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Debating the Malayan Emergency: The new orthodoxy and competing interpretations

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Studies of the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960) over the last dozen years or so have seen the rise to prominence of a new orthodoxy to explain its outcome. This new orthodoxy argues that population control under the Briggs Plan's resettlement programme (mid-1950 to mid-1952) became increasingly effective and was the principal reason that the Malayan Communist Party was forced to change policy by issuing the October 1951 Resolutions. These events, it is contended, turned the tide in the fighting and led to the government's eventual victory. Paying particular attention to the sources used, this analysis shows how the research of a wide range of scholars over the years since the end of the Emergency, challenges the core propositions of the new orthodoxy. The analysis also illustrates that the focus on the new orthodoxy has inhibited the examination of alternative explanations for the course and result of the Emergency, which could usefully be explored.

Introduction

Almost from its inception the Malayan Emergency, which lasted from June 1948 to August 1960 and was a messy, complex, multifaceted and often brutal insurgency war, has been chronicled, examined and explained from a variety of diverse perspectives. As a result, there have been many different interpretations of why the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), its armed wing, the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA), and its mass support organisation, the Min Yuen, lost and the Malayan government, which gained independence from British colonial rule in 1957, won.[1] The Emergency has had a profound impact not just on the political, economic and social

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1 The MCP mounted a second, much less effective insurgency in the late 1960s. Eventually an agreement to end hostilities was signed with the Malayan government in 1989. See Ong Wei Chong, *Malaysian defeat of armed communism: The second emergency 1968–89* (London: Routledge, 2015); and Leonard C. Sebastian, 'Ending an armed struggle without surrender: The demise of the Communist Party of Malaya (1979–89) and the aftermath', *Journal of Contemporary Southeast Asia* 13, 3 (1991): 271–97.

development of Malaya/Malaysia but also on debates around how to conduct counterinsurgency campaigns as well as Britain's policies in the region during decolonisation.[2] Discussions about how best to understand and explain the course and outcome of the Emergency, therefore, have wide implications.

Over the last dozen years or so a new interpretation of the unfolding of events during the Emergency and the reasons for the government's victory has risen to prominence. This account has essentially become the new orthodoxy. The purpose of this analysis is to show how the core propositions of this new, leading interpretation are more contentious and more debateable than its adherents acknowledge. The analysis begins by charting the rise of the new orthodoxy from revisionist challenger to mainstream explanation. Sections two and three demonstrate that the two main arguments of the supporters of the new orthodoxy are questioned by a wide variety of scholars, including those who, in the main, make use of a very different set of sources to those employed by the champions of the currently dominant approach. The subsequent section explores several examples of alternative explanations which can usefully be explored to get a more complete understanding of the Emergency. Finally, the conclusion briefly summarises some of the main findings of the analysis.

The rise of the new orthodoxy

An important divide among interpretations of the Malayan Emergency started to develop during the 1990s. Up to that point the foremost difference among analyses of the Emergency was between those who emphasised the military aspect of the insurgency[3] and those who also explored in greater detail the social, administrative, political and economic dimensions of the conflict.[4] Starting in 1995, previous analyses of the Emergency were grouped together and critiqued by a new set of revisionist scholars. Led by Karl Hack and Donald MacKay, the revisionists argued that General Sir Gerald Templer who, as High Commissioner and Director of Operations from February 1952 to May 1954, was associated with the 'hearts and minds' approach to counterinsurgency, had been given too much credit for the Government's success.[5]

2 On the Emergency's legacy for Malaysia see, for example, Dan Slater, *Ordering power: Contentious politics and authoritarian leviathans in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Bernard Z. Keo, 'A small, distant war? Historiographical reflections on the Malayan Emergency', *History Compass* 17, 3 (2019), e12467, http://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/14780542/2019/17/3. On counterinsurgency, see, for example, Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966). On decolonisation see, for example, Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of violence: A history of the British Empire* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2022) and Katherine Eck, 'The origins of policing institutions: Legacy of colonial insurgency', *Journal of Peace Research* 55, 2 (2018): 147–60.

3 See for example Richard Clutterbuck, *The long, long war: Counterinsurgency in Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1966); Anthony Short, *The Communist insurrection in Malaya 1948–1960* (London: Frederick Muller, 1975), reprinted as, *In pursuit of mountain rats: The Communist insurrection in Malaya, 1948–1960* (Singapore: Cultured Lotus, 2000); and John Coates, *Suppressing insurgency; An analysis of the Malayan Emergency, 1948–1954* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

4 See for example, John Weldon Humphrey, 'Population resettlement in Malaya' (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1971); and Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and minds in guerrilla warfare: The Malayan Emergency 1948–1960* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989; reprinted Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2004); and available at: macsphere.mcmaster.ca/handle/11375/14923.

5 Karl Hack, 'Screwing down the people: The Malayan Emergency, decolonization and ethnicity', in *Imperial policy and Southeast Asian nationalism 1930–1957,* ed. Hans Antlöv and Stein Tønneson

They asserted that it was Sir Henry Gurney, High Commission from October 1948 until his murder by a unit of the MNLA in October 1951, and Lieutenant-General Sir Harold Briggs, Director of Operations from March 1950 to December 1951, who were primarily responsible for the Government's ultimate victory. It was argued that the key was the strategy developed by General Briggs in the months after he arrived in Malaya — widely known as the Briggs Plan — and its forced resettlement of rural Chinese (both 'squatters', as the illegal inhabitants of land were labelled, and other rural dwellers[6]) which resulted in the coercive control of Malaya's rural population. Hack in particular argued that the Briggs Plan ensured, 'that the back of the Emergency was decisively broken between summer 1951 and summer 1952', which meant that 'the tide was already turning decisively' well before Templer's hearts and minds approach could take hold.[7] Government policies implemented after mid-1952 were simply 'optimising' the original Briggs Plan.[8]

The revisionist line was quickly rebutted. Kumar Ramakrishna emphasised that Templer through word and deed was able to build up the morale of Government officials and gain the trust of the rural Malayan-Chinese community.[9] Both achievements, Ramakrishna argued, were crucial to the outcome of the Emergency but were underplayed by the revisionists. Similarly, Simon Smith pointed out that it was Templer's use of the 'hearts and minds' approach to implementing the stalled Briggs Plan which paved the way for the Government's eventual victory.[10] Others also argued that Templer's role in the Emergency was critical. For example, John Nagl, in a widely cited book comparing the Emergency with the US policy during the Vietnam War, emphasised that it was 'difficult to overstate the impact that Templer's energetic personal leadership and desire to solve problems in Malaya had on the course the emergency'.[11]

The revisionists returned to the debate a few years later. This time they were armed with what they claimed to be new evidence that the Briggs Plan and the period from mid-1950 to mid-1952 provided the definitive turning point in the Emergency. Two new sources, in which Chin Peng's memories of the Emergency took

(Richmond: Curzon Press, 1995), pp. 83–109; Karl Hack, '"Iron claws on Malaya": The historiography of the Malayan Emergency', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 30, 1 (1999): 99–125; and Donald Mackay, *The Malayan Emergency: The domino that stood* (London: Brassey's, 1997).

6 It should be noted that many 'squatters' did not see themselves as illegally occupying land on which they had lived for many years. See Tan Teng Phee, 'Behind barbed wire: A social history of Chinese new villages during the emergency period (1948–1960) (Ph.D. diss., Murdoch University, 2011), p. 429.

7 Hack, 'Screwing down', p. 93.

8 On 'optimisation' see Karl Hack, 'Using and abusing the past: The Malayan Emergency as counter-insurgency paradigm', in *The British approach to counterinsurgency: From Malaya and Northern Ireland to Iraq and Afghanistan*, ed. Paul Dixon (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 208, 228–30, 235–6.

9 Kumar Ramakrishna, '"Transmogrifying" Malaya: The impact of Sir Gerald Templer (1952–54)', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, 1 (2001): 80, 83–92. See also Kumar Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda: The winning of Malayan hearts and minds, 1945–1958* (Richmond: Curzon, 2002).

