

# Malayan Emergency

by *Liviniyah, P.*

The Malayan Emergency began in June 1948 after three British plantation managers near Sungei Siput in Perak were killed by insurgents of the Communist Party of Malaya ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2018-03-28\\_141257.html?s=EMERGENCY](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2018-03-28_141257.html?s=EMERGENCY)) (CPM).<sup>1</sup> The CPM had aimed to overthrow the colonial government and establish a Communist People's Democratic Republic of Malaya.<sup>2</sup> The killings marked the rise of a communist insurrection in Malaya which prompted the British to declare a state of emergency in Perak and Johor on 16 June 1948.<sup>3</sup> The emergency was subsequently extended to the whole federation on 18 June 1948 and Singapore on 24 June 1948.<sup>4</sup>

The emergency lasted from 1948 to 1960, resulting in clashes between the armed forces of the Commonwealth and the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA), the military arm of the CPM.<sup>5</sup> While the CPM's insurgency was mainly targeted at the peninsula, they utilised a united-front strategy to seize control of organisations such as trade unions, student and cultural bodies as well as political parties in Singapore.<sup>6</sup>

## **Formation of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM)**

Founded in 1930, the CPM was a political party active in Singapore, the Federation of Malaya and, later, Malaysia. They were also recognised as the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). The CPM evolved from the Nanyang Communist Party (NCP) that was established by a group of communists from the Communist Party of China (CCP) sometime between late 1927 and early 1928 in Singapore. After the Far East Bureau of the Communist International (Comintern) called for a reorganisation of the party in 1929, the NCP was dissolved, resulting in the formation of the CPM in April 1930. The main objective of the CPM was to create a communist Malayan People's Republic in Singapore and Malaya, while spreading the ideology to the Dutch East Indies and Thailand.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the 1930s, the CPM carried out numerous strikes and infiltrated trade unions, and spread anti-Japanese sentiments in attempts to establish itself.<sup>8</sup>

## **CPM during and after the Japanese Occupation**

Upon the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the CPM began their opposition against the British authorities in Singapore in line with the international communist stance of opposing Western democracy. They launched propaganda against the Malayan government and continued to trigger strikes in Singapore. However, in July 1940, the CPM received instructions from the CCP to shift their focus to anti-Japanese agitation instead.<sup>9</sup> Hence, upon Japan's invasion of Malaya in 1941, the CPM offered the British their full cooperation against the Japanese, and thereafter received military aid and training from British authorities to prepare themselves for resistance against the Japanese.<sup>10</sup> The CPM formed a group of resistance fighters who became known as the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_905\\_2004-12-23.html?s=EMERGENCY](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_905_2004-12-23.html?s=EMERGENCY)) (MPAJA), which conducted guerilla activities against the Japanese after Singapore fell in 1942.<sup>11</sup> The MPAJA guerillas also cooperated and received training from Force 136, a special unit formed by the British in 1943 to prepare for a British liberation of Malaya.<sup>12</sup> While the British were aware of the communist influence in the MPAJA, the former armed them on the condition that the MPAJA's objectives were purely based on military concerns.<sup>13</sup>

With Japan's surrender in 1945, the British Military Administration (BMA) took control of Malaya and the CPM was persuaded to disband the MPAJA. In return, the British formally recognised the CPM as a legitimate political organisation and rewarded the MPAJA guerillas with a sum of M\$350 and a bag of rice in recognition of their service and sacrifice during the Japanese Occupation.<sup>14</sup> However, the CPM subsequently embarked on an open political struggle to amass political power through the control of trade union activism and provoked labour unrest and strikes.<sup>15</sup> Their key aim was to seek independence from British rule and establish a "Malayan people's government."<sup>16</sup>

