7. The Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960

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People's Wars in China, Malaya, and Vietnam.

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From its inception in 1930, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) was an overwhelmingly Chinese and urban-focused political party. Wracked by internal dissension, the Party was relatively ineffective and inactive in its early years. In 1937, the Japanese invasion of the Chinese mainland and the declaration of a United Front with the KMT focused MCP minds on organizing resistance to the Japanese among the overseas Chinese in Malaya. The MCP set to work recruiting young men and women in urban areas, creating study societies, and raising money to send back to the Chinese mainland for the fight against Japan.

Though the MCP was previously devoted to the overthrow of the British, the two became allies when the Japanese invaded Malaya and the MCP became the vanguard of the resistance to Japanese occupation. In 1942, the MCP created the Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) to take up arms against the Japanese.¹ The MCP established an incipient administration in the form of a Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Union and cultivated support among the rural Chinese community and relied on it for supplies, intelligence, and recruits.²

Japan’s sudden surrender in August 1945 and its subsequent withdrawal from large parts of Malaya resulted in a general breakdown of the existing administrative structure. Without the protection afforded by the Japanese, the MPAJA emerged from the greenwood, established “people’s courts” (renmin fating), and proceeded to punish civilians who collaborated with the Japanese. The true extent of MCP control of Malaya after the war is difficult to ascertain, but Cheah Boon Kheng, balancing between estimates of 70 percent of the peninsula and “virtually . . . complete control,” states that it was “quite extensive.”³ Regardless of the MCP’s influence, its leadership agreed to demobilize following an agreement in 1945 with the returning British authorities that made the MCP a legal political party. The MCP poured its time and resources into organizing labor in Singapore and Malaya and was repeatedly drawn into conflicts with the British authorities. The combination of this labor activism and the murder of three
European plantation managers in June 1948 brought about the proscription of the MCP and the declaration of a state of emergency.

I. The Ideological Foundations of a Narrow Coalition

In the immediate postwar period, the MCP pursued a united front policy that emphasized the organization of labor unions and of pursuing political reform through peaceful agitation despite demands from more radical members of the MCP that the Party take up arms and go to war against the British. The leader of the MCP, Lai Teck, codified this strategy in January 1946 at the Eighth Enlarged Plenary Session of the MCP’s Central Committee. In his report to the Central Committee he stated that

Today, the colonial problem can be resolved in two ways: (1) liberation through a bloody revolutionary struggle (as is the case in Vietnam or Indonesia) or; (2) through the strength of a national united front which embodies total popular solidarity with harmony established between all political parties and factions.

He further explained

After three years and eight months of war, the masses have endured untold hardships and do not want any more war and eagerly wish for peace. [In Malaya], the Chinese and Indians are immigrants while ethnic Malays are the natives. The development of revolutionary movement has been uneven [between the three groups] and if we go to war again the masses will not support us.

It was therefore decided that the MCP would undertake “three tasks” (san da renwu) and a “Nine-Point New Democratic Program” (jiu da xin minzhu gan-gling). The three tasks were:

1. Uphold the correct line in the revolutionary movement for national liberation, establish a broad democratic national front and to undertake concerted action with all parties in the common national interest and under a common democratic program to oppose British Imperialism, establish a democratic system, and improve people’s livelihoods.
2. To prevent the restoration of the colonial system by creating a force based on a broad national united front of all races.
The “Nine-Point New Democratic Program” consisted of:

2. Creation of an All-Malaya National Assembly (quan-Ma guohui) at the national level, State Councils at the state level, and universal suffrage.
3. Guarantees of freedom of speech, press, organization, association, and religion, the right to strike, the right to travel, and the absolute freedom of the individual.
4. Independence of trade policy.
5. Universal increase in wages, aid for the unemployed and refugees, stabilization of prices, abolition of miscellaneous taxes, levies (kejuan zashui), and high-interest loans, and lower taxes.
6. Vernacular education for each race and the development of a national culture.
7. Institution of an eight-hour workday, improvements in working conditions, creation of a social security system, provision of economic assistance to the poor peasantry, and freedom of agricultural pursuit.\(^7\)
8. Equality of the sexes, including equal pay for equal work, four months of paid maternity leave.
9. Unitig with the oppressed peoples of the Far East.

To the extent that social groups can be said to exist in this political program, they can be roughly divided into urban workers and peasants, both of whom stand in opposition to an exploitative colonial government. As rural concerns will dominate the following discussion, it is important to note that to the extent that the MCP was cognizant of rural issues, it sought only “economic assistance to the poor peasantry” and “freedom of agricultural pursuit.” Both goals were certainly laudable, but they were but footnotes in a political program designed around urban centers and broad, national goals.

In early 1947, Lai Teck, a double agent working for the British authorities, fled Malaya and was replaced by Chin Peng.\(^8\) Chin Peng and other members of the MCP got to work on purging Lai Teck’s ideological influence on the Party
and undertook a thorough critique of Lai Teck’s united front political line. The post–Lai Teck political line was laid out in March 1948 in a document titled “The Present Situation and the Party’s Political Line.” Lai Teck’s political line was condemned as a rightist opportunist line devoid of a class standpoint (shi qu jie ji lichang de youqing jihui zhuyi de luxian) as well as a rightist capitulationist (youqing touxiang zhuyi) line.

This right capitulationist line manifested itself in abandoning the program of national independence, of unprincipled concessions to British Imperialism, of unprincipled compromise with reactionary political parties, of unprincipled appeasement of the petty bourgeoisie, and in not daring to resolutely lead the masses or to unleash the masses and launch the struggle [against British Imperialism].

It was further stated that under Lai Teck “the Party abandoned its [class] standpoint and views because it feared destroying the ‘united front’ and simply appeased the petty bourgeoisie.” In practice, this “appeasement” referred to the MCP’s postwar, pre-Emergency participation in legal politics and labor negotiations in which it was said to have relinquished its position of leadership in favor of acting as if it were just another “bourgeoisie” or “reactionary” political party.

Having examined the errors of Lai Teck’s policies, the MCP declared that Malaya was in a period of bourgeoisie capitalist revolution (zichan jiejixing minzhu geming) in which the driving forces of the revolution would be workers, peasants, the petty bourgeoisie, and the national bourgeoisie. These groups, under the leadership of the proletariat, would form an anti-imperialist national united front (fandi minzu tongyi zhanxian) to oppose the British. It was emphasized that while both “right” and “left” deviations were incorrect, at that moment “right” deviations were the greater threat. The document emphasized that in protecting and advancing the interests of workers and peasants it was they, not the bourgeoisie or petty bourgeoisie, whose interests were paramount. Struggle or coercion should be used against the bourgeoisie to compel them to cooperate with the revolution.

After it elaborated the favorable international environment, the Central Committee condemned the British colonial government’s “limitless economic exploitation and plunder of Malaya’s raw materials in exchange for American dollars, turning Malaya into nothing more than a dollar printing press.” In the Party’s estimation this economic exploitation prevented any increase in wages and was why “not only will there be no economic prosperity in Malaya, but things will get worse as people fall ever further into penury and starvation.” The
colonial government stood as the bulwark of this economic order and was said to be firmly in opposition to the demands of the people. The Party should not “conceal or underestimate this struggle. Rather, it should resolutely face this struggle and welcome it.” The masses, which the MCP emphasized meant the working class (gongren jieji), “knew that negotiations were useless” and that they could improve their lot only through a struggle against the colonial government. If the working class represented the MCP’s best hope for a coalition partner, it firmly dismissed the possibility of help from or attempts to ally with the Malayan bourgeoisie, which it said was economically dependent on the colonial state.

The MCP stated that “the lower strata of the oppressed masses harbored no illusions about British Imperialism” and that while they sought accommodation immediately after the Japanese surrender, their experience under the British, from the abolition of the Japanese currency to the botched distribution of rice by the British Military Administration, revealed the true nature of British imperialism and showed them that the only means of improving their lives was to drive out the British and establishing an independent Malaya.