10 Simon Smith, 'General Templer and counterinsurgency in Malaya: Hearts and minds, intelligence, and propaganda', *Intelligence and National Security* 16, 3 (2001): 60–78, see especially pp. 74–5.

11 John A. Nagl, *Learning to eat soup with a knife: Counterinsurgency lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 89–90.

centre-stage, were singled out.[12] One was the publication that resulted from a workshop, held at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra in February 1999, during which practitioners and scholars discussed with Chin Peng episodes from the Emergency.[13] The other source was Chin Peng's autobiography, co-written with two journalists and based on his recollections and on several documents found in archives in England and Australia.[14] As will become evident, Chin Peng's recollections were generally considered hard evidence, especially when they supported the overall revisionist narrative, that resettlement under the Briggs Plan had been the primary factor in winning the insurgency.

Spearheaded by Karl Hack, who has produced an impressive number of publications on the Emergency, the revisionists' position over the last dozen years or so has become the new orthodoxy.[15] Proponents of this new orthodoxy argue that the conventional histories of the Emergency, in asserting that it was the actions of Templer which turned the campaign during the period 1952–1954, are wrong. They propose that, despite its problems, resettlement during 1951 under the Briggs Plan, adversely affected MNLA supplies, especially food, and morale, which forced the MCP leadership to draw up the October 1951 Resolutions.[16] This point had been alluded to in earlier analyses but was now given added weight with Chin Peng's testimony to back up this interpretation of events. The MCP's October 1951 Resolutions were seen as crucial because they mandated a reduced use of violence and sabotage by the MCP and a greater emphasis on generating political support, which mainly only served to hand the military initiative to the government.

For the advocates of the new orthodoxy, then, the crucial period was from mid-1950 to mid-1952, during which the Briggs Plan was implemented and influenced the MCP's change in policy. Even before Hack published his book on the Emergency in 2022, this interpretation was being highlighted by scholars.[17] Indeed, in 2017, two US-based, counter-insurgency experts, David H. Ucko and Jason A. Fritz, asserted that, 'there is now a loose consensus on the tide having turned by 1951 or 1952, largely as a result of the Briggs Plan'.[18] This view has since been repeated by other scholars who claim that the Briggs Plan's population control alone was enough to defeat the insurgency without needing to win the hearts and

12 See Karl Hack, 'The Malayan Emergency as counterinsurgency paradigm', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32, 3 (2009): 396–400.

13 *Dialogues with Chin Peng: New light on the Malayan Communist Party*, ed. C.C. Chen and Karl Hack (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004). This author was a participant in the workshop.

14 Chin Peng, *Alias Chin Peng: My side of history* (Singapore: Media Masters, 2003).

15 See Karl Hack, 'Everyone lived in fear: Malaya and the British way of counterinsurgency', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 23, 4–5 (2012): 676, where he hopes that his revisionist account, 'at some point will become the new orthodoxy'.

16 Hack, 'Everyone lived in fear', p. 685. Some analysts refer to 'Directives' others to 'Resolutions'.

17 Karl Hack, *The Malayan Emergency: Revolution and counterinsurgency at the end of empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). See also Paul Dixon, '"Hearts and minds"? British counter-insurgency from Malaya to Iraq', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32, 3 (2009): 369; Amitai Etzioni, 'COIN: A strategy of strategic illusion', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 26, 3 (2015): 349; and Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, Beth Grill, Molly Dunigan, *Paths to victory: Detailed insurgency case studies* (Santa Monica, CA.: RAND, 2013), p. 388. All cite Hack as their source.

18 David H. Ucko and Jason A. Fritz, 'Article Review 87', H-Diplo/ISSF, 13 Oct. 2017, https://issforum.org/articlereviews/87-hearts-and-minds . Ucko and Fritz cite Hack as their source.

minds of the rural Chinese population and that it led to MCP's decision to issue the October 1951 Resolutions.[19]

Surprisingly, despite some acknowledgement of the emerging debate around the new orthodoxy's stress on the pivotal role of forced resettlement under the Briggs Plan and its influence on the MCP's decision to issue the October 1951 Resolutions, there has been virtually no systematic, detailed assessment of this interpretation of the Malayan Emergency.[20] In the next two sections the analysis provides such an assessment. It subjects the new orthodoxy's account to examination by calling on a wide range of scholars whose research draws on a plurality of sources, including archival and library material in Malaysia, Singapore and the UK; private papers, personal accounts and interviews with the main participants; and field and ethnographic research in the new villages. The evidence from these sources indicates that the new orthodoxy's interpretation of the course of the Emergency is more debatable than its current status as the new, prevailing, conventional wisdom would suggest.

How effective was resettlement under the Briggs Plan in controlling the rural population?

Analysts of the Emergency generally agree that by early 1950, the Government was losing the initiative to the MCP and from the point of view of British officials in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, the situation was steadily deteriorating.[21] As a consequence, the government decided to appoint a Director of Operations (DOO) who would be a military man but report to the civilian High Commissioner.[22] Lieutenant-General Sir Harold Briggs was appointed DOO in late March 1950 and arrived in Malaya in early April. In the following weeks Briggs toured Malaya producing a report on 24 May for the British Defence Co-ordinating Committee (Far East) in Singapore (BDCC). The Briggs Plan, as the report became known, outlined a coordinated decision-making structure and a Federally-implemented scheme to forcible resettle both squatters and other rural dwellers, a high proportion of whom were Chinese.[23] Resettlement was started in the southern part of the country. It began in Johore on 1 June 1950, and in Negri Sembilan on 1 August 1950, with the idea of 'rolling up' the MCP by steadily extending the scheme northwards up the Malayan peninsula.

Nearly all analysts of the Emergency note that the pace of resettlement in the early years was surprising and remarkable. The unforeseen speed of resettlement

19 See, for example, Joshua Goodman, 'Shirking the Briggs Plan: Civilian resistance to reform and the army's struggle for control in Malaya, 1950–1952', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 49, 4 (2021): 751 and 744; and Michael A. Cohen, 'The myth of a kinder gentler War', *World Policy Journal* 27, 1 (2010): 79.

20 On the debate see Roger C. Arditti, *Counterinsurgency intelligence and the emergency in Malaya* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 4–5; and Keo, 'A small, distant war?', http:compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/14780542/2019/17/3. See also Karl Hack, 'British intelligence and counter-insurgency in the era of decolonisation: The example of Malaya', *Intelligence and National Security* 14, 3 (1999): 127, who refers to the debate as the 'stalemate' versus 'population control' approaches.

21 See for example, Short, *The Communist insurrection*, pp. 231–2.

22 Hack, *The Malayan Emergency*, p. 190, says it was on Gurney's initiative; Coates, *Suppressing insurgency*, pp. 78–80, indicates that Gurney was acting on the advice of the (BDCC) in Singapore.

23 For the full Briggs Plan, see *British Documents on the End of Empire* (BDEEP), Series B, Vol. 3, Part II, *Malaya: The Communist Insurrection, 1948–1953*, ed. A.J. Stockwell (London: HMSO, 1995), doc. 239, pp. 291–3.

was largely fuelled by the near doubling of government revenues induced by the rise in rubber and tin prices brought on by the Korean War which broke out at the end of June 1950.[24] There is some confusion around what portion of the rural population had been resettled and by when. The main difficulty was that the remoteness of many squatters and the possibility that survey teams in the field could be attacked by MNLA units, meant that the true extent of the numbers needing resettlement was very hard to estimate.[25] For example, an October 1952 Combined Intelligence Staff, 'Review of the Security Situation as at 30 September 1952' indicated that '450,000 Chinese' had been resettled by September 1951.[26] Another government source, this time from April 1953, states that, 'by the end of 1951, 80 per cent (401,698) of the anticipated total would have moved into 343 "Resettlement Areas"'.[27] By contrast, Kernial Singh Sandhu, who undertook field work in new villages in 1961–62 and is widely regarded as a leading authority on resettlement, calculates that 385,000 of a final total of 573,000 in 480 new villages, were resettled by the end of 1951, which suggests that around 70 per cent were resettled by early 1952.[28] However, the main difference among analysts concerns the quality of resettlement not necessarily the quantity, although the two are clearly linked.

