious effects of ‘vague’ planning, ‘disorganisation’ and poor leadership.\textsuperscript{29} By early July 1948, with the High Commissioner killed in an air crash, the acting Officer Administering the Government was assisted by an acting Chief Secretary, an acting Attorney-General, an acting Finance Secretary, and an acting Commissioner of Police. The General Officer Commanding Malaya,
Major-General Sir Charles Boucher, had only been in post for a few weeks. These circumstances lead to the assessment that the British lacked a firm strategy, and relied upon ‘poorly directed counter-terror and coercion’.

In this policy vacuum, ‘undisciplined’ units sometimes killed civilians or destroyed their property. Short mentions cases where coroners and an army board of inquiry whitewashed allegations of illegal killings and property destruction. His book suggests a general sense of impunity in the opening phase, though the connection to policy-making is eschewed. While Short readily concedes the mistakes in policy circles, there is a contradiction between asserting the leadership’s desire to punish the whole Chinese population, and that the logical consequence of such a goal, shootings and property destruction, were the acts of undisciplined units on a small scale. Part of the problem is Short’s expectation of evidence for formal authorisation, which in reality no sensible politician would create.

What is required therefore, is an explanation that lies somewhere between the polar opposites of policy-dictated killing, and sporadic breakdowns in discipline. The remainder of the article will develop a tentative alternative interpretation, suggesting that policy-makers, though constrained by certain structural considerations, allowed a state of ambiguity to develop with regards to the treatment of civilians. More importantly, this ambiguity was tolerated even when the consequences became clear.

Early Policy Formulation in Malaya: Intelligence

Writings on the intelligence situation during this period uniformly portray the collection and assessment apparatus as deficient. In short, an insufficient number of agents and analysts were employed, and they were poorly organised. The focus is normally on the failings of the Malayan Security Service and the police, arguing more operatives and better coordination eventually brought success. There is merit in this interpretation, and evidence for structural weakness in political intelligence persistently arising during Britain’s decolonisation wars.

30Short, Communist Insurrection, 120.
32Hack, ‘Screwing down the people’, 87; Short, Communist Insurrection, 161–6.
33Short, Communist Insurrection, 162.
However, it is illusory to believe that intelligence failures are avoidable by managerial reform, for mostly they derive from political and psychological sources. As Richard Betts argues: ‘Policy premises constrict perception, and administrative workloads constrain reflection.’ This section thus moves the debate forward by summarising the structural explanation for intelligence failure, and builds upon it by suggesting an exacerbating failure in perception. Together, these factors diminished the likelihood of discriminate force being used, instead rendering a punishment strategy more attractive, as discussed in the next section.

The Malayan Security Service (MSS) was roundly condemned for failing to predict the insurgency. Its director, John Dalley, complained the Chinese ‘did not readily give information, and getting it from them was inevitably a slow and tortuous process’. These shortcomings were partly due to the organisation functioning at half strength. The MSS was disbanded in August 1948, and Special Branch assumed its functions. During the opening phase, the whole of government suffered from a shortage of Chinese-speaking personnel. Only 12 British police officers could speak a Chinese dialect, and a mere 228 Chinese served in the approximately 9,000-strong police. There were problems in interrogating captured insurgents and translating documents. Six months after the problem was first recognised, there were still too few interpreters. While the Special Branch produced intelligence for arrests rather than for military operations, military intelligence itself was little

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38[Kew, United Kingdom, The National Archives] CO [Colonial Office papers] 537/3692: Comment by Dalley, 5th meeting of the British Defence Coordination Committee (Far East) [BDCC(FE)], 24 June 1948.
42CO 537/3692: Minutes of the 9th meeting of the BDCC(FE), 23 July 1948; CO 717/171/3: Combined Intelligence Staff Summary [CISS] 5, week ending 12 Aug. 1948.
better prepared. This arose partly from the small size of intelligence staffs.\textsuperscript{45} Despite these structural problems the government managed to produce intelligence assessments throughout the opening phase. When considering how to use armed forces, decision-makers require continual analysis of tactical effectiveness in order to adapt strategy to changing conditions. Intelligence officials connected to operational agencies (primarily the military) tend to justify their organisation’s performance by producing optimistic reports. Conversely, analysts in non-operational units (to an extent the MSS and then Special Branch) tend to produce pessimistic assessments.\textsuperscript{46} The British understanding of Chinese society in Malaya affected intelligence assessments and policy formation.\textsuperscript{47} Stereotypes of the Chinese character as being subject to a ‘secret society complex’, and ‘hysteria’ influenced policy. Because the Chinese were considered prone to intimidation, it made sense to instill fear of the government to ensure good behaviour.\textsuperscript{48} Some analyses expressed hostility, with an intelligence report from July 1948 concluding: ‘It is difficult not to feel some contempt for people who can be so terrorised that they dare not even to defend themselves.’\textsuperscript{49} There was little sympathy for civilians who paid money to the communists, even those subjected to death threats. A report in December 1948 concluded that: ‘the motive for paying these sums of money is not political, revolutionary, or even sympathy for the bandits, but cowardice’\textsuperscript{50} The Colonial Office noted how for some of their counterparts in Malaya, ‘a sympathetic approach to the administration of the Chinese does not come naturally’.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{45}Sunderland, \textit{Antiguerilla Intelligence in Malaya}, 13; Short, \textit{Communist Insurrection}, 78.
\textsuperscript{46}Betts, ‘Analysis, War, and Decision’, 64.
\textsuperscript{47}Bayly and Harper, \textit{Forgotten Wars}, 443.
\textsuperscript{48}T.N. Harper, \textit{The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya} (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1999), 151; Ramakrishna, ‘Bribing the Reds’, 336.
\textsuperscript{49}CO 717/171/3: CISS 3, week ending 29 July 1948.
\textsuperscript{51}CO 537/4752: Letter from Creech Jones (Colonial Office) to Gurney (Malaya), 5 Dec. 1949.
The MSS has been criticised for undue optimism about the prospects for a quick victory. However, the Army also underestimated the insurgents’ abilities and exaggerated its own effectiveness. For example, in July 1948 Far East Land Forces (FARELF) was pleased with the course of events:

It seems that the confidence of the civil population in the Authorities is being restored and consequently more and better information is coming in. As a result of this and as they gain momentum, military operations in support of the Civil Power have in most cases achieved good results.