Although the CPM set up a Town Office on Queen Street, it mainly operated through the discreet and underground Singapore Town Committee, the highest directing organ of the party. The Singapore Town Committee was led by Lai Teck who was also the secretary-general of CPM. He was later replaced by Chin Peng in 1947. In the immediate post-war period, the Singapore Town Committee utilised a united front strategy to rally support against the British by directing its branch organisations to penetrate various youth, women, peasant and industrial associations and unions, and formed an anti-British united front with ethnic political parties such as the Malay Nationalist Party (MNP), Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) and the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU). The Singapore Town Committee also employed propaganda by setting up the Freedom Press to spread information about communism and gain support from the masses. In May 1948, the majority of leading communists left Singapore for the Federation of Malaya, where the former MPAJA was remobilised as the Malayan People's Anti-British Army (MPABA) and subsequently as the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA). Acts of violence in May and June 1948 led to the declaration of a state of emergency in the Federation and thereafter in Singapore.<sup>17</sup>

### **Declaration of emergency**

On 16 June 1948, three British planters were murdered in the Sungei Siput district of Perak by three heavily armed Chinese members of a communist gang. This prompted the High Commissioner of the Federation, Sir Edward Gent, to declare a state of emergency in several areas in Perak and Johor on the same day. The emergency power regulations mainly called for the imposition of the death penalty upon those found in unauthorised possession of arms, ammunition or explosives. Additionally, it gave the police special powers in matters such as arrest; detention; exclusion from certain areas; assembly of persons; imposition of curfews; search of persons and premises; closure of roads, paths and waterways; requisition of buildings, vehicles and boats as well as seizure of seditious documents and articles that could be used as offensive weapons. The emergency was extended to the whole of Perak and Johor on 17 June 1948 and was proclaimed throughout the entire Federation of Malaya on 18 June 1948. On 24 June 1948, a state of emergency was enforced in the Colony of Singapore as well.<sup>18</sup>

### **Impact of the emergency in Singapore**

When the emergency was declared on 24 June 1948, the colonial government implemented tough measures in the form of regulations allowing for arrest and detention without trial, the precursor to the Internal Security Act.<sup>19</sup> The various front organisations established by the Singapore Town Committee, such as the MDU, Singapore Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU), Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions (PMFTU) and New Democratic Youth League (NDYL) were also banned under the newly enacted Societies Ordinance and Trade Union Ordinance.<sup>20</sup>

However, the Singapore Town Committee reestablished itself and continued to infiltrate trade unions, student bodies as well as cultural and rural organisations by forming District Committees and Branches such as the Trades Committee, Rural Committee and Students' Committee to supervise

Communist operations within the factories, rural factories and villages, and Chinese middle schools respectively. The CPM then intensified its campaign of violence and intimidation by infiltrating and subverting open and legal organisations.<sup>21</sup> It also committed several acts of violence and sabotage, extortion, shootings, murders and arson attacks in the 1950s, including an attempt to assassinate former Governor of Singapore Franklin Gimson ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1217\\_2006-10-31.html?s=gimson](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1217_2006-10-31.html?s=gimson)) at the Happy World Park in April 1950.<sup>22</sup>

The brutal attacks of the communists during the 1950s drew responses from government forces. Under the leadership of British High Commissioner and Director of Operations Gerald Temper from 1952 to 1954, the identity card system was introduced and Chinese squatters were relocated, depriving the communists of their food and logistical supplies. Temper also garnered public support by portraying the government as the provider for people who sought to improve and normalise living conditions during the emergency.<sup>23</sup>

The insurgency was also subjugated with an integrated strategy that involved the police, military, civil operations and intelligence. A Special Branch (SB) of the police force was developed as the key intelligence agency that provided the government with political and security intelligence. With effective police and military action, the CPM's Singapore Town Committee was dissolved and a majority of its members arrested by the 1950s.<sup>24</sup> This forced the communists to retreat deeper into the jungle and border region by 1954. Chin Peng had also shifted his base from Pahang to southern Thailand.<sup>25</sup>

