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## **RE-EXAMINING THE 1948 REVOLT OF THE MALAYAN COMMUNIST PARTY IN MALAYA**

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*This paper brings forward the idea of MCP's plan for the revolt by examining various MCP documents at that time and oral history records of several important senior MCP cadres in order to determine its rationale. The MCP original document, especially those resolutions passed during the Central Committee Meetings suggest that the MCP did have a plan for revolt. An analytical approach of the MCP documents will help to determine whether the action taken by the MCP was simply an inevitable action against British repression rather than an act that took place because of external forces. Within the MCP, there were also arguments and debates regarding the revolt. Was the revolt necessary and were constitutional means completely exhausted? Could lack of alertness and adventurism be blamed for the ill-prepared revolt? The paper also examines if the Cold War setting in Asia was intentional on the part of the British. By examining British and Australian archival sources and CIA reports, we can determine to what extent the British in collaboration with the Australians and Americans, acted intentionally to extend the Cold War to Asia and create a confrontational situation in order to contain Southeast Asian Communism. In short, were the imperialists responsible for the armed revolts in Southeast Asia?*

Keywords: 1948 Revolt, MCP Document, United Front Strategy, Malayan Communist Party, Malayan Emergency, Cold War, Southeast Asia

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## INTRODUCTION

There are different schools of thought<sup>1</sup> as to whether the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) revolt in 1948 was engaged in upon advice from Moscow obtained through the Calcutta Conference in February 1948, whether it was simply the local situation whereby the British engaged in severe repression of the MCP labour movement and other actions that had triggered the revolt, or whether the MCP had been planning for a revolt?

This paper, on the basis of various MCP contemporary documents and the oral history accounts of several important senior MCP cadres at that time, suggests that the MCP had their own plans for revolt. The original MCP documents, especially those resolutions passed during the Central Committee meetings of the crucial period, does suggest that the MCP did have a plan for revolt. By analysing the MCP documents, we can see why the MCP took the actions it did. The armed revolt was an inevitable action in response to British repression in accordance with essentially local conditions rather than in response to external forces. However, it is obvious that the Zhdanov doctrine issued at the inauguration of the Communist Information Bureau (COMINFORM) in late 1947 did influence the MCP. The victorious of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the Chinese civil war also encouraged the MCP to a certain extent. There is no doubt, however, that the MCP over-estimated its own strength vis-à-vis the British, on the basis of their experiences during the guerrilla warfare against the Japanese during the Second World War.

Within the MCP itself, there were also arguments and debates as to whether revolt was necessary and whether the constitutional avenue had been completely exhausted. There were also accusations that they were ill-prepared for a revolt due to lack of vigilance and errors of “Left adventurism”. The argument reflects the MCP critical review of their democratic endeavour during the Peace period.

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<sup>1</sup> See Phillip Deery, *Malaya, 1948: Britain's 'Asian Cold War'*, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9:1 (Winter 2007), 29–54. Doi:10.1162/jcws.2007.9.1.29. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2007.9.1.29>

### *Re-Examining the 1948 Revolt of the MCP*

The MCP revolt in Malaya cannot be looked at in isolation as the entire Southeast Asia region was in turmoil at that time. How the regional revolutions affect the MCP especially when the MCP had looked upon its own disbandment of the Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) was indeed an act of right deviationist capitulationism. This right capitulationist political line was condemned few months later after the abscondence of Loi Teck. There was also question that whether Chin Peng a radical leader who, after being elected as the Secretary-General in May 1947, forced the MCP to take the route of armed revolt?

It is also important to examine British, CIA and Australian report to determine if the Cold War situation in Southeast Asia was created intentionally by the British. By examining the British records and other newly-released archival materials, we can examine whether the British in collaboration with the Australians and Americans, acted intentionally to extend the Cold War to Asia and create a confrontational situation in order to contain Southeast Asian Communism. Were the imperialists responsible for the armed revolts in Southeast Asia? This is a question for others to examine. This paper will rather concentrate on the role of the MCP itself.