The volume and accuracy of intelligence seemed to be improving and enabling effective offensive operations. The Combined Intelligence Staff reported that after large-scale sweeps, even when the enemy avoided contact, insurgent attacks in the area ‘invariably’ decreased for at least two weeks. Reflecting the military mindset at the time, the report went on to state that defensive action would not have achieved such results. Thus the sweeps often criticised in hindsight were considered effective at the time. On this basis, General Ritchie thought the insurgents would be pushed out of the settled areas and into the jungles by the end of 1948. The police shared his opinion, judging the communists would be suffering casualties and ammunition shortages. Additionally, the Army assessed its offensive as having seriously disrupted the MNLA’s mobilization of reinforcements. In September the first note of caution crept in, as FARELF stated: ‘It is becoming noticeable that during periods of Military activity the flow of information improves and Gangster acts decrease, but that after Military Operations are completed the reverse process occurs.’

The next week’s report returned to reassurances about the military’s success in averting the expected communist offensive. However, the cautious tone re-emerged, remaining throughout the opening phase as reports alternately manifested optimism and pessimism. In early October, the police noted the bandits’ capability to launch attacks 30

56CO 537/3692: Minutes of the 10th meeting of the BDCC(FE), 6 Aug. 1948.
57CO 717/171/3: FMPS 8, week ending 2 Sept. 1948.
or more strong, despite security force offensives in these same areas.\textsuperscript{61} Nine days later, FARELF sustained its optimistic interpretation, applauding ‘steady progress’ in preventing the communists from mounting large-scale attacks.\textsuperscript{62} The police and military held differing definitions of what constituted a large-scale attack, and thus measured their own effectiveness by distinct yardsticks.

This bifurcation is clearly seen by comparing two other interpretations from October 1948. Having analysed insurgent activity over three months, the police observed a ‘steadily mounting enemy offensive’, unimpeded by the security forces.\textsuperscript{63} By contrast, FARELF acknowledged the lack of a ‘spectacular military success as yet’, but thought its operations were effective at breaking the MNLA down into smaller groups. Meanwhile, popular confidence in the government grew, with an increase in intelligence inflows.\textsuperscript{64} Police scepticism about large sweep operations melted away in late October, when Operation ‘Kukri’, in Johore and Perak states, deprived the insurgents of their camps, improved civilian morale and increased the intelligence flow.\textsuperscript{65} Yet the willingness to face unpalatable facts returned within days, in recognising the overall failure to inhibit insurgent attacks on a national level.\textsuperscript{66} Meanwhile, a week later, and seemingly reporting on a separate country, the military marked ‘their most successful week since the beginning of the campaign’.\textsuperscript{67}

These divergent perspectives partly resulted from military statistics centering upon casualty numbers, whereas police reports analysed incidents launched by the MNLA. However, it might be postulated that military optimism rested on an underestimation of the enemy and the conviction that large-scale offensives would work. Soldiers and policemen alike shared the belief in the efficacy of isolating the insurgents by pressurising the population. The belief relied upon intelligence assessments ascribing power to the populace rather than the insurgents: ‘if stern action by the security forces is taken against a particular squatter area and the squatters feel that this is due to recent incidents provoked by bandits in their area, then they can demand that the bandits cease activity for a certain period.’\textsuperscript{68}

The connection appeared vindicated during January 1949, when the decrease in insurgent attacks was attributed to the ‘intensification of

\textsuperscript{61}CO 717/171/3: FMPS 13, week ending 7 Oct. 1948.  
\textsuperscript{62}CO 717/170/1: FARELF sitrep 14, 10–16 Oct. 1948.  
\textsuperscript{63}CO 717/171/3: FMPS 14, week ending 14 Oct. 1948.  
\textsuperscript{64}CO 717/170/1: FARELF sitrep 16, 24–30 Oct. 1948.  
\textsuperscript{66}CO 717/171/3: FMPS 17, week ending 4 Nov. 1948.  
\textsuperscript{67}CO 717/170/1: FARELF sitrep 18, 5–11 Nov. 1948.  
\textsuperscript{68}CO 717/171/3: FMPS 24, week ending 23 Dec. 1948.
operations’. The security forces were gradually instilling confidence in the populace, leading to increased intelligence and thus more arrests of ‘known or suspected bandits’. Later in the month the police again adopted a circumspect attitude, warning that insurgent attacks happened in the Batu Arang area despite thorough screening operations. From FARELF’s perspective, the broad success of their countermeasures was undermined in the public’s opinion by the incessant continuation of ‘small jitter raids’. A year into the MNLA’s campaign, the Federation’s police summary lamented that the communists still held the initiative. Yet this fact seemed to be lost amid the plethora of reports confirming how ‘action in the squatter areas’ had a ‘salutary effect’; namely that ‘bandit activity has practically ceased and ... better tactical information has been forthcoming’.