The political line elaborated by the MCP’s leadership posited more than a non-antagonistic division between rural and urban interests and national and imperialist interests. Rather, it was observed that Malayan society was divided into bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, worker, and peasant classes. The bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie were both firmly allied to the colonial government and, through it, exploited the workers and peasants. Though the MCP retained a rhetorical commitment to a united front, it was a united front of the workers and peasants against a colonial state that operated in the interests of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie.

The new MCP political line produced a new assessment of the possibilities that lay before the MCP. Lai Teck’s political line eschewed armed struggle (wuzhuang douzheng) in favor of peaceful struggle (heping douzheng) because Lai Teck felt (not wrongly) that the people of Malaya would not support an armed uprising after being under Japanese occupation for three years. He maintained that it would be possible to realize the MCP program without the use of widespread and overt political violence. By contrast, the MCP’s post–Lai Teck leadership believed that the MCP could not meet its goals peacefully. “If we are to achieve national independence, armed struggle (that is, a people’s revolutionary war) is unavoidable; it is the primary and highest form of struggle. The current situation has already showed [that this is the case].”

The goal of the revolution would be the establishment of a Malayan People’s Democratic Republic in which a united front of all races would enjoy equality
before the law and all persons over the age of eighteen would have the right to vote. There would be freedom of speech, assembly, association, press, religion, and so on. Industries and rubber estates would be nationalized, miscellaneous taxes and levies abolished, education provided for free, and national and social insurance introduced. Land would be distributed to peasants, a policy that was declared to be “the only correct land policy for the liberation of the peasants and the improvement of their standard of living.” Agricultural assistance was to be provided by the government in the form of agricultural implements, fertilizer, and seed, as well as agricultural credit. The political system would not be a dictatorship of a proletariat or the bourgeoisie, but rather a New Democracy in the mold of that established by the Chinese Communist Party.12

After the declaration of the Emergency, the MCP retreated into rural areas and reconstituted its army, soon to be named the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA). The MCP’s leadership initially believed that the advent of open rebellion against the British would bring about a revolutionary high tide that would wash away the British order. However, popular enthusiasm for the MCP was muted. In response, the MCP laid out a new strategy in a June 1949 document titled “The Present Situation and Tasks.”13 The MCP Central Committee argued that the only way for the masses to become truly revolutionary was to “forge” (duanlian) them through armed struggle. In practice, this meant undertaking an extensive campaign of economic sabotage designed to weaken the economic and social bases of the colonial government, including the bombing of trains and buses and attacks against estates. Such actions were justified on the grounds that estates, whether owned by British or Malayan capitalists, were oppressing the people and their destruction would liberate the oppressed masses that, in turn, would join the struggle against the government. Moreover, such operations required the British to spread their forces thin, making them vulnerable to attack and defeat by the MCP. At the local level, the MCP mobilized men and materiel from areas populated by the rural Chinese. There were no clear guidelines on the use of punishment, but in practice those who disobeyed the MCP became targets of coercion to be “forged” into supporters of the revolution.

About one year after the start of the Emergency, an ideological disagreement came into the open and exposed two contradictions at the heart of the MCP’s political program. The Chairman of the MCP Johore-Malacca Border Region Special Committee named Siew Lau advanced a comprehensive critique of the MCP’s political program. He argued that the leadership of the MCP had an insufficient understanding of how the CCP achieved victory in China, specifically of the role played by Mao’s concept of New Democracy and the United
Front. Siew Lau convened a meeting of the Special Committee of the Northern Johore Second Military Region (without the approval of the MCP Center) and blamed the Party’s setbacks on a misguided policy and a lack of popular support. Echoing the CCP’s policy of “equal distribution of land” (pingfen tudi) and “land to the tiller” (gengzhe you qi tian) during the Chinese Civil War, Siew Lau called for the “equal redistribution of rubber estates” (pingfen jiao yuan) and of an “estate to the tapper” (gezhe you qi yuan) policy. He argued that only by redistributing land could the MCP attract the support of the peasantry and only later should land be nationalized. Such a policy would have the dual benefit of making the Party more popular in general and more popular among ethnic Malays in particular. He argued that “by introducing terrorist activities, the Party had caused the masses much trouble and had thereby alienated their sympathies by robbing them of their identity cards, burning buses, slashing rubber trees indiscriminate shooting at trains and the like.” His ideas were actually well received by his colleagues and his resolutions passed. He put these policies into practice while at the same time halting the transmission of orders from the Central Committee.

Siew Lau was calling into question the MCP’s understanding of Malayan society and the strategy by which a revolution should proceed.

In Malaya, he argued, over seventy per cent of the population consisted of [farm laborers] and [peasants] whose one outstanding demand was for land. The answer to this demand, therefore, was land reform which gave the [peasants] and [farm laborers] the right to own the lands they tilled to share in equal parts the lands developed by, and confiscated from, the British Imperialists and their henchmen. He emphasized that heavy industries in Malaya were pitifully few and the number of industrial workers proportionately low, that rubber-workers constituted the greatest force of workers and the great majority of them were Chinese and Malays, and that the proletariat, therefore, was weak and could achieve nothing without the co-operation of other classes and races.

Though the MCP declared in its Outline of the Democratic People’s Republic of Malaya that it wished to redistribute land to Malaya’s peasants, the MCP drew a sharp line between agricultural land (that is, land occupied by those who grew foodstuffs) and the land of rubber estates. The former was to be handed over to peasants; the latter was to be nationalized. In refuting Siew Lau’s claims, the MCP stated that “when [considered] from the proper social and economic standpoint, [rubber estates] fell fairly and squarely, with tin, into the [category
of industry] and was, in fact, an enterprise for the production of raw material.”

In his 2003 memoirs, Chin Peng remained firmly opposed to the distribution of estate land:

Siew Lau’s ideas were preposterous. They would never work and could spawn horrendous communal problems. On the British plantations, most of the workers were Indians. The next largest racial group was Chinese and the remainder were Indonesian Malays.

To Siew Lau’s criticism that the Party had alienated the support of the masses, the MCP stated that it “adhered to the policy of the ‘greatest happiness for the greatest number,’ which, in its implementation . . . demanded the sacrifice of the interests of the minority to the interests of the overwhelming majority.”

In spite of its strident opposition to Siew Lau’s critiques, by late 1951, the MCP decided to alter its political program and adopt (at least in principle) some of Siew Lau’s proposals. In October 1951, the MCP’s Central Committee passed a series of resolutions detailing a number of mistakes made by the Party in its struggle against the British and slightly expanding the MCP’s coalition. The Party concluded that it went too far in correcting the “unprincipled accommodation” with the national bourgeoisie that characterized the Lai Teck period. It was stated that the bourgeoisie, rather than an undifferentiated reactionary mass was actually divided into two strata (jiecheng): the large and medium national bourgeoisie. The large national bourgeoisie were right-wing in nature and constituted only a small proportion of the population and were the wealthiest portion of the national bourgeoisie. The MCP stated categorically that this group could not be won over and should be the target of MCP violence. However, the middle national bourgeoisie was neither pro-government nor anti-MCP and could be won over and should therefore be made part of the MCP’s united front.

