

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

Successful British Counterinsurgency Operations in Malaya 1948-1960

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At the conclusion of World War II, the world saw a new struggle emerge between communism and those opposed to it. It spread across much of Asia and into the British colonial territory of Malaya. The victory achieved by the British over the communist insurgents in Malaya still stands today as an exemplary model of effective counterinsurgency techniques. From 1948 to 1960, the British defeated communist insurgents in Malaya in order to prevent the spread of communism and maintain control over the civilian population. The British accomplished through effective application of the five fundamental conditions necessary for successful counterinsurgency operations.

Background

Prior to World War II, Great Britain had maintained colonial control over the Malay Peninsula since the signing of treaties of protection with local Malay rulers in 1874. Several of the Malay states were aggregated in 1896 to form the Federated Malay States, commonly referred to as Malaya. Strategically, the British were interested in Malaya because it was one of the world's largest raw material producing territories, supplying one-third of the world's rubber and tin. Later, Malaya would become strategic as a battleground to keep communism from spreading west towards the Indian Ocean. The British maintained dominion over Malaya until World War II, during which time the Japanese seized and occupied Malaya.

In 1948, Malaya's geography made it ideal for a guerrilla insurgency. Approximately the size of Alabama, some 80 percent of the country was covered in dense jungle, largely impenetrable except by animal tracks or through man-made paths. Mobility was further limited by a 6,000-foot mountain range running north to south down the center of the country.

Evolution of the Malaya Communist Party

In 1945, the British regained control of Malaya from the Japanese; however, during the course of the war, a new threat to British colonial rule had arisen. That new threat was the Malaya Communist Party (MCP), which had gained legitimacy fighting a guerilla war against the Japanese occupiers. Within 10 days of the Japanese attack, the British colonial government accepted an offer of assistance from the MCP. The MCP

proceeded to form the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), which received training and logistical support from the British throughout the war. Although the MPAJA showed few military successes against the Japanese, by the end of the war they possessed a cadre of experienced guerilla fighters as well as stockpiles of hoarded supplies that the British had supplied to them during the Japanese occupation. Perhaps their greatest asset, however, were the strong ties the MCP had established with the rural Chinese community, particularly the squatters on the jungle fringes. The number of Chinese squatters resorting to subsistence farming on the jungle fringes had risen dramatically during World War II due to fear of the Japanese, food shortages, and unemployment in the urban centers. By 1945, the total number of squatters was estimated at 400,000.

Having allied with the MCP during World War II, the British initially granted the MCP legal status in 1945. The MCP used this status to prepare its efforts to subvert the Malayan government. From 1945 through 1948, the MCP organized mass strikes, attacked several local planters, infiltrated the Trade Unions, and intimidated officials and laborers. Furthermore, the MCP established cells in each Malayan village and wherever possible conducted Communist indoctrination, cajoling participation by force where necessary.

By 1947, many of the Malay ethnic Chinese felt disenfranchised over perceived failure by the British to live up to promises to provide an easier path to full Malayan citizenship. Subsequently, the MCP accused the British of attempting to exclude them from power as the British organized the Federation of Malaya in 1947 in a plan for the future independence of the Malay states. The MCP used these perceived slights to call for immediate armed



revolt, and the open insurgency began with the killing of three British rubber planters on June 18, 1948. Within two days, the British had declared the “Emergency.”

