

**REVISITING 1948 INSURGENCIES AND THE COLD WAR IN
SOUTHEAST ASIA**

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In 1948 left-winged insurgencies broke out in Malaya, Burma, Indonesia and the Philippines. These insurgencies continued to leave their imprint on the region today. The papers in this volume discuss the significance of these insurgencies in the course of Southeast Asian history, with particular reference to the Cold War in the region. These papers are part of a larger collection that were presented at a *Roundtable on the Sixtieth Anniversary of 1948: Reassessing the Origins of the Cold War in Southeast Asia*, organised by the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 10–11 July 2008. The central concern of the Roundtable was to discuss the significance of 1948 in Southeast Asian history and to determine “in what way 1948 was – or perhaps was not – ‘the beginning of the Cold War’ in Southeast Asia.” Were the seemingly simultaneous left-winged insurgencies that broke out in the region in 1948 Soviet-directed as part of the Cold war in Asia or did the insurgencies emerged from local circumstances affecting the strategies of the struggles of these left-wings movements in the respective counties concerned? How important were the insurgencies in affecting the course of Southeast Asian history? Did 1948 constitute a watershed in Southeast Asian history? The papers in this volume address these issues among many others.

Were the left-winged insurgencies which broke out in Malaya, Burma, Indonesia and the Philippines in 1948 directed by the Soviet Union as part of the Cold War in Asia? Known as the “Soviet Conspiracy Theory”, the starting point for this postulation is Andrei Zhdanov’s speech at the inaugural of the COMINFORM in September 1947 which argued that the world had been divided into two opposing camps: the Western capitalist countries led by the United States on the one hand, and the communist bloc led by the Soviet Union on the other. Zhdanov advocated that foreign communist parties should be in vanguard of

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spreading communism throughout the world. This line was repeated by E.M. Zhukov in an article published in the December issue of *Bol'shevik*, which advocated propagation of revolutions to the colonial areas. According to proponents of this Soviet Conspiracy Theory, it was at the Communist Youth Conference at Calcutta, convened 19–24 February 1948 that the Soviets passed on the “instructions” to representatives of Southeast Asian communist parties to seize the opportunity of the unstable conditions prevailing in Southeast Asia to rise against their colonial rulers. In March, left-winged insurgency broke out in Burma, followed by British Malaya in June, and Indonesia in September.

Consistent with the thesis of monolithic communism, the conventional orthodox interpretation of these uprisings has it that they were Soviet-directed as part of the Cold War in Asia. Soviet interest in Southeast Asia had been notably absent before the Pacific War but by 1947 there were discernable evidence of Soviet’s growing interest in the region. In 1947, the Soviet Union opened an embassy in Bangkok and this was shortly followed by the Communist Youth Conference at Calcutta in February 1948, and the subsequent the outbreak of the Southeast Asian insurgencies later that year. According to this school of thought, that these left-winged Southeast Asian insurgencies broke out almost simultaneously indeed suggest actions in response to instruction from Moscow. Predictably, both the United States and Great Britain immediately assumed that these insurgencies were Soviet-directed and formulated their responses accordingly.¹

¹ For the American perspectives and reactions, see among others NSC 51, “A Report to the National Security Council by the Secretary of State on US Policy toward Southeast Asia.” 1 July 1949. Military Branch, National Archives, Washington DC. The British official view was initially inclined to accept the Soviet Conspiracy Theory but after 1951 they changed their views and played down the suggestion of external influence in the outbreak of the Malayan insurgency. See R.B. Smith, “China and Southeast Asia: The Revolutionary Perspective, 1951,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, XIX, No. 1, (March 1988), 98.