Certainly, the key debate with regard to the implantation of the Briggs Plan is with respect to the effectiveness of forced resettlement in systematically controlling space, people and food, or what Hack refers to as 'geodemographic' control.[29] Although proponents of the new orthodoxy admit that initially many resettlement areas were very basic, with often only a single strand of barbed wire for fencing, and that the first months of the Plan's implementation did not always go well, they argue that by early 1951 there ware some marked improvements in the situation.[30] Effective administration was starting to appear with the appointment of over 200 Assistant Resettlement Officers (AROs).[31] It was asserted that for those resettled, village committees were being formed and they were promised facilities and permanence, including some sort of land title. In addition, while there were setbacks, the regroupment, or nucleation, of labour lines had started on the large European rubber estates and many tin mines and actions of members of the security force were becoming more controlled and targeted.[32] The argument is that by the time Briggs left Malaya — on 1 December 1951 — 'contact rates were up and the ratio of insurgents

24 Richard Stubbs, *Counter-insurgency and the economic factor: The impact of the Korean War prices boom on the Malayan Emergency*, Occasional Paper No. 19 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1971), pp. 24–41.

25 See the comments by Humphrey, 'Population resettlement', p. 100. The original estimate was that fewer than 300,000 needed to be resettled. See Stubbs, *Counter-insurgency and the economic factor*, p. 27.

26 Karl Hack, 'The Malayan Emergency as counter-insurgency paradigm', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32, 3 (2009): 401

27 Hack, *The Malayan Emergency*, p. 192.

28 Kernial Singh Sandhu, 'The saga of the "squatter" in Malaya: A preliminary survey of the causes, characteristics and consequences of the resettlement of rural dwellers during the Emergency between 1948 and 1960', *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 5, 1 (1964): 159. See also Humphrey, 'Population resettlement', p. 120.

29 Hack, *The Malayan Emergency*, pp. 192–3.

30 Ibid., p. 245.

31 Ibid., p. 216.

32 Ibid; see also Hack '"Iron claws"', pp. 102–3.

killed to every security force member was improving, as was the flow of information' and that, 'Food control was tightening'.[33] Overall, it is claimed that by late 1951 the 'vast majority of resettlements were consolidating' and the Briggs Plan was 'maturing'.[34]

However, this positive appraisal of the steady progress made by resettlement under the Briggs Plan, while using some private papers in the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, relies mainly on British colonial documents in the Public Record Office (PRO) (which was folded into The National Archives in 2003) and documents and papers at various libraries around England.[35] As A.J. Stockwell points out in the introduction to his edited collection of papers on post-Second World War Malaya chosen from the PRO, 'What we have from the Malayan government are largely documents generated at the highest level of local administration, in, for example, the offices of the high commissioner, commissioner general, chief secretary or director of operations'.[36] As a consequence, 'the views of the Malayan authorities on any matter are confined to papers which reached London and these tend to be final assessments made by the high commissioner plus documentation in support of the locally preferred option'.[37] In other words, what the proponents of the new orthodoxy rely on most for their interpretation of resettlement under the Briggs Plan from mid-1950 to early 1952 are reports from senior officials in Kuala Lumpur. While acknowledging that there were difficulties, these officials were trying to reassure the British government that progress was being made.

The limitations of relying on high-level official reports on the implementation of the Briggs Plan are illustrated by the combined appreciation of the Emergency situation up to 4 June 1951 submitted by Gurney and Briggs to London. Hack cites the report to highlight that progress in implementing resettlement under the Briggs Plan was being made with the two senior officials anticipating that the Emergency was 'approaching a turning point'.[38] As Hack notes, among other themes, Gurney and Briggs' joint report indicated that intelligence was improving with more information coming in, the number surrendering was increasing, civil support generally was rising, and that 'population control in south Malaya was sufficiently advanced to begin the strict food control that would be the key' to success.[39] But this view of resettlement was far too optimistic. As Stockwell comments, it was 'something of a false dawn' and John W. Humphrey makes a similar point stating that any idea of

33 Hack, *The Malayan Emergency*, p. 242; and Thomas Probert, 'The impact of participating in British counterinsurgency campaigns on British armed forces personnel: The Malayan Emergency as a case study' (Ph.D. diss., Open University, UK, 2020), pp.73–4.

34 Hack, *The Malayan Emergency*, pp. 242 and 247. See also Gian Gentile, *Wrong turn: America's deadly embrace of counterinsurgency* (New York: The New Press, 2013), pp. 41–2.

35 See for example, Hack, 'British intelligence', p. 147; and Hack, *The Malayan Emergency*, pp. 221–9.

36 A.J. Stockwell, 'Introduction', in *Part 1: The Malayan union experiment 1943–1948*, British Documents on the End of Empire (BDEEP), Series B, Volume 3: *Malaya 1942–1957*, ed. A.J. Stockwell (London: HMSO, 1995), p. xxxvi.

37 Ibid. See also Michelle T. King, 'Working with/in the archives' in *Research methods for history*, ed. Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 13–29.

38 Hack, *The Malayan Emergency*, p. 223. For the full report see BDEEP, *Malaya: The Communist insurrection, 1948–1953*, ed. Stockwell, doc. 239, pp. 291–3.

39 Ibid.

the Emergency 'turning a corner' at this juncture, simply because of a rapid expansion of resettlement, was a 'fallacy'.[40]

Indeed, alternative assessments of the progress of resettlement under the Biggs Plan are presented by scholars and commentators who had limited or no access to documents in London but who did have considerable access to Malayan government departmental records as well as files and private papers in the National Archives of Malaysia, and/or undertook extensive field research in Malaysia. Anthony Short is a prominent example. In his role as the 'official historian' of the Emergency for much of the 1960s and from his base at the University of Malaya, Short had access to all Malayan Government confidential and top secret papers. He points to a series of problems with the physical structures of resettlement areas put in place under the Briggs Plan. He states that there 'was very little resettlement that was "completed" in 1951. Barbed wire was lacking, perimeter lighting was lacking, and, with their absence, one cannot pretend that any sort of security had been given' to those resettled. He adds that, 'the only hindrance to the guerrillas was that they might have to walk further to get their supplies and information'.[41] Others with local knowledge also underscored this problem.[42]

Short also details the major difficulties with the security personnel who were supposed to protect, supervise and control the Chinese squatters and landowners, in the resettlement areas and the regrouped labour lines of the rubber estates and tin mines. During much of 1951, when resettlement was in top gear, the recruiting and training of police could not keep up with the mounting demands. Short quotes the Commissioner of Police stating that as well as low morale, the men, who were mostly Malays, lacked 'adequate leadership, supervision and training to an extent that is, in my view, dangerous'.[43] He portrays the special constables and the home guard as having similar setbacks.[44] Another scholar, John Coates, who had access to files in the National Archives of Malaysia and who interviewed many senior participants on the government side of the Emergency, also reports that the home guard faced a scarcity of shotguns and were often armed only with batons. Coates concludes that, 'it was not until Briggs left Malaya that [the home guard] became really effective'.[45] Supporting this assessment, Dato Tan Cheng Lock, founding-president of the anti-communist Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), spoke

40 A.J. Stockwell, 'Policing during the Malayan Emergency, 1948–1960: Communism, communalism and decolonisation', in *Policing and decolonisation: Politics, nationalism and the police*, 1917–1965, ed. David Killingray and David M. Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 111; Humphrey, 'Population resettlement', p. 121. Interestingly, an MCP document dated June 1951 also declared the Briggs Plan a failure, Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*, 47.

41 Short, *The Communist insurrection*, p. 381. Short was appointed official historian in 1960 and submitted a manuscript to the Malaysian government in 1968 but they refused to publish it. It was later published independently of the government.

42 See Correspondent, 'War in Malaya', *British Survey*, Main Series No. 39, June 1952, pp. 14–5; *The Straits Times*, 31 Dec. 1951, cited in Coates, *Suppressing insurgency*, 99; and examples in Hugh Fraser, 'Papers on the Malayan Emergency' (Fraser Report) CO 1022/22 (PRO/TNA). Fraser was the Parliamentary Secretary of State for the Colonies and his report is based on his tour of Malaya after the Secretary of State returned to London in December 1951. Fraser confirmed this point in an interview with the author, Houses of Parliament, 1972.