On the one hand there was a clear awareness at the highest level of the need for intelligence reform, right from the Emergency’s start in June 1948. Malcolm MacDonald, the Commissioner-General for South-East Asia, expressed his frustration with the slowness of change in January 1949, and it has been argued that the system still did not function properly a year later. The important point regarding the counter-terror seen in the opening phase is that voices sceptical about its effectiveness were dominated by those which interpreted it as successful. In other words, the counter-terror persisted because a powerful voice – the FARELF intelligence analysis, and at times the police too – thought it worked. Confronted with contradictory evidence, policy-makers in Malaya fell back upon wishful thinking and old colonial habits of thought. As Betts puts it: ‘The greater the ambiguity, the greater the impact of preconceptions.’

Early Policy Formulation in Malaya: Strategy

Structural and interpretive weaknesses in the intelligence system created the context in which government formulated a strategy based

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75 CO 537/3692: Telegram from Malcolm MacDonald to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 26 June 1948.
77 Betts, ‘Analysis, War, and Decision’, 70.
on the intention to coerce the Chinese squatter population. This section analyses the evolution of the early counter-insurgency strategy, and the next section examines some of the consequences. The historiography on Malaya sometimes blames events in the opening phase on vague, or non-existent planning. General Boucher is criticised for failing to develop an appropriate strategy. Another claim suggests the military were flailing around without direction until Henry Gurney was sworn in as High Commissioner on 6 October 1948.

The argument here builds on an alternative view, positing early-phase repressive strategy as a general attribute of British counter-insurgency. The impetus to punish a recalcitrant population harshly, quickly nipping trouble in the bud, drew on a tradition in British colonial history, and was perpetuated via key personnel transfers from campaign to campaign. The strategic intention to punish the population nonetheless left ambiguity in how to use lethal force at the tactical level. There were two possible methods for clarifying the situation and ensuring the discriminate application of violence. First, codifying precise rules through the Emergency Regulations; and second, creating a form of military case law through disciplinary proceedings which constituted practical examples of what was acceptable. The government in Malaya discarded these restraint mechanisms by enacting highly permissive regulations, and exempting the security forces from prosecution.

The British Defence Coordination Committee (BDCC) (Far East), and the Federation of Malaya Local Defence Committee, created a strategic plan prior to Gurney’s arrival. These early plans were coordinated to a large degree by Malcolm MacDonald, as regional Commissioner-General. Discussing the Emergency with MacDonald, regional governors and their advisers concurred on the desirability of dealing with the communists ‘speedily and completely’. As General Ritchie pointed out, there was a danger that the uprising ‘might spread very rapidly if not dealt with effectively and immediately’. Air Marshal Sir Hugh Lloyd, commanding the theatre air forces, advocated a hard line: ‘Perhaps the best encouragement for people to give information would be to hang some of the enemy.’ MacDonald agreed that any

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78Marston, ‘Lost and found in the jungle’, 97; Short, Communist Insurrection, 136; Stubbs, Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare, 70.
79Barber, War of the Running Dogs, 62; Stubbs, Hearts and Minds, 71.
‘show of force would be helpful’ in improving the security situation.82 A preliminary strategy emerged quickly. There would be two phases to the campaign. The first phase would ‘restore law and order in settled areas of the territory and ... maintain economic life of the country and restore morale’. The security forces would conduct both offensive and defensive operations. The offensive role involved making arrests, sweeps, and searches in order to ‘liquidate the enemy forces’, or if this proved impossible, to drive them into the jungle. Vital economic points, such as power stations, factories, docks, large rubber estates and mines would be defended. The plan’s second phase called for the destruction of guerrilla forces in the jungles.83 Patrols and flag marches started in the first week of June, and ‘about 10 June the situation deteriorated and the Army started protective and offensive operations’; that is, prior to the full Emergency’s declaration on the 18th.84 Initial estimates thought that Phase One would take three months to complete.85

MacDonald emphasised handling the Chinese ‘with great firmness’.86 Responding to the plan, the Colonial Secretary, Arthur Creech Jones, demanded prompt action: ‘we want to strike hard from the start to make sure that we are not faced with one of those lingering guerrilla campaigns’.87 London wanted success in Phase One, only tentatively promising a brigade for Phase Two, rather than the requested division.88 The regional commanders accepted the view that a prolonged campaign might well damage fragile British prestige throughout Asia.89 In addition, the need for a firm campaign also derived from the weakness of settler morale, which FARELF worried could crack at any time.90 Therefore there was an urgency to defeating the insurgency before planter morale collapsed, and with it the economy.91 Britain’s global military overstretch also made rapid victory a priority.92 Knowing this, Malaya refrained from asking for reinforcements.93 Therefore, the troop numbers

82CO 537/3692: Minutes of the fifth meeting of the BDCC (FE), 24 June 1948.
83CO 537/3692: Telegram from MacDonald to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 26 June 1948.
84CO 717/170/1: FARELF sitrep 1, 12 June–12 July 1948.
86CO 717/210/3: Telegram from MacDonald to Sec. of State for the Colonies, 6 July 1948.
87CO 537/3692: Letter from Creech Jones to A.V. Alexander, 8 July 1948.
89CO 537/3692: Minutes of the ninth meeting of the BDCC (FE), 23 July 1948.
91CO 537/3692: Telegram from MacDonald to Sec. of State for the Colonies, 10 Aug. 1948.
92Bayly and Harper, Forgotten Wars, 436.
93CO 537/3692: Telegram from MacDonald to Sec. of State for the Colonies, 10 Aug. 1948.
needed for a restrained, minimum force-style response were unavailable. The alternative, encouraged by views of the Chinese as subject to pressure, and exacerbated by a faulty intelligence system, was a campaign based on fear. The Chinese were considered ‘very prone to intimidation’.94 And they deserved whatever hardships came their way:

the majority of squatters are feeding the enemy and are often sheltering and ‘covering’ him as well; therefore we must deal with them. . . . Government has no alternative but to deport them to their country of origin as undesirables. If several areas are cleared of squatters in this way, with sufficient attendant publicity, it should have a considerable effect on the remainder.95