In a study published ten years after the initial outbreak of the Southeast Asian insurgencies, Ruth T. McVey² called into question whether these insurgencies were Soviet-directed, if indeed the Soviet Union had issued any such “instruction.” According to McVey, the Calcutta Conference did provide encouragement for indigenous Southeast Asian left-winged parties to take up arms, but it was local conditions affecting the struggles of the left-wing elements in the respective Southeast Asian states that determined the outbreak of these insurgencies. That these insurgencies broke out almost simultaneously were coincidental. Most of the more recent scholarly accounts on these Southeast Asian insurgencies endorsed the McVey thesis. Has declassification of new documentary sources revised the conventional interpretations of the outbreak of the insurgencies?

In the first paper, C.C. Chin reexamines the outbreak of the Malayan Communist Party in Malaya (MCP) in 1948. On the basis of various MCP contemporary documents and oral history accounts of several important senior MCP cadres at that time, Chin suggests that the MCP had their own plans for revolts rather than in response external forces. Chin argues that while the Zhdanov doctrine did influence the MCP, it is most unlikely that the MCP would simply act in accordance with Soviet instructions. The MCP was greatly under the influence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and followed the CCP tactics in its political struggle. The CCP taught that each individual party had to observe closely its own situation and decide its own course of action. According to Chin, the outbreak of the Malayan Communist insurgency in June 1948 was essentially in reaction to repressive measures by the British in Malaya. In the effort to corner and stave off the MCP from the various fronts of open and constitutional struggle, the British escalated their repression by means of arrests, banishment and implementing a new Society Ordinance aimed at eliminating and controlling trade unions and other left-wing organizations. These measures were aimed at driving the MCP toward a more radical reaction. Chin suggests that

² Ruth T. McVey, *The Calcutta Conferences and the Southeast Asian Uprisings*. (Ithaca, NY: Department of Far Eastern Studies, Cornell University, 1958).

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these intensified hostile repressions were in fact a well-planned tactic by the British to provoke the MCP to resort to armed struggle.

In response to the growing repression by the British, the MCP came to see armed revolt as the inevitable solution. At the Enlarged Central Committee Meeting held in March 1946, the MCP issued a statement declaring that the people's war was now inevitable. But it was to be the local MCP units that initiated the provocation which triggered the outbreak of war. Instead of full-scale armed revolts, the MCP military units engaged in acts of intimidation against British planters. The British capitalized on the opportunity to immediately carry out a major offensive against the MCP, implementing well-planned mass arrests and declaring the Emergency. Chin suggests that the British had in fact cultivated the situation and had been expecting an armed revolt. The MCP, on the other hand, had over-estimated their own strength vis-s-vis the British.

In the second paper, Leon Comber provides the perspective of the Malayan Police Special Branch on the outbreak of the Malayan Communist Party insurgency. Comber had served as a Special Branch officer in the Malayan Police during the Malayan Emergency, 1948–1960. When the Malayan insurgency broke out in June 1948, he was then a junior Special Branch officer heading the Chinese section of the Federal Special Branch and had participated in the discussions in Kuala Lumpur in early 1949 concerning the origins of the MCP uprising against the government of British Malaya in June 1948. Some five decades after the initial outbreak of the MCP insurrection, Comber interviewed Chin Peng, Secretary-General of the outlawed MCP, at the “Chin Peng Workshop” held at the Australian National University, Canberra, in February 1999.

According to Comber, the Malayan Special Branch was initially inclined to downplay the MCP uprising unless it found evidence that the MCP was receiving external assistance; and in this connection, the Special Branch found that the MCP was in contact with the Chinese Communist Party rather than the Soviets. Indeed, Soviet influence was negligible in Malaya and although the Soviets gave verbal support to the Malayan uprising, trade came before revolution. Soon after the end of the Pacific War, the Soviet Union became interested in developing trade with Malaya, especially in purchasing rubber to build up their stocks that had

been depleted during the Second World War. As such there seem to be little purpose in the Soviet Union fostering revolutions for Malaya.