In December 1955, Chin Peng attempted to negotiate with Malayan Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and Singapore Chief Minister David Marshall during talks held in Baling, Kedah. However, the negotiation failed with both ministers rejecting his requests which were: the recognition of the CPM, freedom for communists upon surrender and the right to form a political party and contest the elections.<sup>26</sup> By the end of 1958, the CPM had completely withdrawn its armed units to southern Thailand. After a 12-year battle, the Malayan Emergency formally ended on 31 July 1960.<sup>27</sup> By then, the conflict had destroyed and wounded the lives of 8,000 civilians and security personnel.<sup>28</sup>

### **Persistence of the communist threat**

Despite the end of the emergency in 1960, the threat of the CPM continued to persist. Inspired by the Soviet Union and China, the CPM declared its return to armed revolt in 1968. It re-established assault units in the Malaysian jungles, while underground groups emerged in Singapore and Malaysia to direct acts of violence and subversion. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed acts of arson, bombings, attacks and assassinations in Singapore and Malaysia.<sup>29</sup> The CPM threat only officially ceased to exist with the signing of the Hat Yai Peace Agreement on 2 December 1989.<sup>30</sup>

### **1989 Hat Yai Peace Agreement**

The 1989 Hat Yai Peace Agreement saw the signing of a peace accord by the CPM, formally bringing the 41-year communist insurgency to an end. The ceremony took place on 2 December 1989 at the Lee Gardens Hotel in the southern Thai town of Haadyai. The peace accord signed between the CPM's secretary-general Chin Peng, chairman Abdullah C.D. and central committee member Rashid Maideen, and the governments of Malaysia and Thailand called for the CPM's remaining guerilla forces to lay down their arms. The peace accord contained seven points, stating that (1) all three parties would cooperate in ensuring permanent peace along the Thai-Malaysian border; (2) all three parties were responsible in facilitating negotiations to end the communist insurgency; (3) the CPM would withdraw its struggle against the Malaysian forces; (4) the CPM would destroy all its arms and ammunition depots; (5) former CPM members would abide by the

laws of Malaysia and Thailand; (6) Malaysian CPM members could return to their homeland and participate in political activities; and (7) Malaysia would recognise CPM members as fellow Malaysians.<sup>31</sup>

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The information in this article is valid as at **May 2019** and correct as far as we are able to ascertain from our sources. It is not intended to be an exhaustive or complete history on the subject. Please contact the Library for further reading materials on the topic.

### Subject

Malaya--History--Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960 ([./search.aspx?q=Malaya--History--Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960&type=articles](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/search.aspx?q=Malaya--History--Malayan%20Emergency%2C%201948-1960&type=articles))

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### ~ Recommendations ~

Communist Party of Malaya ([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2018-03-28\\_141257.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2018-03-28_141257.html))

The Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), also known as the Malayan Communist Party, was a political party active in Singapore, ...

Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army

([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_905\\_2004-12-23.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_905_2004-12-23.html))

The Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) was a group of resistance fighters in Malaya, organised by the Malayan ...

Fong Chong Pik ([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2013-07-12\\_103126.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2013-07-12_103126.html))

Fong Chong Pik (b. 1926, China–d. 6 February 2004, Hat Yai, Thailand), also known as Fang Chuang Pi, was a political ...

**Force 136 (Operation Gustavus in Malaya)**

**([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_68\\_2005-02-02.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_68_2005-02-02.html))**

Force 136 in Malaya was part of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), a secret service organisation active ...

**Merger with Malaysia ([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2017-11-](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2017-11-06_110458.html)**

**06\_110458.html)**

On 16 September 1963, Singapore merged with the Federation of Malaya, Sarawak and North Borneo (present-day Sabah) to ...

**James Joseph Puthucheary ([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1471\\_2009-02-](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1471_2009-02-24.html)**

**24.html)**

James Joseph Puthucheary (b. circa 1922, Kerala, India–d. 3 April 2000, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia) was an economist, trade ...

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