In mid-September 1948 the Local Defence Committee published the first part of a review of internal security, dealing with the security problems facing Malaya. It provided the most sophisticated analysis of the relationship between the squatters and insurgents so far. While recognising the MNLA’s forces were largely based in squatter areas, and relied upon them for food and intelligence, the report appreciated that ‘only a portion of the Chinese community . . . are willingly supporting them.’ Most people supported the communists through fear, and their loyalties would fluctuate with the course of events. Conversely, the report repeated stock phrases about secret societies, and merely recommended ‘the squatter areas be at least covered’ while a detailed plan was worked out.96 Despite the qualifications about popular support for the insurgency, within weeks the BDCC (FE) again articulated its belief that ‘the Chinese were governed by the propaganda of force’.97 On 8 October the Local Defence Committee completed the report’s second part, on measures to combat the uprising, which received BDCC (FE) and the Commanders-in-Chiefs’ approval.98 The overriding priority lay in separating the insurgents from the population, by ‘strong police action’. A method of achieving this was to impress upon people the consequences of helping the insurgents, or remaining neutral observers. The report advised:

95CO 717/171/3: CISS 4, week ending 5 Aug. 1948.
97CO 537/3688: Minutes of the 12th meeting of the BDCC (FE), 27 Sept. 1948.
Imposing responsibility on the inhabitants of any area in which crimes are repeatedly committed and in which the community fails to give adequate information to the security forces. Such responsibility will include the deportation of some of the leading families known to have been implicated.

Thus the poor intelligence situation would be improved by punishing peoples’ lack of cooperation. A few high-profile businessmen should be detained or deported as an example to others who paid protection money to the MCP. The report dismissed any sympathy for those intimidated into paying, instead stressing the ‘profound effect’ such arrests or deportations would have. However, such moves first necessitated clearing the backlog in those awaiting deportation, which might imply short cuts leading to ‘somewhat arbitrary deportation’. Any disadvantages incurred were easily outweighed by the need to stamp out the insurgency ‘quickly and ruthlessly’, to avoid the further loss of innocent life and property. Revivifying the familiar faith in a mass imitative response, the report supposed the ‘salutary effect’ of deportations, which ‘may well swing the balance in favour of Government’. The police were instructed to build up case files against entire squatter areas ‘clearly implicated in bandit activities’. Action would proceed depending on the circumstances:

(a) Where there is a strong case against the area and the numbers involved do not make the problem too great, all the inhabitants of that area to be deported. All huts, buildings and cultivations to be destroyed, in order to prevent bandits or neighbouring squatter areas making use of them. This form of action will, undoubtedly, have a very salutary effect upon their neighbours and all who hear of it.

(b) Where there is reasonably strong evidence not quite warranting mass deportation or where the numbers affected would constitute an administrative impossibility, the squatters should be rounded up and held in a temporary cage in the neighbourhood for national registration or screening.

These policies promised to remedy the squatters’ incomplete fear of the government and would be supplemented by a plan to improve their position, to be drawn up in the future. The language employed in the situation reports demonstrates how plans were translated into action. For example, Operation ‘Radio’, launched in Kedah State on

21 October 1948, was ‘directed against squatters’. Operation ‘Kukri’ in neighbouring Perak State was described as an ‘anti-“squatter” operation’. On another occasion, the police aspired to render squatter areas ‘uncomfortable’. The military shared the sentiment that these operations promised a ‘salutary effect’. From early on in the campaign, senior policy-makers decided punishing whole communities would set an example and resolve the conflict quickly. Because the language in the documents is often euphemistic and vague, it is implausible to argue that the government authorised deliberate killings of civilians, whereas mass arrests, deportations and property destruction were planned. Rather, the government created a permissive environment by encouraging a hostile attitude towards an entire population, without initially setting out specific guidelines on the use of force.

Over an eight-month period, the government passed a series of statutory instruments legalising certain acts. Five regulations in particular had a bearing on arrests, property destruction, and shootings. First, on 31 July 1948, the government gazetted Regulation 27, conferring police powers on the military. Second, Regulation 24, enacted on 16 October 1948, allowed arrest on suspicion and detention without trial for up to 14 days. Third, Regulation 18B, added on 13 November 1948, authorised the officer in charge of a police district to ‘destroy or authorise the destruction’ of a suspect building or structure. Importantly, clause four retrospectively legalised any prior destructions. Fourth, on 30 November 1948 the Federation created Regulation 10A, whereby a chief police officer could declare any location a ‘special area’. In these areas, the regulation permitted the security forces to arrest anyone who failed to stop and submit to a search when called upon to do so. If necessary to effect the arrest, force could be used, which could ‘extend to the use of lethal weapons’.

Finally, Regulation 27A of 22 January 1949 authorised the security forces to arrest suspects, overcome resistance to arrest, and prevent escape from arrest with ‘reasonably necessary’ force. Again, this might extend to lethal force. Before opening fire, the soldier or policeman should ‘call upon him, in a loud voice, to stop and the person so called upon shall be given a reasonable chance to stop’. After arrest, a warning would be given about the liability to be shot if attempting to escape. The Regulation’s last sentence declared anything done before it

101 CO 717/170/1: FARELF sitrep 19, 12–18 Nov. 1948.
came into force which would have been legal under it, as retrospectively lawful.  

The command’s disinterest is demonstrated by its response to the many instances of people ‘shot whilst attempting to escape’, including the notorious Batang Kali massacre (discussed in the next section). None were investigated by the military police’s Special Investigation Branch (SIB). Indeed, a mere lieutenant commanded the Malaya SIB section in the opening phase.  