The expansion of the MCP coalition was to coincide with the institution of the mass line (qunzhong luxian) and a drive to ensure that the MCP did not become alienated from the masses. In the past, the Resolution stated, while leading the mass struggle against the government, the Party “imposed demands [on the masses] that were too high.” The actions of the MCP should be reasonable, beneficial, and restrained (youli, youli, youjie) and based on the masses’ level of political consciousness. Rather than pushing the masses into anything, the Party should only undertake activities such as opposing the drafting of soldiers or home guards, if the masses were prepared and if costs and benefits had been fully weighed. The goal of the MCP’s struggle, it was emphasized, was to improve the lives of Malayan workers and peasants. In a part of the document
that is heavily reminiscent of Mao’s entreaties to his colleagues nearly two decades earlier, the Party states that cadres must undertake investigations and establish close links with the masses in order to understand them. The wishes of the masses were then to be channeled back to the Party where they would be rendered concrete in the form of Party policy. Policies opposed by the masses were to stop, such as the confiscation of ID cards, the slashing of rubber trees, and the firebombing of buses, the burning of new villages, attacks on post offices, transposition infrastructure, and utilities.

The MCP affirmed the importance of eliminating those it classified as “traitors,” but declared that in future higher organs would have to approve executions. The Resolutions make clear that, from 1948 to late 1951, violence was deployed without regard to whether someone was a “backward element” or a “traitor,” the former being someone who opposed some part of MCP policy but was not actually an active supporter of the government. Previously, the Party adopted the stance that “it was better to kill someone innocent than to let someone guilty go.” It was further stipulated that the relatives of those classified as traitors would not be killed, their property would not be confiscated, and the elimination of actual traitors was to be done discreetly with the absolute minimum of collateral damage possible.

The composition of the MCP’s coalition is evident using a number of indirect indicators. Firstly, with regards to membership, the MCP was overwhelmingly Chinese. In 1947, more than 90 percent of the MCP’s formal membership was Chinese: out of 11,800 members, 11,000 were Chinese, 760 were Indian, and 40 were Malay and Indonesian. Data from the beginning of the Emergency to the end of September 1951 clearly shows that Chinese constituted the overwhelming majority of guerrillas killed, injured, surrendered, or captured, as well as those suspected of being members or supporters of the MCP.

Though detailed data such as that presented in Table 7.1 is not available for subsequent years, there is no evidence that the Chinese composition of the Party changed. In January 1953, the government announced that an additional 1,386 “bandits” had been killed, of whom 1,255, or 91 percent, were Chinese. Three years later in January 1956, it was still the case that more than 90 percent of Communist casualties were Chinese. There is no concrete data on the class status of MCP members or supporters, but it is well known that, during the Emergency, rural Chinese peasants were the primary source of men and materiel for the MCP.

Table 7.1 also shows that the vast majority of those killed by the MCP were Chinese. There are no precise details about those killed, but anecdotal evidence
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<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>MCP</th>
<th>Civilians</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Killed</td>
<td>Injured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>2,255</td>
<td>1,157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesian</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orang Asli</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>European</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,405</td>
<td>1,188</td>
</tr>
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</table>

suggests that the people killed by the MCP fall into two categories: those designated as class enemies and those who disobeyed the MCP. The latter be examined in more detail below. As for the former, KMT members and those in management or leadership positions on rubber estates or tin mines (what the MCP would call the bourgeoisie or national bourgeoisie) appear to have been among the MCP’s favored targets. Given the relatively small number of such people in proportion to the larger Chinese population, it is likely that their proportion of total Chinese deaths was similarly small, a fact that ultimately had important implications for the fate of the MCP insurgency.

The MCP governed civilians through its civil arm, the Min Yuen. The Min Yuen was responsible for the collection of taxes and supplies for the MNLA, educating the masses, collecting intelligence, organizing local armed forces, and supporting the local operations of the MNLA. The MCP never took control of rubber estates and its activities remained confined to areas where most civilians engaged in a mixture of rubber tapping and subsistence cultivation. Consistent with its ideological understanding of the structure of Malayan society, other than ceasing harassment of the rural Chinese, MCP institutions did not fundamentally alter class or ethnic relations in these areas. Rather, after the MCP removed manifestations of state authority, the Min Yuen took over the collection of taxes and the mobilization of manpower.

II. A Narrow Coalition

“Nineteenth-century British colonial policy,” Cheah Boon Kheng writes, “had transformed Malaya from a collection of Malay states into a ‘plural’ multicom- munal society.” By 1947, 49.8 percent of the population of Peninsular Malaya consisted of indigenous Malays, 38.4 percent Chinese, and 10.8 percent Indians. Protected by British colonial policy, Malays engaged in primarily agricultural activities, particularly padi cultivation, while government policy favored their inclusion in lower levels of the bureaucracy. The Chinese provided labor for the planting and harvesting of cash crops and for tin mines. Chinese capital featured prominently in the latter, as well as in banks and other small businesses. Indians, for their part, found work as laborers or in commercial enterprise, as well as government employment.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a majority of Chinese were employed in labor-intensive tin mining and, to a lesser extent, rubber tapping. The colonial state regarded the Chinese as a migrant population whose primary function was to provide labor. Indeed, in times of economic growth this
population would work on tin mines and rubber and in times of economic recession it some of its members would return to China. However, over time more and more Chinese remained in Malaya. Following an influx of women from China in the early part of the twentieth century, the Chinese population in Malaya looked less like migrant labor than like permanent settlers. A mix of economic hardship and the introduction of labor-saving technology into the tin-mining industry cut the total employment of Malayan tin mines in half between 1913 and 1929; the Great Depression and the Second World War reduced employment yet further.\(^43\)

In times of economic hardship, the rural Chinese population engaged in subsistence agriculture on land belonging to tin mines, rubber estates, or even on land set aside for ethnic Malays (called Malay Reserves). Government attempts to encourage food production during and after the First World War further increased the number of Chinese engaged in full-time primary cultivation. Even as men returned to work, women and children remained in the fields. The legal standing of this Chinese squatter population was often precarious. The government issued temporary occupation licenses to some members of this community, but sought to use the license as a means to control Chinese labor and protect the interests of ethnic Malays.\(^44\) Though these communities were clearly in violation of colonial law, the government does not appear to have taken action against the rural Chinese at the time.

Even as there was a vast reserve of relatively poor rural Chinese, there were also middle-class and wealthy urban Chinese who were employed and heavily invested in commerce in the cities. Whereas the rural Chinese tended to speak their native dialect and those of others that lived nearby, wealthy, urban Chinese, in addition to their native dialect, spoke Mandarin and English as well. These urban, cosmopolitan Chinese generally had very little social interaction with their rural compatriots. Economic interactions between these groups were usually based on the exchange of labor and wages, as there was never an ethnic Chinese landlord class in Malaya.

The Second World War saw a considerable acceleration of Chinese settlement in rural areas. Chinese employment in tin mines dropped further as Malaya was cut off from world markets and its infrastructure were targets of sabotage or misuse. Japanese violence against ethnic Chinese in urban and suburban areas added to the impetus to flee deep into the countryside.\(^45\) Finally, food shortages, owing to an inability to import rice form abroad, drove many to take up the plow and provide for their own food needs. Indeed, just as with its British predecessor, the Japanese administration saw that this group was economically
productive and should be utilized in pursuit of meeting Malaya’s food needs. In an attempt to facilitate national self-sufficiency in food, the Japanese administration provided temporary occupation licenses for land in Malay Reserves to nonethnic Malays.46

The Japanese administration gave preferential treatment to ethnic Malays, granting them positions in the government bureaucracy previously held by Britons, and made extensive use of Malay officials in requisitioning resources and labor for the Japanese administration.47 When the war came to an end in 1945, the MCP (which had waged a low-scale and largely ineffective insurgency against the Japanese) undertook a settling of accounts with “traitors” who collaborated with the Japanese. The targeting of ethnic Malays that collaborated with the Japanese created ethnic tension and in many places violent ethnic conflict.48

Going into the Emergency, the social base of the Malayan state was the ethnic Malay population, European planters, and a small group of wealthy, indigenous ethnic Chinese businessmen. This was most evident in the attitude of the British toward the rural Chinese, land tenure, and citizenship. Following the end of the Second World War, there was a general British drive against rural Chinese who, in the eyes of the colonial state, were illegally occupying land set aside as either forestry reserves or Malay Reserves; this group of rural Chinese became the “squatters.”49 There was neither a plan nor an intention to provide the rural Chinese with land. Most rural Chinese were, furthermore, not even considered to be citizens of Malaya under new citizenship guidelines published by the British after they returned to Malaya. In 1951, three years after the start of the Emergency, the British expanded their coalition. The rural Chinese were forcibly resettled into new villages, given land to farm, granted citizenship, and given local government responsive to their needs.