### **HOW DID THE EMERGENCY START IN MALAYA?**

How did the emergency start in Malaya? Why did the MCP begin its armed revolt in June 1948? Who initiated the armed conflict? Was it the British colonial regime or the MCP which fired the first shot? Did the Calcutta International Youth Conference convened in February 1948 allow the transmission of instructions from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) which instigated the communist uprisings in Southeast Asia? Was the Malayan case different from the rest? Was the revolt a product of the MCP's own initiatives in response to the British repression of the MCP, its trade unions and its united front activities?

The so-called orthodoxy was that the MCP acted in response to the CPSU instructions issued at the Calcutta conference and for a long period of time this was the official propaganda of the British imperialists and their local agents in Malaya. It was in fact the dominant western Cold War interpretative orthodoxy that the communist parties in

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Southeast Asia were instigated by a CPSU directive to extend the Cold War to Asia. This was based mainly on the “Two-camp” theory put forward in Zhdanov’s famous speech made during the inauguration of COMINFORM in September 1947.

This interpretation was widely accepted, especially by various government administrations. A different school of thought was put forward by some academics suggesting that the Calcutta Conference played an insignificant role in the revolts which occurred in Southeast Asia, and particularly in respect of the MCP uprising in June 1948. This school considered that the local social and political situations were much more significant.

## **THE INTERNATIONAL FACTORS**

There is no doubt that MCP activities were part of the world communist movement coordinated in Asia by the Far East Bureau of the Communist International (COMINTERN) based in Shanghai. In the early stage, the MCP looked toward the guidance of the CCP and the CPSU, particularly in reference to the style and method of the CCP struggle in China. In examining the MCP documents, it is very clear that the Zhdanov speech did influence the MCP in its doctrine.<sup>2</sup>

The characteristics of the MCP were determined by the fact that it evolved from the CCP’s Nanyang Branch.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the MCP was greatly under the influence of the CCP and followed the CCP tactics in its

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<sup>2</sup> C. C. Chin collection of MCP documents: *The Current Situation and the Party’s Political Line*, MCP Statement passed during the fourth Central Plenum, 17–21 March 1948, 2.

<sup>3</sup> There were numerous CCP members dispatched to (and some were actually exiled to) Singapore and Kuala Lumpur in the 1920s. They were active in the local workers movement. The Nanyang Provisional Committee was formed in 1927 to regulate and enhance the workers movement as well as the Communist activities. The committee was under the supervision of the CCP corresponding organisation in Guangdong but had guidance and support from the COMINTERN based in Shanghai. The Nanyang Provisional Committee was subsequently transformed into the Malayan Communist Party in 1930, representing the COMINTERN, Ho Chi Minh presided over the inauguration of the Party.

political struggle. It is most unlikely that the MCP would simply act in accordance with CPSU instructions, as the MCP followed Mao's teaching that each individual party had to observe closely its own situation and decide its own course of action.

### **CONFRONTATIONAL SITUATION AND THE MCP OWN INITIATIVE**

In view of the intensified British repression of the MCP, its trade unions and united front activities during the period of peace prior to the 1948 revolt, the MCP feared that the British would eventually ban the party and terminate the constitutional avenues means of the MCP.

The radical faction of the Party suggested the resumption of armed struggle.<sup>4</sup> Chin Peng was in Hong Kong during June 1947 and in contact with the CCP Southern Bureau. There were discussions as to whether the MCP should engage in armed struggle. The answer later received from Zhou Enlai was that the MCP should make the decision based upon the local conditions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It was known to the members that the MCP Deputy Secretary Yeoung Kuo initiated the motion that the MCP should embark on armed revolt in view of the growing British repression. He was supported by Chin Peng, Xiao Zhang and Li An Dong, and others.

<sup>5</sup> According to a memoir written by a Central Committee member at that time, Ah Shan, after Chin Peng was elected as the MCP Secretary General, he travelled to Bangkok and Hong Kong to re-establish fraternal party relationships with the Siamese Communist Party (SCP) and the CCP. In Bangkok, he informed the SCP Secretary General Li Qi Xin that the former Secretary General Loi Teck had absconded with the Party's funds. He also advised this to the CCP Southern Bureau. Deputy Chief Lian Guan. He consulted and discussed with Lian Guan the rationale for armed revolt and Lian Guan passed on the request to the Southern Bureau Chief Fang Fang. The response surprisingly came directly from Zhou Enlai at a later date through the mail, advising the MCP that it must observe the Malayan conditions at the time and decide the appropriate action on its own. See also C. C. Chin & Karl Hack (eds.): *Dialogue with Chin Peng –New Light*

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The British, on the basis of international intelligence reports and analysis no doubt believed that the Russians were moving the Cold War toward Asia by provoking armed insurgencies in Southeast Asia. Therefore they prepared through large-scale repression.