Sir Henry Gurney’s attitude here is enlightening:

[T]errorists can be defeated only by the initiative being taken by the Police and other security forces against the terrorists on their own ground and according to their own rules. This offensive action against civilian members of the community, not always clearly distinguishable, raises most difficult questions of law. It is in fact impossible to maintain the rule of law and to fight terrorism effectively at the same time. I have publicly said that it is paradoxical though none the less true that in order to maintain law and order in present conditions in Malaya it is necessary for the Government itself to break it for a time. … At the present time the Police and Army are breaking the law every day. A spate of Emergency Regulations to provide legal cover could if necessary be issued, but to give the sanctity of law to pieces of paper signed by the High Commissioner only and not subject to ratification by any legislature must lead, if taken too far, to justified criticism and misconceptions derogatory of the law itself. … it is most important that police and soldiers, who are not saints, should not get the impression that every small mistake is going to be the subject of a public enquiry or that it is better to do nothing at all than to do the wrong thing quickly. … The process of isolation of the ‘hard core’ can only be permanently successful if some alternative object of affiliation, stronger than the bandits and at the same time inspiring greater fear, can be introduced to which the floating Chinese can attach themselves.

This decision by Gurney to effectively absolve the security forces from their duty to act within the law had terrible results. It meant that each

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107 CO 537/4753: Statement by the High Commissioner for Malaya, Annexure ‘A’ to minutes of the 16th meeting of the BDCC (FE), 28 Jan. 1949.
unit bearing arms worked in a world with no clear rules about acceptable behaviour. Consequently how a regiment, company, platoon or police patrol behaved depended largely upon the inclinations of the commanding officer. While further micro-comparative research is required into the disciplinary characteristics of individual units, this article’s contention is that the agency allowed these small groups was permitted by the ambiguity inherent in higher-level policy. The next section highlights some of the implications for the Chinese squatters of Malaya.

**Translating Strategic Intentions into Action**

Because the policy decisions analysed above incorporated a certain element of ambiguity, it is essential to consider how they were implemented. A wide range of policies and tactics were used in the opening phase, including deep-penetration special forces’ patrols, mass arrests and national registration. Clearly, these affected the civilian population in quite different ways, and the degree of discrimination varied depending upon the specific policy and the area concerned. This article cannot offer a comprehensive account of all government action in the opening phase. Rather, the focus is upon three illustrative types of action resulting from the coercive strategy: the use of armed force, arrests, and forced population movements.

**Armed Force**

Suspects were killed in Malaya individually and in groups. The worst known incident occurred at Batang Kali in December 1948, when 24 villagers were ‘shot whilst attempting to escape’. The government hailed the episode as a success against the communists, until January, when it announced that an inquiry (by the Attorney General) had decided no further action was necessary. However, the first recorded incident arose on 20 July 1948, when police shot dead a man they were questioning after he ‘tried to make off’. On 21 July, when military and police responded to an attack on the Elphil Estate they ‘shot two Chinese who refused to stop when called upon to do

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110Ibid., 455.
111CO 717/173/1: Telegram from Officer Administering the Government of Malaya [OAG] to the Sec. of State for the Colonies, 22 July 1948.
so. Numerous other incidents took place where one or two persons were shot. For example, on 8 August in Bentong, police shot dead a Chinese person ‘while trying to escape after arrest’. Here, as elsewhere, there can be no certainty about whether these people were truly shot trying to escape, or if it was a euphemism for murder, as Batang Kali suggests. An incident happened south of Lenga on 7 November: ‘Operation RUGGER continues. Army/Police party search “Kampong”- [village] and detain 102 suspects, of whom 39 identified as Bandits or associates. Eleven Bandits killed while attempting escape.’

What is important here is that 11 people were killed in suspicious circumstances, without an investigation being launched. Indeed, in the next two days three more people were killed in this manner. On 10 November another six suspects were shot while evading arrest in the Kuala Kubu area. Reports noting individual shootings could easily go undetected by the strategic leadership, especially considering the tendency for optimistic interpretations explored above.

However, three incidents in November and December involving the killing of upwards of six people at a time should have aroused suspicion. Perhaps this very realisation explains the passing of Regulation 10A, permitting lethal force in arrests, on 30 November, and Regulation 27A retroactively legalising shooting people trying to escape on 22 January 1949. Whether these incidents were justifiable is almost impossible to objectively discern from the sources available. But it is significant that the official response was to legalise existing practice rather than order inquiries or tighter rules of engagement. The reports offer some insights into how the security forces themselves legitimised these killings, such as that ‘One man tried to break through cordon he was shot dead.’

Having shot three men dead escaping in Johore in August 1948, the police found a Bren gun, two rifles and assorted ammunition. One woman was wounded and another killed carrying ‘Communist documents’. A police patrol shot a bandit who refused to surrender in Kajang, and another killed a bandit who unwisely ‘pretended to surrender and then threw a grenade at security forces’ in Kuala Pilah.

112 CO 717/173/1: Telegram from OAG to Sec. of State, 21 July 1948.
114 CO 717/170/1: FARELF sitrep 18, 5–11 Nov. 1948.
115 Ibid.
116 CO 717/173/1: Telegram from Gurney to Sec. of State, 10 Nov. 1948.
117 CO 717/173/1: Telegram from OAG to Sec. of State, 7 Aug. 1948.
118 CO 717/173/1: Telegram from OAG to Sec. of State, 9 Aug. 1948.
120 CO 717/173/1: Telegram from OAG to Sec. of State, 24 Sept. 1948.
Accidents also accounted for several deaths, although the fact that they were recorded as such suggests the other shootings were purposeful. For example, during an operation near Ipoh, Perak in April 1949, ‘Police killed one bandit and arrested four male and two female suspects. One female civilian accidentally shot.’\textsuperscript{121} On 27 April, near Batu Pahat, Johore, a 1st Battalion The 10th Gurkha Rifles patrol ‘killed one of two Malay fishermen mistaken for bandits’.\textsuperscript{122} Security forces sometimes wounded those escaping, though whether due to a desire not to kill or simply poor marksmanship is unclear. Towards the end of August 1948, an escaping prisoner was wounded rather than killed.\textsuperscript{123} At times, those wounded were re-captured, along with other suspects apprehended without weapons being fired. In a notable success on 4 August, a combined police-military patrol found weapons and explosives in addition to capturing 19 fleeing people.\textsuperscript{124} On 25 September, ‘Police wounded and arrested bandits in Batu Gajah area of Perak.’\textsuperscript{125} On 20 January 1949, 1st Battalion The Seaforth Highlanders apprehended three people attempting escape, and three others were arrested the next day. Yet on 23 January, police south of Segamat killed a person escaping.\textsuperscript{126}

