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## The Running Dog War: Malaya

While the British had suffered a humiliating defeat in Palestine, the conflict that was developing in Malaya was to later be seen as a model for the conduct of counterinsurgency operations. Indeed, for a while, the Malayan experience was put forward quite explicitly as an example to be emulated by the United States in Vietnam. One leading British counterinsurgency specialist, Sir Robert Thompson, who served in Malaya throughout the Emergency, eventually becoming Secretary for Defence in Kuala Lumpur, argued that 'the countermeasures developed and proved in Malaya ... would have succeeded in the early stages in Vietnam if they had been suitably adapted and consistently and intelligently employed.'<sup>1</sup> Thompson was to head the British Advisory Mission to Vietnam from September 1961 to March 1965 and later became a special adviser to President Richard Nixon.<sup>2</sup>

Others have broadly accepted this view of the Malayan conflict; among them, for example, US Army Colonel J.J. McCuen who, in his influential *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary Warfare*, argued that Malaya 'was a major counter-revolutionary victory ... the British have made important contributions to the art of counter-revolutionary warfare'.<sup>3</sup> How valid is this view?

What will be argued here is that the vaunted British 'model' provides only half the answer to the Communist defeat in Malaya and that the other half is provided by the enormous political difficulties that the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) faced. Despite these difficulties and the overwhelmingly superior forces that the British were eventually able to concentrate against them, the Communists were nevertheless able to sustain their insurgency for ten years, a remarkable tribute to their courage, endurance and dedication. The conflict must not be seen in isolation, however, as if it were some sort of counterinsurgency

laboratory experiment. Instead it has to be placed in the context of British Imperial history in the postwar period. This will better enable us to assess the importance of what Winston Churchill described as Britain's 'small but costly preoccupation in Malaya'.<sup>4</sup>

## Occupation and resistance

From its very inception, Communism had been associated with the Chinese community in Malaya, having virtually no influence whatever among the overwhelmingly peasant population of native Malays. To begin with Communism had developed in Malaya as a left-wing faction within the Kuomintang and had achieved some limited success in the organisation of trade unions. In 1930 the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) was itself formally established as a distinct organisation and after some setbacks began to make headway, taking advantage of a strike wave that swept over much of the colony in the mid-1930s. According to one historian:

the MCP moved in on the growing wave of labour unrest in Malaya. Its influence grew by leaps and bounds, culminating in the strike at the Batu Arang coal mine in Selangor at the end of 1937. Workers under Communist leadership took possession of the mines and set up a Soviet Government. They were put down after an armed clash with the police, but the strike wave continued.<sup>5</sup>

The situation was viewed with considerable, if somewhat exaggerated, alarm by the authorities. One senior police officer reported that in his opinion Malaya had just

passed through the most serious crisis of its history. It was within an ace of dissolving into temporary chaos as a result of communist intrigue. The evidence is now clear that Batu Arang was to be a trial of strength between the Communist Party and the Government. Had the organisation there not been crushed and crushed quickly it is almost certain that there would not only have been a general strike, but that this country with its European women and children living in scattered bungalows or estates would have been in very serious danger of being overrun by angry and desperate Chinese mobs.<sup>6</sup>

It was to this revolutionary conspiracy that the British were forced to