

## Fascinating details

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### **MALAYA'S SECRET POLICE 1945-60**

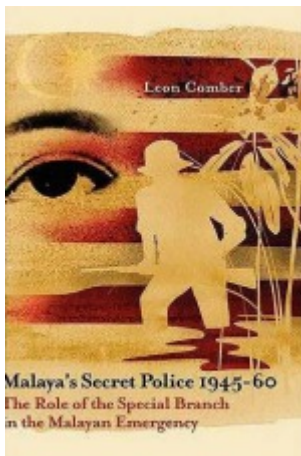
#### **The Role of the Special Branch in the Malayan Emergency**

By **Leon Comber**

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This year marks the 60th anniversary of the start of the Malayan Emergency. The term Emergency refers to the 12-year-long armed struggle – to all intents and purposes a war – over the power to shape the political destiny of post-World War II Malaya and Singapore.

The protagonists were Malaya and Singapore's British colonial Governments and the armed guerrilla units of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). It was, as the late Richard Clutterbuck noted, a *Long, Long War*, lasting from June 1948 to July 1960.

(Clutterbuck was a British army officer and counter-insurgency and anti-terrorism expert who published, in 1966, *The Long, Long War: Counterinsurgency in Malaya and Vietnam*.)

The historical record shows that the CPM had lost in both Malaya and Singapore by the end of the 1950s. Leon Comber's new book sheds important light on one of the reasons why the CPM failed in Malaya's jungles. *Malaya's Secret Police* is a much-needed and long overdue analysis of the role the legendary Malayan Police Special Branch played in the ultimate demise of the CPM in Malaya. What is interesting is that the author himself served as a Chinese-speaking Special Branch officer during the Emergency.

While the role of intelligence in general and the Special Branch in particular had always been regarded in previous analyses of the Emergency as critical factors in explaining the CPM's ultimate demise, no previous study has provided such a level of detail and analysis of the subject.

Comber reminds the reader that the Special Branch's eventual success was by no means fore-ordained. When the British Military Administration (BMA) was set up in Malaya following the Japanese surrender in September 1945, a Malayan Security Service was organised to provide the BMA with intelligence on subversive activities on both sides of the Causeway.

The Security Service, however, was hobbled from the start by a serious lack of Chinese language expertise, and was unable to provide adequate early warning of the steadily increasing threat of CPM subversion of the unions, and its tendency to resort to violent intimidation to push its agenda.

Hence when the Emergency was declared in June 1948 following a serious upsurge in CPM terrorism, within two months the Security Service was disbanded and replaced by two Special Branches that would provide intelligence coverage of Malaya and Singapore. Both Special Branches were initially subsumed within their respective Criminal Investigation Departments (CID).

Comber goes on to outline in meaty and informative detail the evolution of the Malayan Special Branch over the course of the jungle war in the peninsula. He shows how colonial authorities in Kuala Lumpur, urged on by a succession of anxious high-level official visitors from London, began to re-organise and rationalise the Special Branch structure to ensure that its officers were posted to both state and district levels.

By the early 1950s, these officers had begun to develop a network of agents and informers that, together with information from captured and surrendered CPM guerrillas, enabled the Special Branch to gradually build up a detailed and invaluable picture of the CPM's key personalities and order of battle.

Comber makes explicit the fact that the thorny issue of Chinese language expertise within Special Branch was something not easily solved, although progress was slowly made. The author is careful to argue that while the Special Branch was gradually professionalising itself within, internal reforms would have come to naught had they not been accompanied by similar improvements in the wider Governmental counterinsurgency strategy and structural processes.

To this end he correctly reiterates the pivotal importance of General Harold Briggs, the first Director of Emergency Operations, in outlining the famous Briggs Plan. The plan called essentially for isolating the CPM guerrillas from the "sea" of rural Chinese community support through, among other things, resettlement of ungoverned rural Chinese settlements along the jungle fringe into defended resettlement areas, and food denial operations to starve the guerrillas into submission.

Comber then gives due recognition to the role of General Gerald Templer, Briggs' successor as Director of Operations and concurrently High Commissioner in Malaya, in making the Briggs Plan work efficiently. Thanks to these two officials, the political and operational environment began to swing decisively against the CPM by the middle of the 1950s.

By that time, the Special Branch was separated institutionally from the CID, and operated as an elite unit on its own (as "E" Department of the Malayan Police).

Comber stresses that the Special Branch could not have "come of age" without its "unshackling" from the CID, and that Templer maintained the focus on professionalism, training, and the axiom that Asian officers, not their British counterparts, needed to be at the sharp end of the intelligence stick.

Also of interest are Comber's sections on the origins and operations of Government propaganda and psychological warfare, and its close relationship with intelligence.

Comber ends his book with two informative case studies of the Malayan Special Branch in action. The first examines how it cooperated with its Singapore counterpart to nab the notorious senior CPM leader, Lee Meng, while the second shows how it worked with the Thais on the Malayan-Thai border, for years a CPM sanctuary, and especially so in the late 1950s.

*Malaya's Secret Police*, without a doubt, plugs a key gap in the historiography of the Malayan Emergency. It tells a story packed with fascinating operational detail as well as interesting accounts of the key personalities throughout the 1950s who helped shaped the Special Branch from rather inauspicious beginnings, into what was eventually regarded as a top-notch intelligence service in Asia.

This book offers much meat to chew on for students of Malayan, Singaporean and South-East Asian history – and even intelligence and security practitioners engaged in the modern war against a newer species of terrorism.