These examples suggest that a completely indiscriminate shooting policy was not authorised, but that the variation between killings and captures was quite random, depending upon local interpretation of the ambiguous rules. The failure to clarify these rules at the highest level even following the Batang Kali incident, and the decision to exempt the security forces from legal inquiry, highlights the disregard for protecting civilians.

Table 1 below summarises the total casualties inflicted to the end of April 1949. These figures are probably incomplete as not all incidents may have been recorded. Nonetheless, they provide a useful indication of the scale of violence applied towards civilians, and the relative efforts made to wound or capture suspects rather than kill them.

**Arrests**

From the outset arresting suspected insurgents and sympathisers assumed a high priority in the tactical responses employed by the government. By 6 July 1948, the Chief Secretary had issued 892 orders permitting detention without trial.\textsuperscript{127} The initial arrests aimed to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{121} CO 717/170/2: FARELF sitrep 41, 15–21 April 1949.
\item \textsuperscript{122} CO 717/170/2: FARELF sitrep 43, 29 April–6 May 1949.
\item \textsuperscript{123} CO 717/170/1: FARELF sitrep 7, 22–29 Aug. 1948.
\item \textsuperscript{124} CO 717/173/1: Telegram from OAG to Sec. of State, 4 Aug. 1948.
\item \textsuperscript{125} CO 717/173/1: Telegram from OAG to Sec. of State, 25 Sept. 1948.
\item \textsuperscript{126} CO 717/170/2: FARELF sitrep 29, 21–28 Jan. 1949.
\item \textsuperscript{127} CO 717/173/1: Telegram from OAG to Sec. of State, 6 July 1948.
\end{itemize}
capture specifically identified MCP members. However, the dire intelligence situation quickly necessitated the adoption of large cordon-and-search tactics, where those caught inside the net were subjected to screening in order to try and separate the insurgents from the populace. These operations varied in scale. During a combined military-police sweep in the Semenyih area on 25 to 26 July, 500 people were arrested, of whom over 80 per cent were released after questioning.128 Some operations were on a small scale, for example when 1st Seaforths screened 52 people in Johore, arresting two suspects.129 In a larger operation in Perak, troops screened 1,775 men, capturing ‘fourteen known bandits’.130 During Operation ‘Rugger’, conducted in Johore in November, 600 underwent screening, with 152 detained by the police.131 A situation report from October explained the logic behind these actions: “‘Squatter’ areas are the main sources of information and supplies for the bandits, and their dispersal should have an appreciable effect on the bandits [sic] ability to operate effectively.”132

Mere suspicion was enough to prompt an arrest, and during 1948 the police arrested 13,603 after screening.133 Screening intensified in 1949. The smaller-scale efforts, such as the screening of 21 rubber tappers in Selangor on 6 January, became less common as larger operations rose in prominence. For example, on the same day, the 1st Battalion The King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry (KOYLI) screened 2,500 people in Perak.134 Normally the police and military worked together, such as when 3rd Battalion The Grenadier Guards and police screened 425

Table 1. Force Used on Persons Escaping, July 1948 to April 1949

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Force</th>
<th>Number of People Affected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Killed escaping</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wounded escaping</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captured escaping (including wounded)</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accidents</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>125</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: CO 717/170/1; CO 717/170/2; CO 717/173/1.

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128 CO 717/173/1: Telegram from OAG to Sec. of State, 27 July 1948.
130 CO 717/170/1: FARELF sitrep 17, 30 Oct.–5 Nov. 1948.
131 CO 717/170/1: FARELF sitrep 19, 12–18 Nov. 1948.
squatters in Selangor State on 24 February.\textsuperscript{135} The outcome could be positive in quite specific ways, as the arrest of ‘three money collectors’ following the screening of 200 squatters in Johore illustrates. On the other hand, an operation by 1st Malay Regiment in Kedah produced nothing.\textsuperscript{136}

In March and April 1949, the 1st Battalion The 6th Gurkha Rifles carried out repeated screenings, arresting 19 out of 1,300 checked over four days in Kedah.\textsuperscript{137} Besides rural villages, labour lines were also subjected to the process. On 21 April, the 2nd Scots Guards screened a rubber estate in Selangor, making ‘eleven arrests including one known bandit’.\textsuperscript{138} Cities were not exempt; the police screened 1,800 persons in the outlying areas of Kuala Lumpur in May.\textsuperscript{139} Huge efforts could lead to limited results; the 2nd Battalion The 2nd Gurkha Rifles, 4th Hussars and police screened 2,000 in Perak in May, for ten arrests.\textsuperscript{140} At times arrests were made to boost the figures, as the following account suggests: ‘Acting on information that some forty bandits with families had moved into a squatter area near SEGAMAT (JOHORE), a strong patrol of 16 Fd bty [Field Battery, Royal Artillery] searched the district. No trace of bandits was, however, found, but twenty-eight male suspects were detained.’\textsuperscript{141}