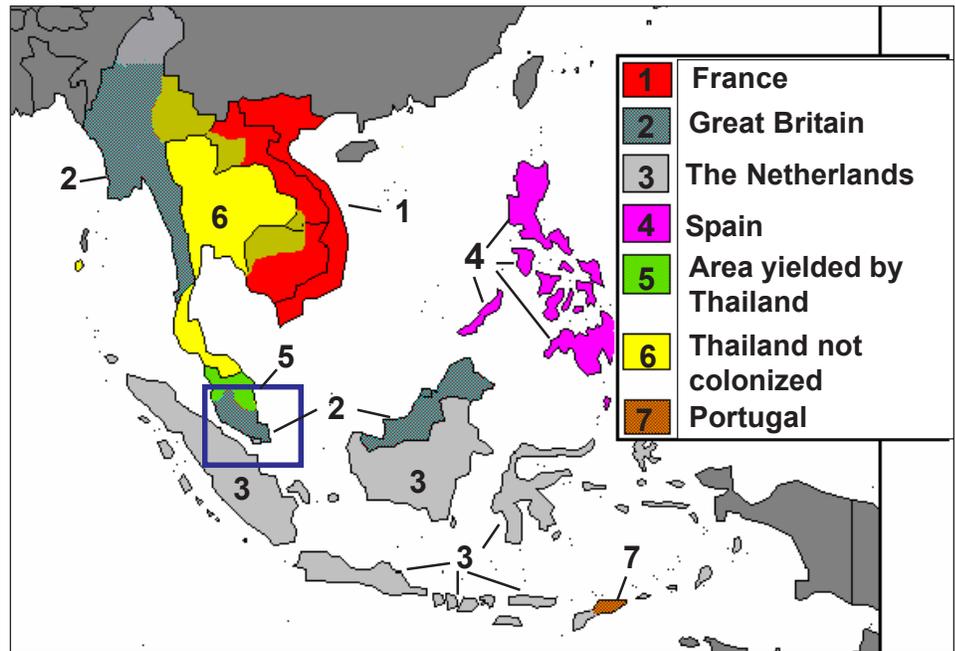
During this time, the armed wing of the MCP was called the Anti-British Army; however, in 1949, the MCP changed the name to the Malay Races Liberation Army (MRLA) in an attempt to conjure feelings of nationalistic sentiment amongst the population. The MCP and the MRLA were led and dominated by ethnic Chinese communists. Support for the MRLA came mostly from approximately 500,000 of the 3.12 million ethnic Chinese in Malay at the time. At the outset of the Emergency in 1948, ethnic Chinese constituted 39 percent of the Malay population, while the remainder of the population consisted of 49 percent Malays and 10 percent Indians and Ceylonese. Apart from the ethnic Chinese, the MCP found little enthusiasm for its goal of replacing the existing government with a communist regime.

MCP Organization and Tactics

At the operational level, the MCP organization consisted of an elaborate structure of committees and military units. The Central Committee was the head of the organization, and subsidiary units were divided geographically into the Regional Bureaus, State Committees, District Committees, and Branch Committees. The Branch Committees were responsible for controlling the Min Yuen, or “the Masses,” which had to be organized to supply the logistical needs of the insurgency. The Min Yuen consisted of local ethnic Chinese who voluntarily or involuntarily supplied the MRLA with food, money, intelligence, recruits, and couriers.

As the military arm of the MCP, the MRLA had a strength of 6,000 to 8,000 personnel. This force was divided into regimental size units of 200 to 400 personnel, and in the early stages of the insurgency, the MRLA generally operated in detachments of 100 to 200 men. This size force was sufficiently large enough to strike and overwhelm isolated police outposts and other outlying static defenses. Additionally, the MRLA also almost always had the element of surprise on its side.

On the tactical level, the MRLA initially had great success against government forces and against the infrastructure of the country. The MRLA engaged in a full-scale



European Colonialism in Southeast Asia

guerilla insurgency against the British and Malayan authorities, killing a total of 400 civilians in the first year, and torturing many others. Using hideouts in the inaccessible jungle, the MRLA conducted ambushes, sabotaged infrastructure, attacked rubber farms, extorted civilians for money and supplies, and destroyed transportation in a deliberate terror campaign designed to cause the populace to lose faith in the government. The MRLA’s terror activities did not extend into the urban centers with their Malay majorities, but the rubber plantations, tin mines, smaller villages, and railway stations quickly became the focal point of the conflict.

1948-1950

During the first two years of the Emergency, there was no integrated counterinsurgency strategy, although the police and armed forces were rapidly enlarged. The British brought in an infantry battalion from Hong Kong and an additional brigade from Great Britain. Additionally, a series of regulations came into effect that would prove effective counterinsurgency tools as the conflict progressed. One such regulation was the right of the government to detain or deport without trial anyone suspected of aiding the communists. Other regulations made it punishable by death to be found in possession of weapons or supplies intended

for the MRLA guerrillas. Additionally, one regulation required that the entire population over the age of 12 register with the local police, who issued identity cards with photographs. Nevertheless, the British officers from World War II facing this new enemy were unfamiliar with the type of warfare in which they were now involved. For instance, they had not seen an enemy that would target “soft targets” or withdraw in the face of fire to jungle retreats.