Prior to the Emergency, the British had effectively institutionalized the exclusion of the rural Chinese from any form of legitimate economic and political participation in the Malaya. The government classified as illegal rural Chinese who settled on what had previously been reserves set aside by the government. From the return of the British to the start of the Emergency the government devoted considerable energy to expelling the Chinese from these lands and destroying any crops or other property thereon. Whatever its intent, the effect of government policy in rural areas was that “where government authority was felt, it was only in the form of harassment of the squatters for illegal occupation of land.”50 The rural Chinese were served orders to vacate their lands and to remove all structures and materials thereon. Elsewhere, local forestry departments ripped up crops planted by the rural Chinese without providing any
compensation. Where squatters were permitted to harvest their crops, they were prohibited from planting again for the following season. Those who refused would be subject to legal sanction. Though the government was adamant that the rural Chinese on government land were indeed squatters, the squatters understandably did not see it that way: “[Illegally occupying land]? We [had] been farming [there] for decades, and suddenly the British [authorities] came and told us we [were] illegal.”

III. The Nature of MCP Rule

The MCP’s insurgency was devoted to the establishment of a Malayan Democratic People’s Republic made up of a united front of all races that would pursue the twin goals of economic development and social justice. In practice, support for the MCP was limited in both its scope and its magnitude. It was, first and foremost, limited almost entirely to the ethnic Chinese community. Even within the Chinese community, support for the movement was confined to a small number of rural Chinese. Even before the British actively contested control of the countryside (of which more below), civilian compliance with the demands of the MCP was low, requiring the application of a significant amount of coercion against the civilian population.

The MCP’s retreat into the countryside at the beginning of the Emergency brought it into contact with the rural Chinese, who, since 1945, had been the objects of state harassment and violence. Harsh British measures against the rural Chinese drove them into the arms of the MCP and bolstered the image of the Party as the protector of the rural Chinese. Squatters provided both active support to the MCP as well as compliance with its demands for supplies. Merchants and businessmen generally refused, often at the cost of their lives.

However, the MCP’s focus was national rather than local and it sought to cripple the British economy through widespread economic sabotage. Already firmly in opposition to rural “elites” such as merchants and businessmen, the attack on larger, more capital-intensive assets ensured that no support from wealthy, urban Chinese would be forthcoming. Behind the policy of sabotage lay the assumption that British capitalists owned rubber estates and that these estates formed a large and vulnerable target that could be used to exert pressure on the government. Sabotage of ethnic Chinese businesses (such as shipping and transport) was designed to both bring down the economy and punish noncompliance with MCP demands for funds.

Whether on large estates or smallholdings, the slashing of rubber trees was
often punishment for the refusal of either estates or individual tappers to comply with the MCP’s demands. The firebombing of buses was likewise an attempt to force compliance. However, the result, to quote one mid-ranking MCP commander, was often to “harm the interests of the masses” as rubber tappers, bus drivers, ticket sellers, and others lost their jobs even as the largest shareholders or owners lost relatively little, as many of them had insurance.55

The campaign of economic sabotage was deeply unpopular and though a number of activists continued to support the MCP, compliance with its demands for manpower and supplies was slipping even as early as 1950. Faced with such disobedience, the MCP applied coercion. In February 1950, after a number of villagers of Simpang Tiga in Sitiawan, Perak refused to comply with orders from the MCP, a squad of MCP guerrillas burned the village to the ground.56 A former MCP commander explained that this action occurred because MCP cadres in that area did not have an adequate understanding of the Party’s policies and “were not good at carrying out investigations” and that Party members

only listened to the views of an extremely small number of leftist masses . . . Our Party does not seek revenge; the British Imperialist Army burns down the people’s villages which can only increase the hatred of the masses. But we are the protectors of the interests of the masses and in all of our actions we must protect the interests of the masses. We cannot put all of the homes of the masses in a village to the torch and force them to endure an unnecessary loss because there are a few reactionary Kuomintang party bosses (danggun).57

Ramakrishna provides a number of illustrations of peasant noncompliance and subsequent MCP punishment:

when a Masses Executive appearing on the jungle fringe encountered tappers who were unwilling to spare funds for the Revolution, rather than labelling them as unenlightened friends in need of further political education, they were all too often regarded instead as traitorous ‘running dogs’ of the Imperialists . . . [In] the Plentong District of Johore, [the MCP] shot dead a Chinese squatter and hacked his wife to death with a [machete]; furthermore, they set alight their hut and threw their eight-year old daughter into the flames. In Kampar, Perak, [the MCP] butchered a Chinese girl by hammering a nail through her head. At Pantai Seremban, two young men were forced to their knees, had their arms strapped behind their backs, and were battered to death by [MCP members] wielding [hoes] . . .
At Kampar, a lone terrorist flung a grenade into a crowd watching a wayside circus, killing five people, including a woman and a child. A Police report prepared in late 1952 emphasised that this ‘senseless cruelty’ was not at all ‘isolated’ but typical of ‘hundreds of similar incidents’ throughout the country. Even captured terrorists balked at the methods used by the Party, one confessing that the ‘tortures are too horrible for description.’

The cumulative result of the MCP’s political program was that even before the widespread relocation of the rural Chinese into New Villages, the MCP already alienated a great many rural Chinese.

**IV. Territorial Control: Guerrilla Warfare on the Periphery**

When the MCP retreated into the Malayan countryside in 1948, it entered an area that had an extremely limited government presence. After a period of re-mobilization and training, MCP units throughout Malaya began their attacks against more populated areas and manifestations of colonial state power. The MCP’s forces and support were most numerous among the rural ethnic Chinese population in the states on Malaya’s western seaboard. The MCP’s campaign against the British had three broad goals: 1) crippling the economy through a campaign of economic sabotage and attacks on infrastructure; 2) forcing the government out of rural areas so that it occupied only the main supply and communication lines; and 3) establishing secure base areas. Throughout the Emergency, the MCP used guerrilla warfare tactics in an effort to weaken and ultimately defeat the British.

Initially, the British approach to military operations was characterized by a conventional military seeking to fight a conventional war. Charles Boucher, the British general in charge of operations in Malaya in 1949, declared that

> My object is to break up the insurgent concentrations to bring them to battle before they are ready, and to drive them underground or into the jungle, and then to follow them there, by troops in the jungles, and by police backed by troops and by the RAF outside of them. I intend to keep them constantly moving and deprive them of food and of recruits, because if they are constantly moving they cannot terrorise an area properly so that they can get these commodities from it; and then to ferret them out of their holes, wherever these holes may be.
Short astutely observes that “this would seem to be the formula which guarantees a long-drawn-out guerrilla war.”

In practice, the British approach to combating the MCP consisted of launching raids into areas believed to harbor MCP guerrillas. The presence of the British military and Malayan state was felt only in the form of raids. British forces would enter an area for several hours, search for the MCP, and return to their bases at the conclusion of the operation. After British forces would withdraw, the *Min Yuen* would reemerge and continue to extract resources and govern the civilian population.