Reports mention the arrest of ‘collaborators’, raising the question of what proved collaboration? For example, on 8 June, the 1st KOYLI ‘arrested three collaborators’ after screening 400 people in Kedah.\textsuperscript{142} Living in an area where the insurgents launched an attack prompted suspicion: ‘Patrol 26 Fd Regt [Royal Artillery] led by informer found occupied bandit camp, and killed three bandits. One other bandit believed seriously wounded, and two Rifles were recovered. All inhabitants of a nearby estate were detained for interrogation.’\textsuperscript{143}

Following the insurgents’ murder of a constable near Kota Tinggi in Johor, the police ‘arrested the entire local settlement who were suspected of assisting them’.\textsuperscript{144} Similarly, the security forces viewed the absence of men as signifying communist allegiance. After screening 420 squatters north of Baling, Kedah, the military reported that ‘No males between ages of twenty and thirty were found to be present.’\textsuperscript{145} During

\textsuperscript{135}CO 717/170/2: FARELF sitrep 34, 25 Feb.–3 March 1949.
\textsuperscript{136}CO 717/170/2: FARELF sitrep 37, 18–24 March 1949.
\textsuperscript{137}CO 717/170/2: FARELF sitrep 39, 1–7 April 1949.
\textsuperscript{139}CO 717/170/2: FARELF sitrep 44, 7–13 May 1949.
\textsuperscript{140}CO 717/170/2: FARELF sitrep 45, 14–20 May 1949.
\textsuperscript{141}CO 717/170/2: FARELF sitrep 46, 21–27 May 1949.
\textsuperscript{142}CO 717/170/2: FARELF sitrep 49, 10–17 June 1949.
\textsuperscript{143}CO 717/170/2: FARELF sitrep 52, 2–15 July 1949.
\textsuperscript{144}CO 717/170/2: FARELF sitrep 73, 3–10 Dec. 1949.
August and September 1949, further large-scale operations, with over 800 people screened at once, took place. The pattern continued from October to December. In the Kuala Lumpur area alone, in late October 1,000 civilians were screened (for only one arrest), 4,000 more between 19 and 25 November, and 600 in late November.

Clearly then, from Operation ‘Frustration’, the arrests of senior MCP leaders in June 1948, right through the opening phase, mass detention played a substantial part in the counter-insurgency strategy. These arrests often involved punishing people who might be communist supporters, rather than accurately detaining people based on evidence of criminality and subjecting them to a fair and open judicial process. Whenever possible, the authorities sought to deport those arrested to China, a measure initially approved by London in June 1948. Some Chinese squatters apparently went by request, but assessing their proportion of the whole, and whether they truly volunteered, is impossible. Deportation, or ‘repatriation’, became increasingly difficult as Mao Zedong’s communist forces took over the country. Neither detentions nor the deportations authorised under the Emergency Regulations allowed any appeal process.

Forced Population Movement

Another type of pressure exerted on the Chinese squatters consisted of forced population movement. Ultimately this meant resettlement into special ‘new villages’, but only about 18,500 people were resettled by March 1950. The villagisation programme largely transpired in the campaign’s second phase. Assessing the percentages of those moved

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148 Bayly and Harper, Forgotten Wars, 430.
149 CO 537/4246: Telegram from Sec. of State for the Colonies to Commissioner-General in South East Asia, 12 June 1948.
151 CO 825/77/1: Monthly report to the Sec. of State for the Colonies and the Foreign Sec., No. 2, 2 Sept. 1949.
by force compared with those who moved voluntarily is impossible, although it often resulted from a military operation. Humphrey highlights possibly the most extreme example, when on 19 October 1948, 5,000 squatters were removed from the Batu Arang area of Selangor after the MNLA attacked there. Bayly and Harper mention the eviction of 456 squatters from Sungei Siput, and 700 more from Tronoh, also in October. Stubbs and Short suggest the military’s taste for destroying squatter homes, usually by fire, developed early on and endured until at least November 1948. The situation reports now show the security forces participated in population movement and property destruction before the former became official policy in October, and the latter was legalised in November 1948. From July 1948 the military took ‘a very big share’ in the evacuations, acting under civilian direction.

The predilection for burning suspects’ property was possibly in retaliation for the MCP’s own arson campaign against rubber estates. The burnings seemed justified when the fires proved the owner’s culpability: ‘Police and military raided an area near Rawang, Selangor. No opposition. Large stocks of rice and prepared food found and removed. Houses burnt and ammunition heard exploding in them. . . .Very few men seen, many new huts burnt down.’ Police and Gurkhas also heard explosions after they set fire to huts near Tampin the next day. Having killed 22 bandits and captured 18 in Batu Arang, Selangor State, on 30 July 1948, the 26th Field Regiment and police punished the locals by burning down many squatter huts. In September, a party escorting prisoners to Kulai was ambushed, so the security forces intended to ‘evacuate all women and children and then to destroy village’ in reply. A rationale for the property destruction often existed then, as shown again on 1 October, when 1/10th Gurkha Rifles burnt a village where they found an insurgent.