The MCP thereby found no hope in its constitutional endeavors, when appeared doomed by British repression. They instead came to see armed revolt as the inevitable solution.<sup>6</sup>

Conflict was inevitable by 1948. Any serious provocation such as the Sungei Siput incident,<sup>7</sup> could have triggered off the war and both sides were prepared for conflict. As such it is immaterial who fired the first shot, as rivalry and potential military contention was already well entrenched.

One key omission of most studies is the lack of MCP documents evidence. This is perhaps due to the inaccessibility of the MCP documents and language barriers.

#### **DID THE MCP HAVE A PLAN FOR ARMED REVOLT?**

Right after the Japanese surrender, in the name of the MCP Central Committee, Loi Teck instructed the MPAJA to surrender their weaponry and hand them over to the British for marginal compensation of USD 300 each person. However, almost all of the MCP State Secretaries

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*on the Malayan Communist Party*, Singapore University Press, Singapore 2002, 133–134.

<sup>6</sup> C. C. Chin collection of MCP documents: *The Current Situation and the Party's Political Line*, the MCP Statement passed during the fourth Central Plenum, 17–21 March 1948, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> According to Zhang Zuo (张佐), then the Fifth squadron commander of the MPAJA Fifth Regiment (later renamed as the MNLA Fifth Regiment), the Sungei Siput Incident was in fact an action carried out by the local Min-Yuen unit, newly formed after the MCP order (April 1948) to prepare for an armed revolt planned for September 1948. The Min-Yuen unit dug out hidden arms and was aiming to generate funds by mean of intimidation of the British planters, but somehow radical members went too far and killed the planter.

and the rank and file were unwilling to comply with the order. Loi Teck finally agreed to a compromise of surrendering half of the less-efficient weaponry to be seen as preparation for an armed revolt should there be such a necessity. This can be considered as an element of an indefinite MCP plan for an armed revolt against the British. Loi Teck asked the MCP State Secretaries to submit to him the maps of the weaponry dumps but this request was refused by them.

In view of the increased suppression by the British imperialists, in early April 1948 the MCP convened a Politburo Meeting in Saleng, Johor. This was a follow up to the MCP Enlarged Central Committee Meeting held in March 1948 when a statement was issued declaring that the people's war was inevitable.<sup>8</sup> The Politburo meeting was intended to discuss in detail the action plan for the revolt. Subsequently, an order requiring the digging up of the weaponry kept secret following the Japanese surrender was issued and the ex-MPAJA rank and file was to be summoned in preparation of the uprising planned for September 1948. The formation of the MPABA<sup>9</sup> was then formalised; certain units in Johor and Perak organised Min-Yuan operations and began collecting subscriptions and making food storage arrangements. However, no official order was issued requiring provocation.

While the MCP Politburo meeting initiated the action plan for the revolt, the British were also, on the basis of reports received, preparing for a major offensive. But it was to be the local MCP units that took the initiative in provocation. The actions were not those of armed revolt but were simply an act of intimidation against the British planters. Nevertheless, the British took the incidents seriously and capitalised on the opportunity to immediately carry out a major offensive against the

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<sup>8</sup> *The Current Situation and the Party's Political Line*, the MCP Statement passed during the fourth plenum of the MCP Central Committee, 17–21 March 1948, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Malayan People's Anti-British Army.

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MCP, initiating well-planned mass arrests and declaring an Emergency.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, the British had cultivated the situation and had been expecting an armed revolt. Since late 1947, the success of the AMCJA-PUTRA Hartal<sup>11</sup> believed to be organised and backed by the MCP, had induced tremendous concern amongst the colonial officers. The British responded with a two-pronged strategy: they stamped over the democracy that they always claimed for but instead ignoring the Malayan people's demand for a rightful independence and denying the proposed People's Constitution, and secondly, against the Malayan People's will installed the Federation Constitution that was negotiated with the feudalistic sultans and their representative party UMNO.