At the beginning of the Emergency, the MCP had more or less free access to and control of numerous squatter areas throughout the country. When security forces entered an area, the MCP’s armed forces dispersed and attacked only when the situation favored them, utilizing surprise attacks, ambushes, and rapid movement. In an effort to replicate the success of the PLA in China, the MCP sought to fight battles of annihilation (*jianmie zhan*) (wherein it would military defeat the British and capture their weaponry and other supplies) rather than battles of attrition (*pin xiaohao*). In addition to sporadic engagements with the British security forces throughout the Malaya, the MCP attempted to capture and hold the town of Gua Musang in July 1948. Situated in southern Kelantan near the border with Pahang, the village had a small contingent of fourteen police. The MCP’s civil arm, the *Min Yuen*, mobilized civilians in the villages around Gua Musang, assembling both supplies and volunteers for the MCP’s armed forces. On July 17, the MCP attacked, captured the town, disarmed the police, and confiscated their weapons. After the MCP declared the town liberated, small contingents of MCP guerrillas radiated out from Gua Musang toward the villages of Bertam and Kuala Lipis. After the capture of the town, a British relief force was sent to expel the MCP, but was itself ambushed fifteen miles from Gua Musang. The ensuing battle lasted for six hours and though the British had air support, the MCP guerrillas stopped firing when it was overhead to avoid giving away their positions. One week later another larger British force attacked and forced the MCP to retreat back into the jungle.

Though the MCP was unable to hold Gua Musang, it was still able to apply the principles of guerrilla warfare in its fight against the British. Pursued by British forces, the MCP set up ambushes in the areas around Gua Musang and harassed them using sniper fire, injuring or killing a number of them. The MCP continued to utilize these tactics after the unsuccessful attempt to set up a base area in Gua Musang, but by 1949 had come to the conclusion that a partial
change in tactics was the best way to confront the challenge posed by the British, namely that instead of fully fledged base areas the MCP should endeavor to create “temporary bases” in which the Min Yuen could continue to supply to the MNLA even as it flitted from one base to another.\textsuperscript{66}

While a base area containing relatively large cities or towns evaded the MCP, up to roughly 1951, the MCP had free access to and control over significant numbers of rural Chinese. Had the British and MCP stuck to their original strategies, the conflict would have likely remained a stalemate for many years to come. However, the conflict changed fundamentally when the British altered their political and military strategies.

V. Political Reform, Contestation, and MCP Collapse

\textit{a. The New Villages}

When the MCP’s insurgency began, it was eminently clear to the government that the rural Chinese population was providing both men and materiel to the MCP. The early period of the Emergency was characterized by what Stubbs has called a “coercion and enforcement” strategy. Where previously rural Chinese were subject to government harassment and expulsion for the crime of illegally occupying land, the presence of the MCP in any given area marked the entire population out for violent reprisal. Victor Purcell reported that

the Chinese press of this period showed great concern at the drastic action being taken and gave the fullest publicity to the burning by the police of Kachau village, near Kuala Lumpur. The paper \textit{Kin Kwok} of Ipoh, published a leader headed ‘Don’t drive [Chinese squatters] to the hills!'\textsuperscript{67}

Instances of direct government attacks on rural Chinese communities were common in the early part of the Emergency. After MCP attacks on security forces, the latter would locate the nearest Chinese settlement, instruct the residents to take what they could from their homes, and burn them down, usually with no compensation or minimal compensation. The disregard for the fate of those dispossessed of their land, their homes, and their possessions was disturbing to at least some members of the government, who observed that the rural Chinese were losing homes, possessions, and livelihoods that they accumulated over the course of many years.\textsuperscript{68}

In the early period of the Emergency, the government was particularly keen on repatriation as a means of bringing the insurgency under control. Because
many of the squatters were not considered citizens in the eyes of the law (even if they and their parents had been born in Malaya), there were ample legal grounds to deport them to their “home country.” Whole families were deported regardless of whether they had family in China or a “home village” to which they could return. And all of this ignored the fact that as the British began deporting ethnic Chinese in late 1948, the Chinese mainland was still in the throes of the Chinese Civil War and had been in an almost-constant state of war since the Japanese invasion in 1937. Unsurprisingly, a vast majority of the nearly twenty-six thousand people repatriated from June 1948 to March 1953 were Chinese and outnumbered non-Chinese deportees by a ratio of nearly 13 to 1.69

By 1949, the British concluded that mass deportation was not a practical solution to either the “squatter problem” or the MCP-led insurgency. There is no data from either the British or MCP that indicates how many civilians supported the MCP either directly or indirectly. However, there was enough support for the MCP (and enough dislike of the government) to make it impossible for the government to effectively identify and eliminate the MCP threat. From the government’s perspective, this was a result of the Chinese not being under the administrative control of the government. The government’s Squatter Committee Report noted how “the squatter areas served as an ideal cover for the bandits” and how, in turn, the squatters were susceptible to pressures from the guerrillas “owing to lack of administrative control and their isolated location.” The Committee surmised, however, that in most cases in fact the squatter had “no sympathies either way but necessarily succumbed to the more immediate and threatening influence - the terrorist on their doorsteps as against the vague and distant authority of the government.”70

Based on this recommendation, the Malayan government began the consolidation of existing villages and wholesale resettlement of the rural Chinese throughout Malaya into settlements called “New Villages.”71

The task of resettling more than five hundred thousand mostly rural Chinese was a massive undertaking both for the government and for the rural Chinese. Squatters were generally (though not always) provided with both oral and written orders for relocation and were given roughly one week to tear down their dwellings and rebuild them within areas designated as New Villages. They were also to be provided with some monetary compensation to assist with the cost of
moving and building a new house in the New Village, as well as assistance moving their possessions from their original plots to the New Villages.

The New Villages were intended to fulfill two goals: separating the “fish” (the MCP guerrillas) from the “water” (the rural Chinese) and winning the “hearts and minds” of the Chinese. The New Villages themselves were usually fortified and surrounded on at least three sides by barbed wire fences. In some areas the British ordered villagers to cut down all crops around the perimeter fence that were taller than two feet in height. In Kinta, Perak, for example, all undergrowth thirty feet inside and forty feet (and in some cases ninety feet) outside of the perimeter fence needed to be cleared. Civilians were sometimes required to register with the government for an ID card prior to resettlement in the New Villages. Those who did not register prior to entry were required to do so after they arrived in the New Villages. The rural Chinese were required to fill out a form on which they provided the names, occupations, ages, races, and genders of all family members. The government retained a copy and a form was hung up on the wall of the house so that the authorities could consult it when doing spot checks.

Once in the New Villages, to make sure that no supplies reached the MCP, civilians were limited in the amount of food they could purchase and could only have a one-week supply of food in their homes. If they purchased food in a can or package, it had to be opened at the place of purchase to ensure that it could not be given to the MCP. Civilians were not permitted to leave without being searched and they were not permitted to take food with them, a particularly onerous requirement for rubber tappers who had to be in the fields from dawn to dusk. New Villagers were also not permitted to take food to cemeteries on the traditional Chinese Tomb-Sweeping Festival (Qingming jie).