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157 Bayly and Harper, Forgotten Wars, 448.
158 Stubbs, Hearts and Minds, 73; Short, Communist Insurrection, 154.
159 CO 537/4239A: Telegram from Commissioner-General for South East Asia to Sec. of State for the Colonies, 12 July 1948.
160 For example, the attack recorded in: CO 717/173/1: Telegram from OAG to Sec. of State, 21 July 1948.
161 CO 717/173/1: Telegram from OAG to Sec. of State, 17 Aug. 1948.
162 CO 717/173/1: Telegram from OAG to Sec. of State, 18 Aug. 1948.
Intelligence reports shed light on the issue of voluntary movement. One from October 1948 assessed that:

The Malayan Colleries [sic] and police have made life singularly difficult for squatters in the Batu Arang area and the police and the military have done likewise in the Kajang area [south of Kuala Lumpur]. A typical Chinese reaction to this would be, that, being harassed by both the authorities and the bandits, to move to the comparatively safe areas in the vicinity of a large town.166

Sometimes the burnings happened as part of a screening operation, preventing squatters from returning to a supposedly ‘cleared’ area. For example, the 1st Seaforths and 26th Field Regiment screened 600 people near Muar, Johore, arrested 33 men, then destroyed all the huts in the area.167 Forced movements continued throughout 1949, hundreds leaving their homes at a time: 525 people were ‘evicted’ by the 1/6th Gurkha Rifles and police from Sintok, Kedah on 28 February.168 On 8 March, 1st Seaforths and police ‘evacuated some three hundred squatters’ from Bekok, Johore; and on 11 April they ‘cleared a squatter area’ of 280 people near Jementah.169

FARELF considered the ‘evacuations’ were ‘seriously impeding bandit operations’.170 A report from April 1949 documented the ‘Voluntary movement of squatters’ in Perak, ascribing this to ‘recent action by the security forces’.171 In April 1949, the 2nd Scots Guards reported that they had ‘screened village and removed all squatters. All their houses were destroyed.’172 East of Kulim, Kedah, the police burned down ‘meeting places in squatter area’ following six arrests.173 On 9 August 1949 squatter huts were destroyed because ‘bandit hideouts’ were found in the area.174

These practices clearly conform to the policy guidelines analysed earlier. Yet the punitive dimension remained, as shown when 2nd Battalion The Coldstream Guards and police removed 457 squatters

170CO 717/170/2: FARELF sitrep 37, 18–24 March 1949.
from the Bertam valley in August 1949 as a punishment for insurgent attacks a month earlier.\textsuperscript{175} Therefore there appears to have been a close connection between the destruction of property and the forced movement of whole populations as a tactical device in the overall punishment strategy aimed at coercing the Chinese squatters into compliance. The practices pre-dated official policy, were then incorporated into the government plan, and continued until at least August 1949. Quantifying the properties destroyed and the people moved is impossible when many reports refer simply to ‘many’, yet there is no doubt that thousands were affected.

Conclusion

This article has sought to question some common assumptions about the didactic value of Malaya as the key case study of the ‘hearts and minds’ approach to counter-insurgency. The argument has built upon previous scholarship on the counter-terror in the campaign’s opening phase, adding qualifications and extra information. It challenges the views, found in the historiography, that the police and Army tried to operate within the law, and that early mistakes arose from a lack of planning. Rather, the evidence demonstrates how a contempt for the Chinese squatters combined with intelligence failure to produce a policy in favour of punishing an entire population.

While earlier studies have rightly emphasised the severe shortages in personnel and sources available to the intelligence system, this study suggests that the assessments were interpretively flawed. They drew unduly optimistic conclusions, underestimating insurgent capabilities and exaggerating the effectiveness of government policy. Consequently a self-fulfilling prophecy emerged whereby a government convinced of punishing people for ‘salutary effect’ witnessed the very effect it wished to see. Because events were understood through the prism of a pre-existing set of assumptions, improvements in the material dimensions of intelligence would perhaps have made little difference. Whether the punitive policies enacted in the opening phase actually proved useful is debatable; the fact that they were substantially modified or abandoned in later phases suggests not. What is important here is that the government thought them effective in 1948–49. It pronounced this view in a series of policy documents and formal meetings. When official policies were adopted, such as property destruction, they did formalise already extant tactical practice. This should not lead to the under-estimation of policy’s impact though, as the tactics described became much more widespread after official endorsement.

With regards to arrests and property destruction the guidelines were clear; suspect areas would be punished collectively for insurgent activities. Elsewhere, ambiguity seemed to reign, especially concerning the rules on the use of deadly force. However, the document from January 1949 shows how the Governor permitted the indiscriminate use of force to continue, despite repeated instances of suspicious shootings. These were not investigated and the law was modified to permit the unregulated use of lethal force. The real significance came not from the law being changed or the lack of oversight, but the two in combination. The article then proceeded to demonstrate how these policy decisions manifested themselves at the tactical level, recording instances of shootings, arrest operations and property destruction that have recently come to light. The frequency of these examples supported the arguments made about policy as a key causal factor.

The evidence suggests modifications arose in the planning process over time, and further research into how these issues evolved through the remainder of the Emergency is needed. The existence of abuses in campaigns in Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, Aden, Northern Ireland, and Iraq suggests that questions about generic causes of abuses, patterns of behaviour and the strategic consequences warrant a response, however qualified by historical specificity it is wise to be.\textsuperscript{176} Indiscriminate death and destruction is, to a greater or lesser degree, inevitable in armed conflicts. It is more likely when policy-makers think that targeting non-combatants is strategically useful. Strategic studies must continue to engage with the question of civilian suffering not simply because of the moral imperatives inherent in democratic states subject to the rule of law, but because it effects the question at the subject’s heart – why do armed forces win and lose?

**Acknowledgements**

An earlier version of this paper was given at the ‘Intelligence, Strategic Culture and Counterinsurgencies’ workshop, National Defense University, Washington DC on 11 June 2008. Thanks to Patrick Cronin and Huw Davies for arranging the event, and the participants for their remarks. Thanks to Manuel Bollag, Paul Dixon, David French, Karl Hack, Georgina Sinclair and Christian Tripodi for their comments on subsequent drafts. Errors remain the author’s responsibility.

\textsuperscript{176}Hew Strachan, ‘British Counter-Insurgency from Malaya to Iraq’, *RUSI Journal* 152/6 (Dec. 2007), 11.
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