Into 1949, neither side of the conflict had made great strides against the other. The MCP was somewhat discouraged that the Malayan populace did not embrace its message of revolution, and escalated government military patrols were increasingly placing the MRLA on the defensive. On the British side, although the communists had been prevented from seizing and retaining any population centers for any significant amount of time, British and Malayan forces were unable to effectively protect the local population from infiltration, intimidation, and control by the MCP. There was no one person in charge of handling the Emergency as a whole, and thus police, military, and civil efforts were disjointed and uncoordinated instead of being joined under a single effective policy. Command and control overlapping police and military geographic areas was severely lacking, with no clear division of responsibility. The British had also learned the frustrating lesson of the futility of

running search and destroy operations in an effort to overcome a lack of actionable intelligence from local sources.

Advent of the Briggs Plan

With the introduction into the conflict of retired army officer Lieutenant General Harold Briggs in March 1949, the tide was about to turn in favor of the British. By June 1950, Briggs had developed a counterinsurgency plan that would become known as the Briggs Plan. The fundamental theme of the Briggs Plan was to deny the MRLA access to their principal source of supplies and information, which was the civilian population. To accomplish this goal, Briggs placed new emphasis on the efforts of the police and reinforced the enforcement and intelligence capabilities of the police force particularly in the populated areas. Eventually, the police force was augmented to 75,000 personnel, up from the approximately 10,000 police in Malaya at the outset of the Emergency. On the military side, the Briggs Plan called for troops to establish secure bases in the villages. From these bases, the military was to conduct patrols within a radius of approximately five hours travel. This caused the dispersion and deterrence of the MRLA, which was further exacerbated by the military's simultaneous efforts to conduct deep-jungle patrols and air raids which further harassed the retreating insurgents, destroyed their camps, and captured or destroyed their food caches.

A further prong of the Briggs Plan was a policy of "food denial." Although increased police efforts in the villages denied the MRLA many of its previous logistical support assets, it proved impossible to prevent the MRLA from obtaining supplies from the squatters at the jungle's edge. Often the squatters were forced or intimidated by the MRLA into providing supplies, information, and recruits. Because of their geographic dispersion, it was logistically not feasible for the British and Malay authorities to provide security to those on the outer fringes. To address this problem, Briggs developed a resettlement plan for the squatters.

Under the Briggs Plan resettlement initiative, approximately 400,000 squatters on the jungle fringes were forcibly resettled into approximately 500 villages. This measure not only provided security for the squatters, but, because of the foresight and tact with which the operation was conducted, it earned the government the loyalty of many squatters who had up to that point been unsure of which side would win the conflict. The government gave each squatter family actual ownership of its own parcel of productive farmland in addition to five months worth of provisions to get started. On each parcel of land, the government built a hut frame and left the supplies to finish the walls for each squatter family to finish constructing themselves, thereby giving the squatters an immediate sense of ownership. To provide security along the perimeter of the villages, government forces installed wire obstacles, and each village saw the introduction of a police presence. Additionally, the government established potable water supplies, schools, shops, medical clinics, and eventually electricity. Through efforts such as these, the British earned the support of the squatter population and managed to severely reduce the MRLA's ability to use the squatters as logistical assets. This further isolated the insurgents and provided the populace with a degree of security that was unavailable until then.

Another essential element to the Briggs Plan was the notion that the civil and military authorities must proceed hand in hand.

Toward this end, Briggs instituted a system of committees, which included the local civil authorities and the local military and police commanders. These committees were set up at three levels. In order of descending geographic breadth, they were the State War Executive Committee (SWEC) at the state level, the Circle Executive War Council (CWEC) at the circle level, and the District War Executive Council (DWEC) at the district level. The local brigade commander would represent the army at the SWEC, and the battalion commander and company commander would represent the army at the CWEC and DWEC levels, respectively. Elected civilian authorities presided over these meetings, and representatives from the planting community were also invited to attend. At these meetings, decisions were made on how best to win the struggle with the communists both on a military level and in the hearts and minds of the populace. Routinely, these meetings addressed such items as food control, resettlement, curfew restrictions, labor troubles, coordination of police and military actions, and other issues. The civilian leaders of the SWECs and DWECs also had the power to prevent security forces from carrying out a proposed mission if the cost in the goodwill of the local populace would outweigh the planned military victory.