43 Short, *The Communist insurrection*, p. 287.

44 Ibid., pp. 282–7. See also Fraser Report.

45 Coates, *Suppressing insurgency*, p. 96.

for many rural Chinese. In February 1952, he called the Government's policy of using unarmed home guard to protect resettlement areas, 'a half-hearted policy and a farce'.[46]

Another group of scholars, who use both local documents and field work in the new villages — as the resettlement centres became known after March 1952 — arguably provides the fullest account and the best explanation for the problems that resettlement under the Briggs Plan encountered in the second half of 1951 and into 1952. Tan Teng Phee, who had access to local government files, notably Selangor Secretariat and British Advisor, Selangor files, and who undertook field research in Malaysia in 2007–2008, during which he interviewed numerous informants who had lived in the new villages at the time of the Emergency, lists the many limitations that plagued resettlement areas well into 1952. He notes major difficulties created by the lack of earth-moving equipment and building supplies at the local level. He also indicates that accurate site information for planning resettlement areas was often difficult to obtain because trained officials were scarce with many fearing going to some locations. These obstacles were compounded by officials being overloaded with work and, hence, making poor judgements about site selection and layout design.[47] Francis Loh Kok Wah, who had access to district office records and new village files as well as using participant-observation fieldwork in Kinta Valley new villages in 1978, reinforces these points.[48]

Humphrey, who provides one of the most thorough analyses of resettlement during the Emergency, undertook research in Malaysia in the 1960s. He found that far too many of the early resettlement areas built under the Briggs Plan during 1950 and well into 1951 were badly designed, laid out and located, which created long-term problems. Inadequate security and slum-like living conditions, including constant flooding, few standpipes for potable water and limited land for the many resettled agriculturalists were the result. Humphrey points out that in early 1951 the government was notably failing in its attempts to reverse the deterioration of the resettlement areas. Severe shortages of trained staff only added to their problems.[49] He goes on to record that, by late 1951, 'It seemed as though every mistake and oversight of the last two years suddenly began to crop-up before the unbelieving eyes of the government officials', with a number of resettlement areas 'on the verge of closing due to poor security and living conditions'.[50] Significantly, Sandhu notes in this respect that,

46 *The Straits Times,* 9 Feb. 1951, cited in Stubbs, *Hearts and minds*, p. 158.

47 Tan Teng Phee, 'Behind barbed wire: A social history of Chinese new villages in Malaya during the Emergency period (1948–1960)', (Ph.D. diss., Murdoch University, 2011), pp. 101–2, 223. See also Tan Teng Phee's book based on his dissertation: *Behind barbed wire: Chinese new villages during the Malayan Emergency 1948–1960* (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2020).

48 Francis Loh Kok Wah, *Beyond the tin mines: Coolies, squatters and new villagers in the Kinta Valley, Malaysia, c.1880–1980* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 118–27, 136–8. See also the major problems listed in Department of Public Works, briefs on 'Matters likely to be raised, visit of the Secretary of State for the Colonies', 3 Dec. 1951, P/PM1, Chief Secretary 438/B/51 (National Archives of Malaysia), cited in Stubbs, *Hearts and minds*, pp. 106–7.

49 Humphrey, 'Population resettlement', pp. 114 and 210, and on staff shortages, see pp. 104, 106–7 and 115. Humphrey acted as Short's research assistant for nine months, which gave him access to many government documents on resettlement. He also conducted interviews in nine selected new villages and received questionnaires from over 2000 villagers. On the sources for his data see Humphrey, 'Population resettlement', pp. 13–15.

50 Humphrey, 'Population resettlement', pp. 121–2.

although many resettlement areas should have been closed and moved, 'The obstacle to re-siting was the cost.'[51] Humphrey also states that in early 1952 the government continued 'to ignore the growing signs of decay and dissatisfaction which were beginning to eat at the settlements like a cancer'. For Humphrey, resettlement continued to be in 'serious difficulty' and it was only, when, later in 1952, the emphasis shifted from 'the number resettled to the quality of life' that the effect of the changes proved 'startling'.[52] Humphrey's analysis is supported by the recent research of David Baillargeon, who cites documents in the Arkib Negara Malaysia from the Federal Town Planning Department and a letter from the official Town Planner to show how bad the resettlement areas were.[53]

Overall, then, there are two distinct interpretations of the resettlement during the period June 1950 to early 1952 under the Briggs Plan. One version, the new orthodoxy, promoted most notably by Hack, sees the remarkable speed and scope of resettlement in a positive light even while acknowledging that resettlement ran into difficulties in the first few months after it was introduced in Johore. Relying mostly on the reports of high-level officials in Kuala Lumpur it concludes that, during 1951, 'the vast majority of resettlements were consolidating' and that 'demographic control' over those being resettled was 'tightening' and 'maturing' so as to produce a 'definitive clearing of areas'.[54]

The other interpretation of events during the same period concludes, primarily based on local, lower-level departmental sources and field research, that resettlement under the Briggs Plan was largely unsuccessful in enabling the government to supervise and control the rural Chinese population. The argument is made that although coercion and force was used to try to corral and control those resettled, it was not very successful. For scholars who adhere to this view, the resettlement areas were so poorly constructed, ravaged by time and weather, and lacking in trained security and administrative staff, that overseeing and regulating the daily lives of occupants was very difficult. For example, in Short's view, 'In 1950, 1951 and even much later very little resettlement, or regrouping of estate labour, could be regarded as effective'.[55] Coates quotes Briggs writing in November 1951 that, 'At the present rate it is my considered opinion that the morale of the population will drop to a level below the danger point and further losses occur before the plan can take effect'.[56] Coates concludes that as Briggs left Malaya in early December 1951 a great deal still needed to be implemented and that 'strategically, the Briggs Plan seemed to be in ruins'.[57] And Humphrey, based on his in-depth analysis of resettlement, indicates that, as Briggs left Malaya his Plan was in 'dire jeopardy'.[58] More recently, Aaron Edwards in a study which relies on military files and private papers in the UK states

51 Kernial Singh 'Sandhu, 'Emergency resettlement in Malaya', *Journal of Tropical Geography* 18 (1964): 167.
52 Humphrey, 'Population resettlement', pp. 147–8.
53 David Baillargeon, 'Space of occupation: Colonial enclosure and confinement in British Malaya', *Journal of Historical Geography* 73 (2021): 32.
54 Hack, *The Malayan Emergency*, pp. 242, 434.
55 Short, *The Communist insurrection*, p. 292.
56 Coates, *Suppressing insurgency*, p. 96. In Briggs's view, then, the Plan had not taken effect.
57 Ibid., pp. 99, 110.
58 Humphrey, 'Population resettlement', p. 121.

that in the second half of 1951, 'The truth was that the situation was dire. The Briggs Plan was in its embryonic phase and needed considerable nurturing before it could gain traction'.[59] The analyses of these scholars cast doubt on the new orthodoxy's assertion that the Briggs Plan was becoming increasingly effective throughout 1951. Indeed, the arguments of the new orthodoxy are, therefore, much more contentious than its supporters would have us believe.

Why did the MCP issue the October 1951 Resolutions?

Advocates of the new orthodoxy view the increasing maturation and effectiveness of resettlement under the Briggs Plan as the primary cause of the MCP's decision to issue the October 1951 Resolutions and change policy. For example, in his recent book, Hack states categorically that, 'The October 1951 Resolutions were a radical response to the pressures of the Briggs Plan' and that it was the '1950–52 phase that brought the Emergency to its peak of incidents and casualties, which ultimately persuaded the MCP to issue its October 1951 Resolutions'.[60] When other subscribers to the new orthodoxy make this same point they invariably cite Hack as the source for their conclusion.[61] The argument is made that the Resolutions, which called for a reduction in violent attacks against the general rural population and an increased attention to political work to mobilise support, served to hand the military initiative to the government. The Resolutions, which signalled the change in strategy, are viewed as the definitive turn of events from which the MCP never recovered and which led to the government's victory. This interpretation of the course of the Emergency appears to be one of the main reasons why the adherents of the new orthodoxy see mid-1950 to mid-1952 as the decisive period in the Emergency.