Instead of an external involvement in the MCP's decision to take up arms in June 1948 the Malaysian Special Branch, according to Comber, had expected that Chin Peng, who was personally in favour of an armed revolt against the British colonial government, would implement his own policy after he became Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Malaya in April 1947. The Special Branch also surmised that the MCP, thwarted in its attempt to infiltrate the trade union movements and bring about a Democratic People's Republic of Malaya by peaceful means, decided to resort to rebellion in an effort to overthrow the government. As such, the Calcutta Conference played no relevance whatsoever in the outbreak of the Malayan insurgency. Indeed, as Comber intimated of his interview with Chin Peng in Canberra in February 1999, the Secretary-General of the MCP did not receive an invitation to attend the Calcutta Conference. That was rather strange if it was indeed the intention of the Soviet to issue instruction to the Southeast Asian communist parties to take up arms against their respective colonial masters. Pointing to findings of researchers working on Soviet archives, Comber seems well-pleased that Soviet archives corroborates the view of the Malayan Police Special Branch taken in 1949, long before the Soviet archives became accessible to researchers.

In the next paper, Ang Cheng Guan examines the situation in Vietnam in 1948. By the time of the Calcutta Conference in February 1948, the French and the communist-led Vietminh had already been at war since 1946, a war that would eventuate in the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and the consequent French withdrawal from Vietnam in 1955. Unlike the MCP, the Vietminh was invited to the Calcutta Conference where the Vietnamese delegation was in fact given the honour of delivering the keynote message. Given that the Vietminh were then engaged in a war against the French, it was not surprising that the Vietnamese report focused on their military experiences in their war of liberation.

Ang Cheng Guan notes that although the military focus of the Vietnamese message seemed to fit well with the general tenor of the conference, the Vietnamese position in fact ran contrary to the general

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consensus at Calcutta. The conference had reiterated Zhdanov's interpretation of the Two Camp Doctrine and had called for a united front of all revolutionaries to launch armed struggle against the colonialist forces. However, this had been rejected by the Vietnamese. Indeed, upon returning from the conference the Vietnamese expressed irritation at the attempts to impose the international line on them. Instead, they steadfastly maintained that the struggle for national liberation and democracy takes on a different character according to the actual condition prevailing in each country. This, Cheng Guan emphasized, did not mean that the Vietnamese leadership did not subscribe to the two camp thesis. Indeed, the Indochinese Communist Party had anticipated the two camps as early as the Eight Plenum in May 1941. To be sure some quarters within the Vietminh leadership were inclined to support the full implications of Zhdanov's Two Camp Doctrine but the general consensus was inclined toward the belief that the bourgeoisie could still be harnessed against the anti-imperialist movement as part of their national liberation front led by the communist. Chen Guan suggests that the Vietnamese struggle shifted from nationalist/anti-colonial sentiment to include communist/anti-capitalist sentiment as well after the United States, China and the Soviet Union became mired in the Vietnamese struggle for independence. Cheng Guan suggested the point of the shift to be between late 1949 and early 1950.

Katharine McGregor's paper is a reassessment of the significance of the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) revolt in Madiun in 1948 to the Cold War in Indonesia. In the first part of her paper, McGregor provides a review of the scholarly literature of the Madiun affair, highlighting the continuing debate about the roles of the internal and external players and interpretation of this period in Indonesian history. The paper also provided an overview of the on-going significance of the Madiun uprising to the image of the Indonesian Communist Party and to continuing hostility toward the party.

McGregor argues that while 1948 was not a significant turning point, it was an important "flash point" in the domestic Cold War for Indonesia. Indeed, Madiun became a key reference point in the competition between the PKI and Masyumi in the 1950s. For the PKI, Madiun was odious as well as a significant scar and for many the party had been vigilant in guarding against any provocation. As McGregor explains, the

suspicious and antagonism between the PKI on the hand and the anti-communist groups on the other had never gone far beyond the surface after 1948. Indeed that amber flared up again during the violence of 1965–1966 when anti-communist factions in alliance with the Indonesian military slaughtered hundreds of thousand people who were suspected to be communist or else sympathetic to the communist. It was during this violence that communism was ultimately banished from Indonesia.