In order to corner and cut off the MCP from the various fronts of open and constitutional struggle, the British had 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 cultural societies and organisations. These measures were aimed at driving the MCP toward a more radical reaction. In retrospect, the author sees the intensified hostile repression was, in fact, a well-

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<sup>10</sup> More than a thousand of left-winged Malays and a thousand-plus Chinese activists were systematically arrested within the three-day period. The extreme success of the arrests suggests the degree of planning, intended to coincide with the declaration of the Emergency.

<sup>11</sup> The Hartal was organised by the AMCJA-PUTRA with the backing of the MCP and took place in 20 October 1947, it was a great success, the entire economic activities from Penang to Johor Bahru was at a standstill. This was meant to demonstrate the people's support to the "People's Constitution" proposed by the AMCJA-PUTRA. However, the British gave no concession to the action and went ahead to implement the "Constitution of Federation of Malaya". See also Geoff Wade, *The Origins and Evolution of Ethnocracy in Malaysia*, Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series No. 112, 11–12; and C. C. Chin & Karl Hack (eds.): *Dialogue with Chin Peng – New Light on the Malayan Communist Party*, Singapore University Press, Singapore 2002, 118–119.

planned tactic by the British to provoke the MCP to resort to armed struggle.

Did the MCP have a plan for the revolt? The answer is yes. In response to the growing repression by the British, the MCP had analysed the situation as reflected in its documents during this period. Listed below are the MCP documents issued between December 1947 and February 1948 that relate to the objective and plan of an armed revolt. In some texts, the theme is relatively subdued and carefully worded in such a way that the constitutional struggle might still be seen as the key element. These documents reflected the critical review process taking place within the Party, specifically condemning the Loi Teck political line and reassessing the political situation and the Party's leadership in the overall political movement of the time.

1. December 1947: MCP Central Committee's Conclusions on the Preliminary Discussions of the Basic Issues in the Malayan Revolution

This lengthy paper addressed these issues in several chapters: Chapter one examined the nature of Malayan society and analysed the political, economic, class, culture, education and religious conditions; Chapter two examined the issues of nationality in Malaya; chapter three looked at the object of the Malayan revolution; chapter four focused on the task of the Malayan revolution; chapter five was on the impetus of the Malayan revolution; and chapter six examined the character of Malayan revolution.

The object or target of the Malayan revolution was decisively defined as the British Imperialists, while the character of the revolution was declared to be neo-democratic and the objective was to establish a Democratic Republic of Malaya.

However, this paper did not define the method of revolution. It differed from any previous MCP articles or statements in that it mentioned nothing at all about any constitutional struggle.

This important document was tabled and passed at the Second meeting of the MCP Ninth Plenum in December 1947.

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2. December 1947: The Current Policies of the Malayan Communist Party

This was another lengthy paper which was a follow-up of the analytical paper mentioned above. In chapter one, it analysed the subjective and objective situation of the Malayan revolution, the international revolutionary environment and the internal balance of forces; in chapter two and three, it focused on the party's current political line and criticised the Democratic Program for being ambiguous; in chapter four and five, it emphasised the importance of the national united front and detailed the means and methods to be employed in the national united front; in chapter six, it stressed the current strategy of struggle.

The paper was also tabled and passed during the second meeting of the Ninth Plenum.

The new assessment of the situation and scrutiny of the Party political line led on to the condemnation of the Party's "Right deviationist capitulationism". March 1948 was a turning point for the Party. The tone changed drastically after the MCP Central Committee meeting in March 1948 and the Statement issued on 21 March 1948 clearly announced that a people's war was unavoidable and a clear signal was issued through the statement. The documents issued subsequent to it were the public announcement published in the MCP organ: "Voice of the People", under the title of "Understand the Situation, Master the Orientation" and other documents as listed below.

1. 17–21 March 1948: The Current Situation and the Party's Political Line

In conformity with Zhdanov's "two-camp" theory and based upon an analysis of the colonial current confrontation in Malaya, this re-emphasised the Party's leading role in Malayan revolution against British rule; criticised the party's former capitulationist political line. It clearly stated that the disbanding of the MPAJA was a mistake and emphasised the importance of the people's armed forces. It also declared the inevitability of armed struggle (people's revolutionary war).

This statement was tabled and passed during the Fourth Meeting of the Ninth Plenum.