The New Villages were supposed to include brand-new infrastructure including roads, schools, sanitation, plumbing, and electricity. In addition to physical infrastructure, the rural Chinese were also to be given land and security of tenure. The first indication that the government would grant land to the rural Chinese was in December 1951 when the government announced that relocated squatters would be given permanent title to their lands. The states followed the lead of the Federal Government. In Perak, Kedah, and Selangor, thirty-year leases were granted to the rural Chinese. Penang, meanwhile, granted leases of thirty-three years, while Negeri Sembilan granted twenty-five years. There was variance in the amount of land, as well. In Negeri Sembilan villagers were to get at least four acres, in Perak they got from one to three acres, in Kedah one acre.
was granted for growing vegetables and padi, and in Penang villagers got from 1.5 to 2 acres.\textsuperscript{78} In some areas of Johore villagers received 0.5 acres.\textsuperscript{79} In Province Wellesley, land titles appear to have been for thirty-three years.\textsuperscript{80} The shortest titles/leases appear to have been for ten years, while the longest went as long as ninety-nine years.\textsuperscript{81} Local governments also provided land to the rural Chinese by resettling them in areas that had previously not been open to cultivation.\textsuperscript{82}

In addition to the socioeconomic changes brought about by the creation of the New Villages, there was also an important political change: the creation of New Village Committees (\textit{xincun weiyuanhui}). In New Villages everyone over the age of twenty-one was given the right to vote for these local committees that, in principle, were to serve as a means of both bottom-up and top-down control, in which the government could penetrate the village and ensure that its policies (specifically those vis-à-vis the insurgency) were implemented. The committees were also supposed to serve as a means of bottom-up input into the system in which civilians would elect leaders sympathetic to their interests as well as communicating with local politicians their problems and issues, after which the latter would work to solve those problems.\textsuperscript{83} Indeed, in Senai, a September 1951 New Village Committee meeting covered matters relating to security as well as more mundane matters that required attention from higher levels of government, such as assistance with digging wells, sanitation, and the improvement of roads.\textsuperscript{84} There is evidence that in 1951 elections were reasonably widespread and that elections took place in new villages in and around Ipoh (Perak), Johore Bahru (Johore), Kluang (Johore), and Kangsar (Perak).\textsuperscript{85} In 1952, there were yet more elections held in New Villages in Province Wellesley.\textsuperscript{86}

The creation of New Village Committees and elections continued apace in 1952 and 1953 and by early 1953 local councils were established in smaller New Villages, with larger New Villages to follow later in the year.\textsuperscript{87} Later, New Village Committees were made into Village Councils endowed with the power to collect local taxes, oversee infrastructure projects, and tend to other matters of local concern. The Federal Government also provided grants to New Villages in the amount of one dollar for every two dollars raised through taxation.\textsuperscript{88}

An illustration of how these Committees worked in practice can be seen in the case of Yong Peng in Johore. The government ordered that residents of a part of Yong Peng be relocated a second time and that all buildings that did not adhere to building codes be torn down or renovated. The New Village Committee drafted a letter that laid out the views and concerns of New Villagers and delivered it to the local resettlement officer.\textsuperscript{89} The government appears to
have been responsive and moderated its approach and provided compensation to those affected by the resettlement and renovation orders. Later, the Committee appealed to the government yet again, requesting compensation for those who had yet to receive it, as well as requesting permission and resources for the establishment of an athletic field, assistance with feral dogs, and to dispatch street cleaners and public health personnel to spray pesticides.90

b. Extensive Defection to the Incumbent and Institutional Collapse

Resettlement of the rural Chinese into New Villages came at a time when the MCP’s popularity was already low. Given the widespread violence carried out by the MCP, there was some credibility to the British claim to be protecting the rural Chinese from the MCP. But New Villages were not impenetrable and the Min Yuen continued to operate even inside of New Villages. In some cases, resettlement actually facilitated the MCP’s collection of taxes. Chin Peng, the leader of the MCP, recalled years later that the Korean War boom and concentration of villagers flooded the MCP’s coffers with money.91 Furthermore, the resentment engendered by relocation actually produced recruits and support for the MCP.92 MCP supporters found ways to get supplies to the MCP even in the face of the restrictions imposed on the New Villages.93 For example, New Villagers deposited cans of food at the bottom of manure barrels. After the British caught on to this tactic, they started checking the barrels with long poles. The MCP’s supporters responded by dropping hoe blades into the barrels. One British soldier, particularly excited by what appeared to be provisions for the MCP, reached in with his bare hands and was badly cut by the blade. MCP supporters also gave the guerrillas permission to take whatever they needed from their fields, located outside of the perimeter fence of the New Villages.94

Though the MCP retained a few supporters in the New Villages, compliance with its demands for men and supplies in contested areas disappeared after the government instituted reforms that incorporated the rural Chinese into the Malayan economy and political system. The British reforms simultaneously increased compliance with the government and decreased compliance with the MCP. As more civilians refused to obey the MCP, the MCP applied yet more coercion. One rubber tapper in Bidor, who had started on his job just two days previously and refused to provide cooperation or supplies to the MCP, was found dead with his hands tied behind his back, cuts all over his body, and his ears and fingers cut off.95 When the government started the process of registering all civilians and issuing them ID cards, the MCP forcibly confiscated the ID cards and destroyed them. The process of obtaining new cards was time-consuming,
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involved a great deal of bureaucracy, and may even require the civilians in question to pay for their new cards. But the MCP cared little about such things. As one guerrilla commander recalled, after his unit successfully captured part of Bidor, they confiscated the ID cards of all civilians they could find “and explained our reasons for doing so. However, explaining it was one thing; whether the masses accepted it was something else entirely . . . Whether it was the correct [policy] or not was something [for us] to think about later.”

Proactive government measures to expand its coalition and the refusal of the MCP to alter its political program resulted in a massive withdrawal of compliance from the MCP. With the establishment of the New Villages, the rural Chinese were presented not merely with a choice between the MCP and the government, but with protection from the MCP if they refused to comply with or support it. Afforded such protection, civilians refused to comply with the MCP and its influence over the civilian population disappeared.

The collapse of the MCP’s institutions transformed the MCP into small bands of guerrilla fighters divorced from Malayan society. The MCP never made the mistake of engaging the British (and later Malaysian) forces using conventional tactics, meaning its armed forces remained intact. However, unable to gather the supplies or recruits it needed from the rural Chinese, the MCP embarked on a “long march” that eventually took it to northern Malaya, where it established a small base area on the border with Thailand and where it remained well after the Emergency came to an end in 1960.

VI. Conclusion

The Malayan Emergency is often held up as a paragon of a successful counter-insurgency. The theoretical framework I advance in this book explains why the British victory over the MCP was so complete: the coalition established by the MCP was extremely narrow and did not include even a majority of the rural Chinese who should have been its natural allies. The MCP’s political program for Malaya was almost entirely focused on urban areas and its leadership never took the concerns of the rural Chinese seriously. For the MCP, the concrete concerns of the rural Chinese were generally unimportant. Its campaign of economic sabotage, burning of ID cards, and refusal to even countenance the redistribution of land demonstrate that in spite of its claims to the contrary, the MCP never truly adopted a mass line and as a consequence its rule was characterized by low levels of civilian compliance and high levels of coercion.

Early in the Emergency, the British did not attempt to administer the rural
Chinese, treating them instead as a security problem to be addressed through the use of force. That changed with the establishment of the New Villages and the incorporation of the rural Chinese into the Malayan polity. By ceasing violence against the civilian population, actively incorporating the rural Chinese into the Malayan body politic, and providing them with relatively responsive and representative political institutions that addressed their concerns, the British provided both an opportunity and incentive for rural Chinese to defect from the MCP to the government and ultimately bring about a collapse of the MCP insurgency.

The Malayan Emergency is one of the most studied insurgencies in the modern era, and there have been numerous practitioners and scholars who have advanced explanations for the British victory. It is important to begin, as nearly every study of the conflict does, with Short’s (2000) *In Pursuit of Mountain Rats: The Communist Insurrection in Malaya*. Short highlights several aspects of the British counterinsurgency program that produced success for the British that would ultimately find their way into work by a number of other scholars.

The first of these is the appointment of Gerald Templer. To a far greater extent than Short, Ramakrishna (2002) holds up the Templer as one of the most important factors explaining the defeat of the MCP. There is little doubt that Templer energized the Malayan Civil Service and European community in Malaya at a time where morale in both was extremely low. He also pursued the government’s counterinsurgency policies with a kind of vigor that was unknown to his predecessors.