Supporters of the new orthodoxy put forward a number of arguments to assert that the Briggs Plan caused the MCP to change strategy in October 1951. First, they give considerable weight to the pronouncements of the MCP Secretary-General Chin Peng, who indicated that resettlement was an important factor in the Central Committee developing the October Resolutions.[62] But this line of reasoning assumes, problematically, the reliability of Chin Peng's memory. Even Chin Peng himself conceded during the ANU Workshop that, 'after so many years I cannot remember everything'.[63] Instructively, Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper point out that Chin Peng gets his facts wrong around the critical unmasking of Lai Tek, the former leader of the MCP who at various times also worked for French, British and Japanese intelligence.[64] Chin Peng also gets his time-lines

59 Aaron Edwards, *Defending the realm: The politics of Britain's small wars since 1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 72; see also Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*, pp. 95–6.

60 Hack, *The Malayan Emergency*, pp. 249 and 433. Hack repeats this point frequently throughout his book, often using similar phrasing, to make sure the reader understands his main thesis. See for example, *The Malayan Emergency*, pp. 5, 242, 253, 258, 283, 391 and 442. For an early expression of this argument see Hack, 'British intelligence', p. 133.

61 See for example, Souchou Yao, *The Malayan Emergency: Essays on a small, distant war* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2016), p. 104.

62 See for example, Chin Peng, *Alias Chin Peng*, p. 273; and *Dialogues*, ed. C.C. Chin and Hack, pp. 159–60.

63 *Dialogues*, ed. C.C. Chin and Hack, p. 85, see also pp. 62 and 103. There was no evidence presented at the Workshop that Chin Peng kept a diary or detailed journal during the Emergency.

64 Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *The forgotten wars: The end of Britain's Empire in Asia* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 599. Even Hack, *The Malayan Emergency*, p. 56, is compelled to chide Chin Peng

muddled. Hack approvingly quotes him stating that, in 1951 'the new villages with their … wire fencing, barbed wire, flood lights, police guards, constant searches, frequent interrogations and general restrictions on movement', created a situation in which 'we realised we were facing nothing less than a crisis of survival.'[65] However, government records show that even by the end of 1952 perimeter lighting been installed at only 17 of the 180 new villages that required it; the high cyclone fencing, to which Chin Peng refers, was not widely available; and the lack of training and low moral of police and home guard in late 1951 greatly reduced the capacity of the government to search, interrogate and restrict the movement of those being resettled.[66]

Moreover, it is not necessary to question Chin Peng's sincerity in wishing to rid Malaya of its colonial rulers or his personal appeal, to argue that he exaggerated the threat of resettlement under the Briggs Plan in order to cover his own shortcomings as a leader and strategist. Analysts and commentators acknowledge that the MCP suffered from a shortage of good leaders. F. Spencer Chapman, who was with the MCP during the Japanese Occupation and knew Chin Peng, comments that, 'There was never enough natural leaders to go around and no attempt was made to train or encourage this quality'.[67] C.F. Yong details the high percentage of top and middle-ranking leaders in the MCP who were arrested, deported or killed by the Japanese and British between 1937 and 1947.[68] This resulting shortage of leaders was so acute that when the MCP's head, Lai Tek, was unmasked in 1947 as a traitor who had worked for the French, British and the Japanese, the Party had to make the 23 year-old Chin Peng their new Secretary-General. Chin Peng's leadership was under a cloud from the start. Despite being young and relatively inexperienced, he had been one of Lai Tek's chief lieutenants, having notably been sent by the leader in August 1945 to rein in a group of radicals in Kedah, who at the time advocated for a more aggressive approach against the British.[69] Chin Peng was also known by some in the MCP as Lai Tek's 'Little Boy'.[70] Such links to the discredited former leader created problems. Certainly, Chin Peng's own leadership was not without its challenges.

In addition, the MCP's strategy under Chin Peng ran into difficulty almost immediately the Emergency was declared. Poor organisation and limited training meant that the Central Committee's attempts to create liberated zones failed.

for getting wrong the story of the Sungei Siput murders, which precipitated the declaration of the Emergency.

65 Hack, *Emergency in Malaya*, p. 257, quoting Chin Peng, *Alias Chin Peng*, p. 268.

66 Malaya, *Proceedings of the Federal Legislative Council*, 'Resettlement and the Development of New Villages', Paper No. 33, 1952; Short, *The Communist insurrection*, p. 404.

67 F. Spencer Chapman, *The jungle is neutral* (London Chatto and Windus), 1949, p. 161. Hanrahan, *The Communist struggle*, also notes the prevalence of poor leadership in the MCP, pp. 69, 73, 104, 113, 127. See also Stubbs, *Hearts and minds*, p. 90.

68 C.F. Yong, *The origins of Malayan communism* (Singapore: South Seas Society, 1997), pp. 181–257, 274–6.

69 Marc H. Opper, 'Forging the masses in Malaya: Mass mobilisation, the united front and revolutionary violence in Malaya, 1939–51', in *Experiments with Marxism-Leninism in Cold War Southeast Asia*, ed. Matthew Galway and Marc H. Opper (Canberra: ANU Press, 2022), pp. 205–6. Opper notes of this incident that Chin Peng 'made no mention of it in his memoirs or during any of his interviews', Ibid.

70 *Dialogues*, ed. C.C. Chin and Hack, pp. 76–7, 101–3; Cheah Boon Keng, *Red star over Malaya: Resistance and social conflict during and after the Japanese Occupation, 1941–1946* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983), p. 92.

During 1949 the Party changed to a strategy which, Marc Opper, relying on original documents, states, reflected the belief that, 'the masses could be made into supporters by being subjected to violence'.[71] This new approach 'fundamentally changed the relationship between the MCP and the masses'.[72] Short, Coates and others note that this new policy elicited a variety of criticisms including from Lam Swee and, most tellingly, from Siew Lau, who focused on the corruption of the Central Committee and the counterproductive nature of the new policy.[73] Chin Peng was reluctant to talk about these criticisms at the ANU Workshop and gave both Lam Swee and Siew Lau short shift in his autobiography.[74] Moreover, based on a diary kept by a senior MNLA commander, the Malaysian historian Mahani Musa records that after 1949 there was a lowering of morale due to too much secrecy and the inability of party leaders to 'create a strong fighting force'.[75] She sums up the diarist's view as one in which 'criticism of the party leadership was severe'.[76]

There was every reason, then, for Chin Peng to play up the threat posed by resettlement under Briggs and play down criticism of his leadership and policies. Indeed, A.J. Stockwell points out that Chin Peng's recollections at the ANU Workshop and in his book may 'have been reshaped as he raked over the coals during his years in exile and having been starved of information for so long', and that he 'embarked on his memoirs fully committed to a particular version of the Emergency'.[77] It was clearly a version which, understandably, served him best, not necessarily one which always accurately described events.