Still on the Indonesian experience, Richard Mason discusses the impact of Parti Komunis Indonesia (PKI)-Front Demokrasi Rakyat (FDR) uprising in 1948³ on the United States' policy toward the Dutch-Indonesian war which had raged since December 1946. American policy maker at that time believed that the PKI-FDR uprising, like the risings in Burma, Malaya and the Philippines were Soviet-directed and had reacted accordingly. Their belief was manifested in the consequent shifts in their policies toward the region. Before 1948, for instance, American policy towards Southeast Asia was almost exclusively dictated by the imperatives of the policies towards Europe. All other considerations, including the objectives of US diplomacy in newly emerged areas, were subordinated to this European policy. But as Indonesian left-winged parties began to organize themselves into a front opposed to further negotiation with the Dutch and the scepter of communism began to loom, Washington began to appreciate that if communism in Indonesia was to be eliminated, the demands of Indonesian nationalism would have to be satisfied.

The outbreak of the PKI-FDR uprising in 1948 certainly underscored the belief that that Indonesian nationalism had to be settled in a just and practical way as precondition to fight communism. But as Mason emphatically argued, important as the as the insurgencies were in marking a turning point in the Cold war thinking of the United States toward Indonesia, it was still subordinated to the importance of European considerations. It was the threats to Americas European

³ The PKI-FDR revolt is otherwise known as the Madiun uprising as referred to by Katharine McGregor in her essay in this volume.

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policies posed by Dutch policies in Indonesia that ultimately led the US to threaten sanction against the Netherland in 1949. It was this threat that caused to Dutch to resume negotiation with the Indonesians on the terms of the independence of Indonesia.

The last paper, by Abdul Rahman Hj Ismail, is an interim report of an on-going research on the reactions of the Malays in Malaya to the coming of the Cold War to the region. As Abdul Rahman emphasised, 1948 was indeed a momentous year in course of Malayan history. It marked the official formation of the federation of Malaya in February, annulling the immensely unpopular Malayan Union experiment amongst the Malays. 1948 also marked the declaration of the Emergency, which lasted until 1960, three years after the Federation of Malaya obtained independence from Britain.

According to Abdul Rahman, the vast majority of Malays in Malaya were not interested in, if indeed they had been aware of the on-going Cold War between the Western bloc led by the United States on the side the Eastern bloc led by the Soviet Union on the other. The preoccupations of the Malays during the immediate post-Pacific War period was nationalism and the concomitant effort to gain independence for Malaya from Britain. In particular, they had been rather anxious that the Malays, who were the native of the land, were not robbed of the custodianship over Malaya and political privileges of the Malays in independent Malaya. Consumed with these issues, the Malays had little interests in external affairs.

For the majority of the Malays, the Cold War was most popularly associated with the Emergency, which British authorities had declared in the effort to quell the armed uprising mounted by the MCP. Except for a few isolated cases, Malays in Malaya were generally not attracted to communism which they perceived as foreign, and particularly Chinese. As such, and particularly at a time when the Malays were jealously guarding custodianship over their homeland, communism certainly had no appeal amongst the Malays. It perhaps largely because of the lack of Malay support that the cause of the MCP in Malaya was foredoomed.

Independently, each of the essays in this volume tend to lean towards the McVey thesis which had argued that the seemingly spontaneous left-winged revolt that broke out in Burma, Malaya and Indonesia in 1948

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had arisen from local circumstances rather than any instructions from the Kremlin. To be sure, Zhdanov's two-camps did probably provide some encouragement to the local communist movements but it was the local conditions prevalent in the respective Southeast states that had triggered off the insurrections. The conclusion offered in these essays are suggestive of course, pending alternative interpretations that might be borne out by further research in the relevant archives.

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Guest Editor