However, Templer’s importance lies not in his martial attitude toward subordinates, his “psychological impact” (as Ramakrishna argues), or the theater of touring New Villages or opening intelligence letter boxes, but of putting into practice policies (most of which were drafted prior to his arrival) that expanded the social coalition of the government by incorporating the rural Chinese into Malaya’s political and economic system. His rigorous implementation of policies providing for a multiethnic armed forces and of security of tenure for the rural Chinese reflected his implicit understanding of the need to incorporate groups excluded on the basis of race and socioeconomic standing, but these were hardly his ideas. Moreover, Templer’s actions and statements during the Emergency make clear that this understanding was indeed implicit, as evidenced by his often heavy-handed overreactions to the unwillingness of the rural Chinese to provide intelligence or cooperation to the government. Hack (1999) is therefore on solid ground when he argues that the “turning of the tide” owed more to factors outside of Templer’s immediate control and that “given local conditions and
ongoing refinement of the Briggs Plan, Gurney or any other general Britain was likely to send to its vital Malayan dollar earner would probably have sufficed."

A popular explanation for the British success over the MCP is the provision of services in the communities into which rural Chinese were resettled, thereby winning the “hearts and minds” of the rural Chinese. To make this argument is to ignore and underestimate the hardship that the government imposed on the rural Chinese. The process of resettlement was profoundly disruptive and tore rural Chinese from their lands and communities. The government made some attempts to assist the rural Chinese as they were resettled in the form of monetary compensation (between $70 dollars and $30 dollars) and moving assistance. For example, squatters from Wong Kee Village in Senai, Johore were given $30 dollars when moving and subsequently $6 dollars per person per household. In addition to monetary compensation, in theory the rural Chinese were also supposed to be provided with assistance moving into the New Villages. But in practice, the trucks dispatched by the government were not always willing to move everything that belonged to the squatters, forcing them to use their own funds to hire trucks or ox-pulled wagons or request help from friends and family.

Though these programs were designed to blunt the negative impacts of resettlement, when they arrived in the areas designated as New Villages, the rural Chinese were usually confronted with an area without any of the amenities that would later characterize the larger New Village project. So the villagers had to dig their own wells, outhouse pits, and clear their assigned lots to make the suitable for construction, a task that sometimes involved cutting down trees, clearing grasses, and leveling out uneven land. In response to this spike in demand for dwellings and amenities, in early March 1951 it was reported that the wages of carpenters shot up in response to the surge in demand for building houses and other structures in New Villages. In Senai and Kahang the cost of labor was $20 to $30 dollars per day. As a result, labor was being brought in some Singapore and other regions around Senai. Transportation was also in short supply and the cost of transporting household items from old villages to new villages was more than $10 dollars. There was also a shortage of materials for the construction of houses. In response to inflated prices, in May 1951 the local government of Teluk Intan in Bidor, Perak purchased a large quantity of attap and provided it to the residents of the New Villages at a discounted rate and allowed merchants to sell the remainder at going market rates. This appears to have been the exception rather than the rule, as no evidence exists of similar programs elsewhere.

The Orwellian-sounding “New Villages” were designed to be communities that included modern amenities like running water, schools, paved roads, and
modern sanitation. While there were a number of model New Villages that conformed to the Government’s blueprint and had all of the modern amenities promised to the rural Chinese, a vast majority did not. Short concludes that “in 1950, 1951, and even much later very little resettlement, or regrouping of estate labour, could be regarded as effective.” Quoting the chief police officer of Selangor, he notes that

Thousands of Chinese of all walks of life are now living behind barbed wire and are expected to be policed by a handful of untrained men who are tied down by gate and perimeter patrol duties. Proper police work is well nigh impossible and duties in resettlement areas result in corruption, boredom and ill discipline. In addition there are vast problems concerning administration, health, [and] education. These problems were the norm, not the exception. Many New Villages lacked even the most basic amenities. Roads were not paved and did not have drainage ditches, public taps were either not supplied or their number insufficient, electricity was either not supplied or supplied in limited quantities, medical clinics were in short supply, and sanitation nonexistent or questionable. Schools, too, were unevenly distributed and the total number of pupils varied according to both provision of facilities and instructors, as well as the socioeconomic position of a child’s family. Employment was not guaranteed and in Kinta, Perak, unemployment ranged between 30 percent and 50 percent while unemployment and underemployment remained problems throughout the New Villages.

The preceding description should make it clear that the government did not simply buy off the rural Chinese with modern amenities, not least of all because those amenities did not materialize in the way the government promised. But there is reason to believe that even if the government provided the rural Chinese with all the schools and roads it promised, the effect on the insurgency would have been limited because the provision (or lack thereof) of material goods is not what drove the rural Chinese to support the MCP in the first place. The rural Chinese were institutionally excluded from economic and political participation in Malaya up to roughly 1951, and no amount of schools or water taps would have changed that. There is no reason to suppose that the rural Chinese would have been any less willing to support the MCP if the government provided them with electricity or roads while still subjecting them to state violence.

Even if the considerable costs of resettlement and the poor conditions of the New Villages are ignored, there is no evidence that active support never materialized for the government either in the form of voluntary recruitment into the
armed forces or Home Guards or the provision of high-quality intelligence to the government. Laws mandated participation in Home Guard or other para-military units, and there were provisions mandating both monetary fines and jail time for those who refused. In Port Swettenham, the government mandated that all males between the ages of eighteen and fifty-five must register for service in the Home Guard (ziwei tuan). On the last day of registration, a surge of three hundred men signed up. Though the government-friendly Nanyang Siang Pau lauded this as an expression of “the enthusiasm of the villagers for [joining] the Home Guard,” it is far more likely that fear of government sanction was the primary motivator for the last-minute enlistees.

There is also no evidence that the rural Chinese provided the government with large amounts of high-quality, actionable intelligence on the whereabouts or activities of the MCP. Much has been written about the way in which Templer imposed collective punishment on Chinese civilians. One of his most celebrated methods was imposing collective punishment on communities located in or near areas of MCP influence and then demanding that they fill out questionnaires about insurgent activity in their villages. Contemporaneous accounts and subsequent studies of the Emergency have lauded these measures as, at least, showing the government’s resolve to tackle the MCP. However, the usefulness of this method was disputed by senior Colonial Officials such as T.C. Jerrom, a Principal Secretary, who minuted to J.D. Higham, Assistant Secretary, Head of South East Asia Department, that the questionnaire method used by Templer had been a ‘flop’ and ‘no useful information had been provided.’ Moreover, it did not seem to have been realized by Templer that most of the Chinese villagers were in any case illiterate and not able to read or write and, even if they had wanted, they would not be able to complete the questionnaires they had been given.

An examination of contemporaneous news reports provides no indication that any useful intelligence was produced as a result of this method. The only anecdotal evidence that these measures were effective in any way comes from Short, who reports that the collective punishment imposed on Tanjong Malim resulted in the arrest of a few members of the Min Yuen and a few supporters of the MCP, but no actual guerrillas or MCP members. Even Ramakrishna, an analyst with much sympathy for Templer and his methods, notes that having civilians fill out questionnaires “‘was more of a psywar than an intelligence gathering operation’, because the main objective was to ‘sow fear and doubt in the minds of the [Communist Terrorist] sympathisers and to shake the confidence of the
[Communist Terrorists] themselves in the benevolence of the environment in which they operated.’” 118 Some civilians were paid for information, but the exchange of money for information is hardly evidence of support and, in the event, there is no record of how widespread this practice was, nor of the quality of the intelligence provided. 119