A second reason for advancing the argument that resettlement influenced the MCP's October 1951 Resolutions was the food shortages it was said to create. It was certainly the case that dislocation from resettlement meant that less food was produced by the rural Chinese who were resettled.[78] However, Sandhu makes the point that, 'The squatters were only one source of assistance to the Communists. The Min Yuen had roots deep in every layer of Chinese society'.[79] And with a substantial drop in the export of food and a marked increase in imported food, the towns and major centres across Malaya, which were notably not targets for MCP attacks, could provide food for MNLA units.[80] Moreover as Tan Teng Phee illustrates, the food that was

71 Opper, 'Forging the masses', p. 213. See also Hanrahan, *The Communist struggle*, p. 115.
72 Opper, 'Forging the masses', p. 212.
73 Short, *The Communist insurrection*, pp. 310–13; see also Coates, *Suppressing insurgency*, pp. 63–6, and his assertion that, 'Chin Peng was neither the theoretician nor the strategist that the situation demanded', p. 50.
74 See *Dialogues*, ed. C.C. Chin and Hack, p. 148; and Chin, *My side of history*, pp. 256–7, 259. This author tried to raise this issue with Chin Peng at lunch on the second day of the ANU Workshop, but it was clearly something he was reluctant to talk about.
75 Mahani Musa, '"I want to live": Malayan Communist Party struggles as seen by female defectors', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 94, 1 (no. 320, 2021): 85.
76 Ibid.
77 A.J. Stockwell, 'Chin Peng and the struggle for Malaya', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 16, 3 (2006): 297.
78 See Hack, *The Malayan Emergency*, p. 229. See also Elkins, *Legacy of violence*, pp. 515–6, who quotes Colonial Office files in The National Archives in London and Hack.
79 Kernial Singh Sandhu, 'Emergency resettlement in Malaya', *Journal of Tropical Geography* 18 (1964): 160.
80 On food exports and imports see, Sandhu, 'The saga of the "squatter"', p. 170. On the MCP's use of towns and cities for food, see J.B. Perry Robinson, *Transformation in Malaya* (London: Secker and

grown in and around resettlement areas at this time easily found its way out to the MCP.[81] Crucially, while over 50 per cent of the nearly 250 Surrendered Enemy Personnel (SEPs) chose to turn themselves in to the government during 1950 and 1951 because they disliked the MCP's policies and over 40 per cent because of internal friction or a sense of hopelessness, not one stated that they gave up because of a shortage of food. It was not until into 1952 that hunger became a problem.[82] While there may have been some shortages of food for a few MNLA units, the claim that lack of food influenced the MCP's change in policy has limited empirical support.

A third reason for followers of the new orthodoxy to argue that the Briggs Plan was the primary cause of the MCP's decision to issue the October 1951 Resolutions, was that British intelligence reports of the time saw this as the main explanation.[83] However, this understanding of British intelligence has been challenged. Roger C. Arditti indicates that little actionable intelligence on MCP policy was available up to 1952 because Special Branch 'lacked a viable presence in the Chinese community'; 'there was a chronic shortage of Chinese-speaking officers'; and, as a result, it was 'largely ineffective' as the primary intelligence gathering organisation.[84] He also points out that the uniformed branch of the police was essentially a paramilitary organisation, which so alienated those being resettled that it could get little information from them.[85] Arditti quotes Courtney Young, head of Security Intelligence Far East (SIFE) and a Chinese and Japanese speaker, who, while acknowledging that Special Branch had good information about the organisation and senior personalities of the MCP, also concluded that, 'little is available on its tactical deployment and intentions; its intelligence and sabotage organisations; and its external links and communications'. Young continued, 'There is no counter-espionage information and, so far as is known, no long-term or high-level penetration of the MCP'.[86]

Arditti's assessment is supported by a variety of commentators. Alexander Nicholas Shaw notes that the collection of raw intelligence 'inside the Malayan Special Branch was still extremely poor' and that, 'Whilst its Singapore counterparts repeatedly penetrated the communist party, Malaya was more reliant on lower-grade intelligence sources'.[87] Short, based on access to local intelligence reports, observes that, 'Very little, in fact, seems to have been known and digested about MCP policy even by the end of 1954'.[88] And, Oliver Lyttelton, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, who spent more than a week in Malaya and the region in early December 1951 concluded that, 'Intelligence was scanty and unco-ordinated between

Warburg, 1956), p. 46. Tan, *Behind barbed wire: Chinese new villages*, p. 262, records that in a government raid on shops in Tras in November 1951, 'about $50,000 worth of rice in storage' was found.

81 Tan, *Behind barbed wire: Chinese new villages*, pp. 142–8. See also Lennox A. Mills, *Malaya: A political and economic appraisal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), p. 57; and Edgar O'Ballance, *Malaya: The communist insurgent war, 1948–1960* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 112.

82 Coates, *Suppressing insurgency*, p. 65; and Hack, *The Malayan Emergency*, p. 370.

83 See Hack, 'Malayan Emergency as counter-insurgency paradigm', pp. 399–401.

84 Arditti, *Counterinsurgency intelligence*, p. 210. Arditti relies on KV 4 Series Security Service files for his analysis.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid., p. 191.

87 Alexander Nicholas Shaw, 'MI5 and the Cold War in South-East Asia: Examining the performance of Security Intelligence Far East (SIFE)', *Intelligence and National Security* 32, 6 (2017): 804.

88 Short, *The Communist insurrection*, p. 316.

the military and the civil authorities.'[89] In other words, the intelligence community at the time had very limited sound information on which to pronounce authoritatively on the cause of the MCP's change in strategy.

In contrast to the advocates of the new orthodoxy's position that it was the Briggs Plan that was the principal reason for the MCP issuing the October 1951 Resolutions, other scholars and commentators argue that it was internal factors, notably the use of violence against the rural population, which was the main cause of the MCP's decision to change course in October 1951. This argument is advanced by nearly every analyst who both reads Chinese and has a good knowledge of the MCP. For example, Lucian W. Pye, who interviewed 60 SEPs while undertaking research in Malaya in 1952–53, states that, 'By the fall of 1951, the MCP leadership had to recognize the complaints of its Min Yuen leaders that the indiscriminate action of the MRLA units were making even routine Min Yuen work difficult'. Pye goes on to maintain that, 'After three years of terrorism it was apparent that the party had to find new techniques to ensure the continued neutrality of the masses of the Malayan Chinese'.[90] Cheah Boon Keng, the pre-eminent Malaysian historian of the MCP, attributes the reason for the October 1951 Resolutions to the Party to realising that their attack on the economy, through slashing rubber trees, sabotaging tin mines and blowing up buses, 'was counter-productive and threatened the livelihood of the people'.[91] And Gene Z. Hanrahan, similarly, comments on the fact that tree-slashing created ill-feeling among the people and that the more militant terrorist actions employed by the MNLA and the Min Yuen meant that many were alienated by the MCP's inept tactics.[92]

Two other regional experts with very different backgrounds reach a similar conclusion about the significance of the MCP's alienating use of terror and violence against Malaya's rural population. The first is C.C. Chin, who has published extensively on the MCP, mostly in Chinese, and who helped to host Chin Peng during his unusual visit to ANU in 1999 and participation in the February workshop.[93] C.C. Chin wrote the biography of Chin Peng for the publication from the ANU Workshop.[94] His verdict on why the MCP produced the October 1951 Resolutions is unequivocal: they were 'meant to rectify the deteriorating situation faced by the MCP and MNLA, due to the rank and files' harsh handling of those villagers who were uncooperative whether because of circumstantial reasons or for fear of British harassment'. He also noted that the Resolutions attempted to solve the problem that previous policies, including destroying identity cards and slashing rubber trees,

89 Oliver Lyttelton, *The memoirs of Lord Chandos* (London: Bodley Head, 1962), p. 366. Hack, *The Malayan Emergency*, p. 240, suggests that Lyttleton's description of intelligence at the time was hyperbole, but the research of Arditti, Shaw and Short demonstrates it was not.

90 Lucian W. Pye, *Guerrilla communism in Malaya: Its social and political meaning* (Princeton: Princeton, University Press, 1956), pp. 104–5.

91 Cheah Boon Keng, 'The Communist insurgency in Malaysia, 1948–1960: Contesting the nation-state and social change', *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 11, 1 (2009): 147. Cheah was at the ANU Workshop and clearly discounts Chin Peng's version of events.

92 Hanrahan, *The Communist struggle*, pp. 118, 120–3. On Hanrahan's expertise see, Marc Opper, 'Gene Z. Hanrahan', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 90, 2 (2017): 71–96.

93 Anthony Reed, 'Preface', in *Dialogues*, ed. Chin and Hack, p. xxvi.

94 C.C. Chin 'In search of the revolution: A brief biography of Chin Peng' in *Dialogues*, ed. Chin and Hack, pp. 331–77.

had 'damaged the livelihood of the general masses'.[95] A comparable conclusion is reached by C.C. Too who had gone to school with some MCP leaders and talked to many of them immediately after the end of the Japanese Occupation. After working for the Nationalist Chinese Consulate in Kuala Lumpur he joined the Emergency Information Service in 1950 and was widely recognised as the Government's most knowledgeable officer on the history of the MCP. C.C. Too described the Resolutions as constituting an admission 'that wanton terrorism carried out in the past had antagonised the civilian population' and that they called for the adoption of the Maoist strategy of 'simultaneous armed struggle in the rural and jungle areas' and 'masses struggle in the areas under Government control'.[96] Neither of these authorities on the MCP sees the Briggs Plan as the key reason for the issuing of the October 1951 Resolutions.