2. 20 April 1948: Understand the Situation, Master the Orientation

Following the MCP Politburo meeting in Saleng, Johor in early April, this public statement was published in the MCP official organ “Voice of the People” (民声报) under the pseudonym of Zheng Jie (郑杰, euphonic with “zhengzhi ju” 政治局, the Politburo) announcing the party’s new political line and hinting at the imminence of armed struggle.

3. 9 May 1948: Determine to Lead the Workers Forward

This was an editorial first published in the “Workers News” (工人报) issued by the MCP Trade Union Department on 7 April 1948 and later openly published in the “Voice of the People” on 9 May 1948.

This editorial reviewed the past workers movement tactics and mistakes and aimed to stir up sentiment and encourage the struggle by staging more aggressive strikes based upon the theme set by the directives above issued in March 1948.

4. May 1948: MCP Central Committee Decision on the Consolidation of the Party

In preparing for armed revolt, this measure followed up the April MCP Statement on the Loi Teck Incident which condemned his capitulationist political line.

An purge took place from late April expelling certain key party members such as the MCP Singapore Open Representative Zhang Ming-jin, Central Committee member Luo Xu-Mo, Ah Shan and seven other top cadres plus numerous others in the rank-and-file.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> C.C. Chin & Karl Hack (eds.): *Dialogue with Chin Peng—New Light on the Malayan Communist Party*, Singapore University Press, Singapore 2002, 133.

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This resolution was tabled and passed at the Fifth Meeting of the MCP Ninth Plenum in May 1948.

5. 26 May 1948: Go all out to Mobilize the Peasants in Struggle

This was an MCP statement published in the “Voice of the People” aimed at mobilising the peasants to joining in the armed revolt, following the statement issued for urging the workers to step up their strikes as stated above.

### **CLOSE EXAMINATION OF THE MCP’S MARCH 1948 STATEMENT**

Let us examine more closely this vital MCP document – the March 1948 Statement. In its analytical statement of the current political situation at the time, the MCP had indicated a more drastic picture internally and externally.

#### **Condemning the British Labour Party and its Policies**

In terms of external factors, the MCP stated that at that time the most urgent, the most serious and the key conflict was “the conflict between the democratic and the anti-democratic camps” in accordance with Zhdanov’s “Two-camp Principle.” The key conflict was seen as being between the two camps represented on the one side by the American-British imperialists and on the other by the forces united by Soviet anti-imperialism. Therefore, the most important task was to defeat the reactionary policies of the American-British imperialists.

The statement concluded that the policies of repression pursued by the imperialists against national democratic liberation movements in the colonies had the following characteristics:

1. Military intervention by means of armed repression was aimed at destroying the newly-established republics or the people’s liberation movements.
2. They aimed to establish either so-called “independent states” that in nature were not really independent or to implement so-called “federal political systems” (with reference to the

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Constitution of the Federation of Malaya), aimed at breaking up the solidarity of the people in the colony or serving to divert the mode and divide the forces engaged in struggle.

3. They implemented the “divide-and-rule” policy to further create inter-racial conflicts in order to control the colony.
4. They nurtured and supported the feudal class and bourgeoisie in forming puppet governments so as to divert the people’s struggle for real independence.

The MCP saw the newly-elected British Labour Party Atlee Administration as having betrayed the working class. They depicted it as “the ruling machine” and the faithful “running dog of the bourgeoisie”. As such, they saw it as no different from the Conservative Party, with the policy being implemented in Malaya being in fact the usual imperialist exploitation and repression. The British Labour Party was branded as an imperialist agent under the cover of socialism and urged the people not to be misled by its so-called reform policy. Placing any hope in the British Parliament was condemned as wrong. The implementation of the “Federation of Malaya Constitution” in opposition to the “People’s Constitution” was seen as having completely exposed the determination of the Labour Party to carry out its imperialist policy.

#### **Scrutiny of and Review of the Party’s Political Line**

The statement assigned much space to reviewing the party’s post-war political line, and the MCP concluded that this was essentially a line of right capitulationism. It was also classified as right opportunism whereby the Party had abandoned its stand as a proletarian party. That the party had abandoned its political agenda for national independence was seen as the biggest single mistake committed by the Party.