Nagl’s (2002) is one of the more prominent recent accounts of the British victory over the MCP. He argues that institutional learning allowed the British military to discard attachment to conventional warfare and adopt tactics that were more appropriate for an insurgent conflict. That is doubtless true, but more effective elimination of armed insurgents is not a substitute for addressing the grievances that drive civilians to join insurgents in the first place. As discussed in chapter 1, Nagl does not address the political side of the insurgency, but speaks favorably of the use of the Chinese-language media, specifically radio, newspapers, films, and theater troupes and states that they had a “dramatic impact.” 120 Others have devoted considerable attention to the forms of information warfare deployed by the British in their attempt to sway public opinion. 121 There is no evidence that any of the “psywar” techniques deployed by the British had any substantive impact on the insurgency. Many people in New Villages did not have electricity, let alone radios, so radio broadcasts were quite useless. The circulation of newspapers was relatively limited in New Villages and many rural Chinese were illiterate, once again blunting a possible impact. 122 There were certainly films and drama troupes, but New Villagers were well aware that the films were government propaganda and there is no evidence that any media produced by the government ever changed the minds of the rural Chinese, let alone driving them to cease support for the MCP in favor of the government. 123

Ramakrishna (2002) takes an expansive view of “propaganda” as both “propaganda of word” and “propaganda of deed,” which he argues together were designed to win the “confidence” of the rural Chinese. Ramakrishna argues that it was attentiveness to the concerns of the rural Chinese that enabled the government to win their “confidence” and thereby defeat the MCP. “Without confidence,” he writes, “the Chinese would not pass intelligence to Security forces on terrorists and their Min Yuen helpers; without confidence they would not march in the crucial anti-Communist processions organized by Good Citizens’ Committees.” 124 While the government may well have had the “confidence” of some rural Chinese, there is simply no evidence that the psychological dimension of the conflict that Ramakrishna highlights is an important as he claims. What the government needed was not “confidence,” but compliance with its laws and, by extension, defection from the MCP and a refusal to comply with it.
A final recent addition to the analysis of the Malayan Emergency is Staniland’s (2014) *Networks of Rebellion*. He argues that the strong links that the MCP had to the Chinese community in Malaya and the cohesiveness of the organization itself made it what he calls an integrated insurgent group that could be defeated only a concerted campaign of leadership assassination and “local disembedding” (the displacement of populations, implementation of intense social control and surveillance, and using local counterinsurgent forces and “flipped” former militants to target insurgent fighters and sympathizers). Staniland summarizes the process in Malaya as follows:

The social underpinnings of the MCP were forcibly changed by coercive state policies of resettlement, as Bayly and Harper note: “In the new settlements people often had little in common, not even a shared language. The trauma of removal did not encourage the formation of new communities, whether through dialect associations, clubs, or temples. Social trust was deeply damaged.” [ . . . ] Resettlement shattered the vertical social bonds that had kept the local MCP institutions functioning. As Coates writes, “the new Malaya envisaged by the MCP was deprived, for the foreseeable future, of such social basis as it had.” [ . . . ] The MCP had become disembedded from its core local communities. It withdrew further into the jungles and began to prepare to emulate a Maoist model of peripheral insurgency in expectation of protracted conflict. [ . . . ] Yet surrenders to the British accelerated during the mid-1950s as local control broke down. 126

It is important to highlight, first of all, that while it was true that there were many different dialect groups among Malayan Chinese, Cantonese had long served as a lingua franca in cities and later in the New Villages. Even uneducated Chinese were proficient in multiple Chinese dialects (and sometimes Malay as well). More importantly, internal MCP documents and memoirs of its soldiers and commanders provide no indication that linguistic diversity among ethnic Chinese posed a problem for the MCP’s operations during the Emergency (or during any period of its history, for that matter). Secondly, communities were often moved in their entirety into New Villages, so not all community structures were lost. While the initial resettlement presented huge difficulties for the rural Chinese, they rebuilt their communities, including dialect associations, clubs, and temples. Finally, though settlement was meant to separate the MCP and the population, Staniland is far too sanguine about the extent of disruption. The Min Yuen often moved into New Villages along with the civilians: move the village, move the civilians, move the MCP operatives.
along with them, and supplies continued to flow. Rural Chinese defected from and refused to comply with the MCP not because of the overwhelming coercive force of the British or because resettlement was disruptive but because of the political incorporation of the rural Chinese into the Malayan polity. By undertaking a reform of its political institutions, the British successfully removed the incentive to comply with or provide support for the MCP.

Though the active and enthusiastic support of the rural Chinese largely eluded the British (and later Malaysian) authorities, the fact of the matter is that they did not need it. What the government needed was for rural Chinese to cease complying with the MCP and to instead comply with the laws of the government. As one of the preeminent scholars of the Emergency says,

the result [of the “hearts and minds” strategy] was more to neutralize the key sectors of the population—the rural Chinese and especially the New Villagers—and to make it impossible for the guerrillas to rely on them for recruits and supplies. Without these critical ingredients, the communist revolution gradually withered away and the few communists who remained became increasingly vulnerable to the operations of the security forces. 131

In the absence of compliance with MCP demands and with the defection of civilians to the British administration, the MCP’s institutions collapsed.

A few words are necessary on the ethnic makeup of Malaya and of the MCP. That the MCP was a predominantly Chinese organization is well known, as is its inability to make inroads among non-Chinese groups in Malaya. While there is no question that there was a history of racial tension in Malaya, at no point did the MCP make a concerted effort to recruit non-Chinese in any appreciable quantity and the MCP’s political program did nothing to speak to the concerns of non-Chinese groups, especially the Malay majority, and the leadership of the MCP remained firmly in the hands of ethnic Chinese. 132

The MCP’s unwillingness to engage the issue of ethnicity is paralleled by its unwillingness to engage any other issues that were of importance to rural dwellers in general. As the MCP’s institutions started to collapse in the wake of the establishment of the New Villages, its leadership undertook what it (and many observers) believed was a reevaluation of its policies designed to restore its influence and reinvigorate the insurgency. Codified in October 1951, the MCP made at least a rhetorical commitment to broadening its base of support, namely among the national bourgeoisie. But the October 1951 resolutions ultimately represented a change in the political tactics of the MCP, not in its overall political strategy. The MCP sought to reinforce the mass line and to make sure that its
activities benefitted the masses. Such changes were doubtless important, but the MCP remained committed to its vision of a Malayan People's Democratic Republic in which land was collectively owned and collectively worked. Even after the October 1951 Resolutions, the MCP’s plans for a Malayan polity and nation were simply too distant from the preferences of most Malayans (regardless of ethnicity). As a result, the MCP was unable to utilize the grievances (economic or otherwise) of any of Malaya’s ethnic groups as part of a wider anti-colonial nationalist movement to overthrow the Malayan government.133

The Malayan Emergency is one of the most studied insurgencies of the modern era and it has often been asserted that the British won the insurgency because they won the hearts and minds of the rural Chinese through the provision of public goods and services such as schools, roads, and running water and through their use of innovative military tactics. The Malayan Emergency starkly illustrates that the outcomes of insurgent conflicts are a joint function of the actions of the incumbent and the insurgent. It has been argued that “the British did not win the Emergency so much as the Malayan Communist Party lost it.”

The MCP attempted to win a quick military victory [and] maintained the Chinese character of the Party and failed to reach out and appeal to the other races; they did not foresee, until it was too late, how vulnerable they would become because of the dependence of the guerrilla units on food supplies from the populated centres; they failed to appreciate fully the immediate concerns of the Chinese population, and, finally, they did not find a way to counter successfully the Government’s resettlement programme.134

This is doubtlessly true, but at the outbreak of the insurgency the government, too, adopted policies that failed to address the fundamental problems that animated the insurgency. It was only when the government actually undertook substantive political and economic reforms that it was able to reduce the appeal of the MCP’s and induce the population to cease any noncoerced compliance with their political institutions. It was that, not the provision of public services or the adept use of military force that ensured that when the MCP lost control of a given area nearly all civilians defected to the government and ceased to comply with the MCP. Repeated again and again over the span of Malaya, the result was the complete collapse of the MCP insurgency.