The Briggs Plan showed early successes as insurgent activity diminished into late 1950. However, the MCP regrouped and changed their tactics, which led to a rise in insurgent activity to a high point of 606 incidents during June 1951. The insurgents, it was determined, now were infiltrating the workforces on the estates and among the remaining squatters and still were successfully extorting food and supplies. To counter this development, Briggs further augmented his food denial program by conducting Operation Starvation. This plan was aimed at cutting off the insurgents from all food and medical supplies. All areas from which food or supplies could be had were labeled "controlled areas," and the taking of food and supplies from these areas was strictly regulated and enforced. Shopkeepers were required to keep detailed records of sales receipts, and rice rations were delivered already cooked, so that it remained edible for only two to three days after delivery. Additionally, Briggs developed the Home Guard as part of Operation Starvation, which enrolled the local populace to aid police patrolling in the effort to defeat the insurgents logistics and free up the police force.

Despite the continuing effectiveness of the Briggs Plan, the MRLA scored a major psychological victory in October 1951, when it managed to assassinate the acting British High Commissioner, Sir Henry Gurney. Furthermore, in November 1951, Briggs left Malaya at the end of his appointment. These events proved a pyrrhic victory for the MCP because they brought a new sense of urgency to the British counterinsurgency efforts. They also brought to Malaya General Sir Gerald Templer in January of 1952, who would energetically implement and improve upon the Briggs Plan.

The Time of Templer

Templer's effectiveness at implementing the Briggs Plan and improving upon it would prove to mark the beginning of the end for the MCP insurgency. As one of his first moves, Templer made an official promise of Malayan independence upon elimination of the communist threat. This eliminated a platform of communist nationalist propaganda, and no longer could the MCP effectively recruit based on an anti-colonial stance. Templer also emphasized

that the conduct of the counterinsurgency and the conduct of normal civil government affairs were completely interrelated and would be handled as one problem under a single, unified chain of command. Templer streamlined and integrated the command and control structure of the police, military, and civil aspects of the government. Additionally, Templer emphasized that the entire Malayan population must play its part in fighting the communists.

Templer took several steps to further increase the security of the Malayan population. He provided new impetus for the until-then struggling Home Guard forces by providing one in three of them with weapons and enlarging their ranks to 200,000 by 1954. An all volunteer force, Home Guard citizens reported to the local police stations where they were issued shotguns for the duration of their assigned patrols. As individuals became thoroughly screened, they were trusted to have shotguns in their homes for immediate action against infiltrators and for defense of the village perimeter. Templer mandated that, as an entire Home Guard unit proved itself trustworthy, they would become responsible for the security of the entire village, thereby relieving the police forces for further action. Although considered risky at the time, the gambit paid off when the Home Guard proved a critical link between the populace and the security forces, especially as attachments on military patrols. This link provided much useful information that allowed security forces to effectively focus their efforts based on the intelligence provided instead of spending hours patrolling through the jungle in search of insurgents. This derivation of local intelligence would prove a great force multiplier because it was estimated that non-intelligence based patrolling required 1,800 man-hours of jungle patrols for each contact to be had. The Home Guard isolated the MRLA insurgents both physically and psychologically in the villages and rubber plantations and made a concerted effort to stamp out extortion and intimidation. By 1954, 150 new squatter villages had become responsible for their own security.

In addition to the Home Guard, Templer also began to build up a national Malay army with a vision toward eventual Malaya independence. Templer also maintained the pressure on the food supply of the

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MRLA, the effectiveness of which was attested to by captured MRLA soldiers. Police intelligence had also by this time infiltrated agents and informants into the Min Yuen, and many communist smugglers were captured as a result. Additionally, British and Malayan security forces were at the highest levels of strength yet seen. There were 40,000 British troops in the theater, along with 40,000 police forces. Through the constant harassment and pursuit of insurgents with whom contact had been made, the morale of the MCP was quickly plummeting. Further, the lenient treatment and offer of employment and financial reward to insurgents wishing to switch sides proved a valuable source of intelligence. Overall, the increased security for the populace and the emphasis on local efforts produced an improvement in the flow of intelligence and information to the security forces.

By March 1952, Templer, however, was not yet satisfied with the results and took several additional measures at the local level to ensure cooperation with the government as opposed to with the communists. For instance, Templer saw to it that security forces enforced strict 22-hour curfews on villages suspected of aiding insurgents until the populace provided the desired intelligence. To protect informers, security forces provided a system where every citizen was required to fill out an anonymous, confidential information card. Due to the security it provided the informant, this technique proved very effective. Additionally, the security forces under Templer conducted extensive psychological operations against the insurgents, including the dropping of leaflets encouraging surrender, the distribution of some 93 million anti-communist pamphlets, and broadcasts relating the relative comfort of captivity and working for the government as opposed to hacking out an existence in the jungle.