The negative reaction to the MCP's tactics is also cited as a determining factor in the October 1951 Resolutions by Marc Opper, based on his recent analysis of original documents. Opper concludes that the MCP's slashing of rubber trees; firebombing buses; confiscating identification cards; murdering individual rural Chinese; and, in rare circumstances, even burning entire villages, produced 'an overwhelmingly negative reaction' among civilians and resulted in the October 1951 Resolutions.[97] For Opper, the Resolutions, 'stated for the first time since Lai Tek controlled the party that the MCP must guard against "leftist" deviation and that such deviations posed the greatest threat to the revolution'.[98] Intriguingly, Chin Peng accepts this point when he states in his book that the 'realisation that our military approach from late 1948 through to 1951 had been utterly inappropriate was a bitter pill to swallow. The review of our armed struggle strategies dominated a two-month period from August to September, 1951'.[99] Opper's close analysis of MCP documents, then, confirms the judgement of the vast majority of those who have studied the MCP in depth: it was internal factors associated with the MCP's use of violence against the rural population and not the Briggs Plan, that forced the Central Committee led by Chin Peng to adopt the October 1951 Resolutions. Indeed, a range of other scholars and commentators with detailed knowledge of Malaya during this period similarly conclude that too many key sectors of the population had been alienated by the MCP's violent actions.[100] Their verdict makes a central tenant of the new orthodoxy's interpretation of the Emergency much more debateable than its proponents admit.

95 C.C. Chin, 'The revolutionary programmes and their effect on the struggle of the Malayan Communist Party', in *Dialogues*, ed. Chin and Hack, p. 272.

96 Lim Cheng Leng, *The story of a psy-warrior: Tan Sri Dr. C.C. Too* (Batu Caves: Lim Cheng Leng 2000), p. 78. See also Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*, pp. 46–7, who cites Too's private papers. On Too's career see Kumar Ramakrishna, 'The making of a Malayan propagandist: The communists, the British and C.C. Too', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 73, 1 (2000): 67–90.

97 Opper, 'Forging the masses', p. 214.

98 Ibid. On how the MCP's October decision fits into the wider international debate among communist parties, see Short, *The Communist insurrection*, pp. 315–8.

99 Chin Peng, *My side of history*, p. 279.

100 See for example, T.N. Harper, *The end of empire and the making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 162; and O'Ballance, *Malaya*, p. 113.

Alternative explanations

Significantly, the new orthodoxy's insistence that it was the Briggs Plan that was the decisive factor in the Emergency and led inexorably to the government's success, precludes consideration of a number of other, alternate, explanations for the outcome. Some can usefully be explored further. One is Humphrey's argument that, 'through ineptitude and doctrinal myopia', 'the Communist high command committed a significant number of tactical and strategic errors' which meant that, 'the British did not win the Emergency so much as the Malayan Communist Party lost it'.[101] Other analysts support this general point. Michael R. Stenson states that the strength of the MCP was on the decline in 1948 and that its haphazard and undisciplined approach to the launch of the armed conflict in June and July 1948 meant that it was bound to fail. He argues that as a result of the general disarray and confusion within the Party, at no point was it able to progress 'beyond the stage of terrorism to more concerted guerrilla warfare'.[102] In this regard, several scholars highlight the poor leadership of the MCP. Chin Kee Onn, author of *Malaya Upside Down*, a book about the Occupation years, called the MCP 'amateur revolutionists'; C.C. Too considered the Central Committee 'too naïve' and of 'low calibre'; and Phillip Deery describes the MCP's leadership structure in the wake of Lai Tek's defection as 'characterized by youth, inexperience, and a lack of discipline'.[103] Hence, the new orthodoxy's emphasis on the Briggs Plan paving the way for the government's victory may obscure the fact that it was the MCP which in essence lost the battle.

A second alternative explanation for the outcome of the Emergency, which is masked by the new orthodoxy's arguments and which arises from the first explanation, is that the British were just lucky.[104] As has been noted, the MCP leadership was inexperienced. The failure to recognise that in alienating the country's Malay and Tamil communities, as well as sections of the Chinese community who supported the Kuomintang Nationalists, they so reduced their possible base of support as to make their cause almost impossible to realise — a problem that was compounded by the use of violence against potential followers. Significantly, the MCP were also hampered by the fact that they received no material support from outside Malaya and Singapore. But the British were likewise lucky on another front. As Bayly and Harper point out, 'The British were rescued by the economy'.[105] The Korea War, which broke out in the same month as resettlement under the Briggs Plan commenced, prompted a quadrupling of rubber prices and a doubling of tin prices. The resulting Korean War boom, from mid-1950 until 1952, produced a doubling

101 Humphrey, 'Population resettlement', pp. 173–8. See also Francis Loh Kim Wah, 'Beyond the tin mines: The political economy of Chinese squatter farmers in the Kinta Valley new villages, Malaysia' (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1980), p.152.

102 Michael R. Stenson, *Repression and revolt: The origin of the 1948 communist insurrection in Malaya and Singapore* (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1969), p. 30.

103 Chin Kee Onn to Hugh T. Pagden, 9 Aug. 1948, CO537/3757, cited in Stubbs, *Hearts and minds*, p. 58; Too is quoted in Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*, p. 34; and Phillip Deery, 'Malaya, 1948: Britain's Asian cold war?', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9, 1 (2007): 42.

104 See Anthony Short, Review of Richard Stubbs, 'Hearts and minds in guerrilla warfare 1948–1960', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 19, 1 (1991): 114; and Stubbs, *Hearts and minds*, p. 254.

105 Bayly and Harper, *The forgotten wars*, p. 527.

of government revenues, near full-employment at increased wage levels and higher profits for rubber and tin companies so that they could regroup their labour lines in more nuclear, defensible settlements.[106] As a consequence, resettlement, and eventually regroupment, could be undertaken at a speed and scale across the country that Briggs and the government's planners could not have envisaged. Moreover, the surplus revenues generated at the height of the boom allowed for the implementation of General Sir Gerald Templer's hearts and minds approach from mid-1952 through 1954 and beyond.[107] Although a drop in commodity prices in 1953 raised the possibility of a recession that could give added life to the MCP, rubber prices fortuitously returned to relatively high levels for the second half of the 1950s as the Alliance Party took power in 1955 and Malaya gained independence in 1957.[108]

The British were correspondingly lucky in terms of the political aspects of the Emergency. Having insisted on handing over power only to a multiracial government and placing their faith initially in the mercurial Datuk Onn bin Jaafar and his Independence for Malaya Party, the British were fortunate that Tunku Abdul Rahman and H.S. Lee were astute enough to convert the United Malays Nationalist Organisation and the MCA into the consociational Alliance Party when Onn failed to gain the trust of voters.[109] And, of course, it was particularly providential that the British were able to grant independence to Malaya which undermined one of the MCP's main objectives and severely dented their morale.[110] The British were also lucky that so many Malayans were prepared to take on the MCP. For example, many MCA officials and members put their lives on the line to promote the Association in the new villages with around 300 murdered over the course of the Emergency.[111] Similarly, large numbers of Malays and Tamils served in the police force and many rural Chinese were members of their villages' home guard units.[112] In other words, then, Malayans were not, as some analysts seem to imply, simply victims or hapless bystanders looking on as the MCP and the British colonial government fought each other.[113] A good number worked to bring the Emergency to a