Templer took several steps to encourage and facilitate participation in the local government at the grass roots level as well. Although village committees were elected under the Briggs Plan, they had no financial authority and served only in an advisory role. Templer granted these village committees statutory authority and made them responsible for collecting rates and license fees. The village committees also were given the responsibility to oversee the use of public funds for such local improvements as schools, medical facilities, and community halls. To further facilitate involvement in local governance, Templer instituted the Civics Course, which brought citizens together for one full week's worth of training on democratic governance. By 1954, the government hosted 130 such courses. Additionally, in late 1953, Templer introduced the policy of labeling districts that had proven themselves to be actively opposed to the communist insurgents "white areas." By achieving this sought after award, a district acquired freedom from most of the irksome restrictions imposed by the Briggs Plan on the remainder of the country, such as curfews, limited shopping hours, food control, and prying patrols. To the first district vested with this honor, Templer made clear that it was now up to the local population to "keep the Communists out and see that they never come back."

The results of Templer's tenure were clearly positive. There was a decrease in the number of incidents from 6,100 in 1951, to 4,700 in 1952, to only 1,100 in 1953. Further, through constant police and military patrolling, in addition to the other measures taken, the insurgents were now on the defensive. The monthly total of police losses fell from 100 per month in 1951 to 20 per month by the middle of 1952, never to rise above that figure again. Similarly, the number of civilian deaths at insurgent hands fell from 90 per month in 1951 to 15 per month in 1952, also never to rise above that figure again.

After Templer left Malaya in 1954, his policies and those of Briggs were continually enforced with success against the insurgents. Although it took until 1960 for the Malayan government to officially declare the Emergency ended, victory over the communist insurgents was clear when Malaya gained its independence in 1957 and saw a new government form without a

single seat going to a communist or communist supporter.

Analysis of Application of Counterinsurgency Doctrine

The British counterinsurgency against the MCP was effective because it successfully established the five conditions of an effective counterinsurgency campaign. Under current United States Army doctrine, the five fundamental conditions necessary for successful counterinsurgency operations are as follows:

- 1) A secure populace,
- 2) Established local political institutions,
- 3) Contributing local government,
- 4) Neutralizing insurgent capabilities, and
- 5) Information flow from local sources.

Each of these five conditions contains some degree of nuance. Under the first condition, a secure populace means security from the influence of insurgents initially, moving to a situation where the host nation population is mobilized, armed, and trained to protect itself. Effective security allows local political and administrative institutions to operate freely and local commerce to flourish.

Under the second prong, establishing local political institutions includes establishing conditions favorable for the development of host nation governmental institutions, including law enforcement, public information, health care, schools, and public works.

Under the third condition, contributing local government is both tangible and psychological, and local security forces must reinforce and be integrated into the plan. This local integration must be constantly emphasized with the local and host nation police, civil, and military leadership, as well as with the populace at large. Psychologically, in order to mitigate the impact of insurgent propaganda, the populace must constantly be reassured that conditions are improving. Counterinsurgency operations must establish conditions that contribute to host nation and local government effectiveness.

To neutralize insurgent capabilities under the fourth prong, counterinsurgent efforts must work to exploit insurgent grievances and work with local authorities and leaders to resolve issues of local

concern thereby legitimizing governmental institutions.

Under the fifth prong, to foster information flow from local sources, counterinsurgent efforts must facilitate and use intelligence obtained from local sources to gain access to the insurgent's economic and social base of support, order of battle, tactics, techniques, and procedures.

The British effectively secured the populace during the Emergency. The resettlement of the squatters under the Briggs plan proved to be an effective security measure. Though it displaced some 400,000 persons from the life they then knew, the resettlement eventually provided security to the squatters by placing them in defensible villages with a security perimeter. Furthermore, the improved living conditions and new property ownership the squatters enjoyed made it so the former squatters now had something more to defend. Briggs and Templer both rightly emphasized the efforts of the Home Guard, which progressively formed into a viable, trained, and armed local security force. This not only bolstered local village security but security on an operational level as well due to the fact that security forces, until then posted on static guard duties, were freed to conduct other offensive

operations against the insurgents. Finally, Templer's implementation of the "white areas" proved to be the final successful push of security from a nationally led effort down to a locally led effort. The Briggs Plan and Templer's additions to it enabled Malayan locales to achieve free operation of commerce and of local political and administrative institutions.