106 Stubbs, *Counter-insurgency and the economic factor*, pp. 3–15, 24–48.
107 Stubbs, *Hearts and minds*, pp. 155–87.
108 On rubber prices see, Colin Barlow, *The natural rubber industry: Its developments, technology and economy in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 440-1. See also Stubbs, *Hearts and minds*, pp. 232–5.
109 Diane K. Mauzy, 'Consociationalism and coalition politics in Malaysia' (Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 1978), pp. 100–3. See also R.K. Vasil, *Politics in a plural society* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 56–64.
110 See Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*, pp. 199–201; and Nori Katagiri, 'Winning hearts and minds to lose control: Exploring various consequences of popular support in counterinsurgency missions', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 22, 1 (2011): 181–3. D. Michael Shafer, *Deadly paradigms: The failure of U.S. counterinsurgency policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 116–20, sees the granting of independence as crucial leverage in the 'hearts and minds' approach.
111 Heng Pek Koon, *Chinese politics in Malaysia: A history of the Malaysian Chinese Association* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 129.
112 Andrew Mumford, *Counter-insurgency myth: The British experience of irregular warfare* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 36–8: J.J. Raj Jr., *The war years and after: A personal account of historical relevance* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1995), pp. 85–187; and Tan Teng Phee, *Behind barbed wire*, pp. 75–77, 181–3.
113 See Elkins, *Legacy of violence*, pp. 469–79, 493–516, 521–43, who tends to portray the Emergency as a contest between the brutal British and 'Chin Peng's followers'. By contrast Francis Loh Kok Wah,

conclusion as well as to shape the way their country developed after the fighting had finished.

A third alternative explanation for the outcome of the Emergency seeks reasons for the eventual success of resettlement under the Briggs Plan by comparing it to the failure of similar policies elsewhere in the world. Reviewing the use of resettlement in counterinsurgency campaigns in Vietnam, Algeria, Mozambique and Rhodesia, R. Marston concludes that, 'Empirically the case against resettlement seems overwhelming. The policy has been a part of only one successful counter-revolutionary campaign in modern times'.[114] American counterinsurgency analyst Anthony James Joes, comparing several attempts to employ resettlement as a key aspect of counterinsurgency, concludes that successful relocation programmes require, 'money, skilled administrators and especially, careful planning', otherwise, 'relocation centers can turn into recruiting grounds for the insurgents'.[115] The incomplete nature of resettlement in Malaya by late 1951 or early-1952 resembled the failed resettlement projects noted by Joes and Marston in counterinsurgency operations in other parts of the world. At the same time, their analyses strongly suggests, that additional factors, unique to Malaya, such as the money provided by the revenue surplus from the Korean War boom; the rectification from late 1952 onwards of early problems associated with the original lack of planning; the marked expansion of trained administrative capacity; and the provision of key services, such as schools as well as static and mobile health care centres — all of which characterised resettlement post mid-1952 — were indispensable to its eventual success.

Indeed, rather than place so much weight on the Briggs Plan-years of mid-1950 to mid-1952 as 'breaking the back' of the insurgency and 'turning the tide' inexorably to victory for the government in 1960, as proponents of the new orthodoxy do, it might be more fruitful to consider the Emergency as made up of a series of critical events, none of which by themselves were decisive but which together proved conclusive. It may, therefore, be instructive not to portray the measures introduced by Briggs between mid-1950 to mid-1952 as a sufficient condition for the success of the government. Instead, it might be more profitable to conceive of the eventual outcome of the Emergency as determined by a series of necessary conditions — for example, a weak MCP; the introduction of the Briggs Plan; the Korean War boom; Templer's hearts and minds approach, and the attendant expansion of the government's administrative capacity; the development of strong political parties; and the granting of independence — which collectively, and in sequence, proved sufficient to bring about the end of the insurgency. In other words, it would be regrettable if adherence to the new, seemingly dominant, orthodoxy excluded the exploration of other, alternative interpretations and explanations of the course and outcome of the Emergency.

'Forward' in *Behind barbed wire: Chinese new villages*, xvii, notes that new villagers sought to be 'agents of the own destiny' in the face of repression and coercion from government forces and the MCP.

114 R. Marston, 'Resettlement as a counterrevolutionary technique', *The RUSI Journal* 124, 4 (1979): 49.

115 Anthony James Joes, *Resisting rebellion: The history and politics of counterinsurgency* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2004), p. 120. See also Humphrey, 'Population resettlement', pp. 294–6.

Conclusion

This analysis has set out the main features of the key debates surrounding the contending interpretations of the Malayan Emergency. Importantly, it has assessed the core arguments of the new orthodoxy, both in terms of its claims regarding the effectiveness of the forced resettlement under the Briggs Plan from mid-1950 to early-1952, and its attribution of resettlement as the primary reason for the MCP issuing the October 1951 Resolutions. Under debate is not whether the Briggs Plan and the role played by Gurney were important in changing the course of the Emergency; their significance to the final outcome has been widely recognised, not least by Templer.[116] Rather, at issue is whether the Briggs/Gurney period turned 'the strategic tide', as Hack puts it in the Conclusion to his book, and was the principal deciding factor that ultimately led to the Government's victory.[117] Or, alternatively, was this period one of a number of crucial factors, each of which provided a turning point of sorts, that contributed to the eventual outcome of the Emergency?

The analysis of the debate has revealed the extent to which sources shape how events are interpreted. For example, the arguments of the new orthodoxy are largely based on the reports from senior government officials housed in the Public Record Office/The National Archives and libraries in the UK and the recollections of senior MCP leaders, notably Chin Peng. In contrast, many of the questions that are raised about the new orthodoxy's positions are rooted in the accounts of lower level officials found in the National Archives of Malaysia and the testimony from those who were resettled, drawn from field research undertaken in new villages in Malaysia. Certainly, this helps to explain why scholars from the first wave of analyses of the Emergency, such as Humphrey, Pye, and Short, raise challenges to the arguments central to the new orthodoxy.[118] Similarly, analysts who had extensive access to resources in both the UK and Malaysia, such as Ramakrishna, and more recently to original MCP documents and field research in new villages such as Opper and Tan Teng Phee, also raise questions concerning the robustness of the arguments put forward by proponents of the new orthodoxy.[119]

Finally, the debate around the competing interpretations of the Emergency, and especially the emphasis on resettlement and the new villages, reveals that there are still aspects of the insurgency about which too little is known. For example, the role of major centres such as Singapore, Johore Bahru and Kuala Lumpur in sustaining the MCP has not been fully explored. Similarly, did Min Yuen units operate out of the rapidly expanding dormitory towns, such as Petaling Jaya and Pasir Pinji, which sprang up seemingly overnight, as well as in smaller centres such as Raub and Seremban, whose population also grew as rural Chinese sought safer places to

116 See James Ongkili, *Nation-building in Malaysia 1946–1976* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 86, where he relates that in an interview, Sir Gerald Templer told him that, 'I swallowed the Briggs Plan hook, line and sinker'. Similarly, Templer acknowledged the debt he owed to Briggs in an interview with the author in London, 26 July 1972.

117 Hack, *The Malayan emergency*, p. 451.

118 See Humphrey, 'Population resettlement'; Pye, *Guerrilla communism*; Short, *The Communist insurrection*.

119 See Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. This author also had extensive access to archives and libraries in the UK as well as in Malaysia and Singapore; see Stubbs, *Hearts and minds*, pp. 266–77. See also Opper, 'Forging the masses' and Tan Teng Phee, *Behind barbed wire*.

live? Some valuable research has been undertaken on women in the Emergency but still more could be done.[120] And, equally, it would be desirable to learn more about the lives of non-communist Malayans during this period — for example, those who were special constables, or members of the home guard, Malay Regiment or the mixed-race Federation Regiment. It would be unfortunate if the new orthodoxy's emphasis on the government's strategy from mid-1950 to mid-1952 and its role in bringing about the victory of 1960, inhibited research on a wider set of participants whose voices can usefully be heard.

120 See Agnes Khoo, *Life as the river flows: Women in the anti-colonial struggle* (Petaling Jaya: SiRD, 2004); Mahani Musa, 'Women in the Malayan Communist Party', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 44, 2 (2013): 226–49; Mahani, '"I want to live"'; and Hannah West, 'Camp follower or counterinsurgent? Lady Templer and the forgotten wives', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 32, 7 (2021): 1138–62.