During the Emergency, the British effectively established local political institutions. One of the first prongs of the Briggs Plan was to establish locally elected councils, and later, Templer further bolstered this local government tool by adding to each council's legal authorities. These actions gave the local populace a stake in their own future, particularly when Templer gave the local councils authority to oversee the implementation of public funds for community improvements such as schools, electricity, running water, and health care facilities. Further, the introduction of the "white areas" by Templer accelerated the country towards victory over the insurgents. In effect, the British had set up a clear reward system to encourage local governments to proactively assume the fight against the insurgents. The effectiveness of this plan was clear when those areas that won the "white area"



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During the Malayan Emergency in 1956, members of Britain's 25th Regiment Royal Artillery engage suspected bandit positions from their firebase.



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During the Malayan Emergency in 1956, gunners with Britain's 25th Regiment Royal Artillery tend to their 25 pounder gun/howitzer on their base camp in Malaya.

label took pride not only in their newfound freedoms, but also in their new "status." Thus, the British established conditions favorable for local host nation government institutions.

The British effectively fostered a contributing local government. The SWECs and DWECs Briggs organized provided the mechanism for integration of the elected civilian leadership, the military and police forces called for by United States Army doctrine. The British also fostered local government contributions by empowering the elected civilian leadership to oversee and approve any military or police actions in their jurisdictions. This real grant of power gave the local governing authorities the necessary sense of ownership in their own destiny necessary to ensure their energetic, proactive contributions to their own welfare and security. Additionally, Briggs and Templer effectively emphasized the need for local government to work hard for the populace in the continuing effort to win hearts and minds. The British did well to realize that the Malayan populace was looking not only at military successes, but also at whether the government they currently lived under was better than what was being offered by the communists. This emphasis on local government service was effective in producing tangible results, in the form of improved living standards, and psychological results, in the form of loyalties won in the struggle for the hearts and minds of the populace.

The British effectively neutralized insurgent capabilities. The efforts by Briggs and Templer to eliminate the sources of food, recruits, and supplies for the insurgents proved effective. By forming the new squatter villages, creating accountability for retailers of food and medical supplies, and controlling the population's rice rationing, the British effectively began to starve the MRLA troops. Combined with increased military, police, and Home Guard patrolling, made all the more effective through the use of intelligence from locals, the MRLA was forced deeper and deeper into the jungle and away from the populace. This allowed British psychological operations to exploit insurgent grievances through offers of food and comfortable living conditions advertised in pamphlets and fliers. Those insurgents who surrendered were treated well and then employed to work

against their former comrades, which dealt a further blow to the MRLA and MCP. Thus, the British effectively neutralized insurgent capabilities on all fronts simultaneously.

The British effectively fostered information flow from local sources. As the British learned prior to implementation of the Briggs Plan, it took many hundreds, even thousands, of long hours of tedious jungle patrolling to produce the fruit of just one reliable intelligence tip from informed local sources. To their credit, the British through Briggs and Templer, realized that in order to obtain intelligence from the local populace, the populace had to feel secure from retribution from the violent and indiscriminating insurgents. The British did well then to substantially augment the military and police forces in order to convince the populace that they intended to win the struggle with the communists.

These forces also helped to provide the security necessary for the free flow of intelligence to the government. However, it was the Home Guard that provided the most effective conduit to information flow from local sources. The Home Guard brought with it the double-advantage of increasing security and fostering intelligence flows, both from the Home Guard citizens themselves and from the local populace they secured. This movement gained momentum throughout application of the Briggs Plan, culminating in the advent of Templer's "white areas." Thus, the insurgent's economic and social bases of support were effectively eviscerated when information from local sources eliminated their ability to covertly operate amongst the populace.

Conclusion

The British victory over the communists in Malaya has become a textbook example of effective counterinsurgent techniques due to the effective application by the British of the five fundamentals of a counterinsurgency. Detractors from the British efforts may point out that Malaya did not share a border with a hostile communist nation and that the insurgents thus were not as well supported as those in other world conflicts. Additionally, even though the British defeated the communist insurgents in Malaya, the process took over a decade at an enormous cost in lives, manpower, and funds. However, the talent of men like Briggs and Templer cannot be overstated. They derived and applied novel techniques and methods of battling an elusive and adaptive enemy. As a testament to the efficacy of the British techniques, the methods for conducting a counterinsurgency developed by the British in Malaya still serve today as the basis for modern military counterinsurgent doctrine.

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