The MCP concluded that the line had been developed during the anti-Japanese period, and condemned specifically the “Nine-Point Anti-Japanese Programme” and the “Eight Propositions” and pinpointed the following obvious errors:

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1. The Nine-point Anti-Japanese Programme was lacking a national independence economic agenda, such as the confiscation of imperialist assets.
2. The party conducted only guerrilla warfare and limited themselves to only organising the anti-Japanese masses without establishing local political power.
3. The party was wrong in terms of military policy, as the troops were only stationed in the jungle and aimed to fight a bloodless war.

In the political line, the Statement claimed that the Party had lost its class stand, and was blurred in its class viewpoint vision in the following respects:

1. It had totally underestimated the nature of the British imperialist reactionaries.
2. It had over-estimated the effects of peaceful legal and constitutional struggle, and had pursued this solely, mechanically separating the peaceful struggle from the violent struggle.
3. It had confusingly considered the merchants and the common civilians or general public as the masses, and ignored the lower class of workers and peasants.

The statement claimed that the line was a vestige of Loi Teck, and condemned it as a “running dog” line. It considered that it was wrongful for the MCP Central Committee to continue adopting it after the absconding of Loi Teck. The MCP Central Committee was seen as lacking clear vision and understanding of proletarian leadership.

The statement indicated that the Party had overly emphasised the weakness and incompetence of the Party and the people, and did not realise that there was no “elementary democracy” and therefore, there was no such thing as “national self-rule” or national autonomy.

The MCP listed the facts and mistakes of the right deviationist capitulationism as:

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1. By disbanding the MPAJA and abandoning the armed struggle, it had therefore disarmed the Party. This had great implication for all work and hampered the passion of the masses for struggle.
2. The Party engaged in a series of political retreats and submissions to British repression. This restricted the means of struggle to only peaceful protests, labour strike and other soft form instead of encouraging the hard line struggle or resorting to more aggressive forms of struggle.
3. The Party dared not mobilise the masses to develop the struggle, and worse still restricted or even suppressed the masses in their struggle. The statement considered that this was in fact a reflection that the MCP had abandoned its leadership of the masses and had only concentrated on uniting the upper classes in the united front struggle. Thereby, through cooperation with the upper classes in a form of capitulation, the Party had neglected the lower classes, and had neglected the struggles of the workers and peasants.
4. After forming the united front organisation, the Party was not seen actively involved or exerted influence when and where necessary. The Party had adopted a “behind-the-scenes” policy and failed to lead the masses in open struggle, but instead had handed over the leadership and followed behind the petty bourgeois party.<sup>13</sup> This was due to a fear of destroying the united front but thereby they abandoned the Party’s stand and agenda.

The statement further stressed that after observing the current situation and reviewing the Party’s line, a new line therefore had be established in replacement of the line of capitulationism.

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<sup>13</sup> The Malayan Democratic Union (MDU) was a party created by the Left and the MCP. Its Headquarter and the branches initially comprised MCP members. In fear of the British branding the MDU as the front organisation of the MCP, MCP members were withdrawn from the MDU in early 1946.

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The new line was to be based upon leadership by the proletariat and the foundation comprised a worker-peasant alliance, and through wide and broad organisation, uniting and mobilising the masses and developing them into a concerted strength of the revolutionary anti-imperialist united front in the struggle for independence and liberation. The resolution also required the discarding of the policy of working with wavering and traitorous minority upper class elements, and instead devotion to mobilising the general masses to real action in fighting against imperialist policies, so as to achieve true national liberation and independence. As such, the MCP firmly announced that armed revolution was unavoidable, and that the armed revolt was of great and specific significance.

The MCP defined the then current revolution as still a bourgeois democratic revolution but noted that it had to be led by the proletarian revolutionary masses. The policy comprised an anti-imperialist policy of national independence and it encompassed two principles:

1. All struggles must insist on leadership by the proletariat.
2. Every possible class and all the masses must be united for all struggles.

As to the form of struggle, the MCP stressed that against the British imperialists, the Party had to resist strongly, fight against the British policies, and adopt a two-prong strategy involving both peaceful constitutional or legal means as well as illegal and violent forms of struggle. The current task was defined as fighting for a national independence and liberation which would resolve the economic problem in Malaya.

In very clear terms, the statement concluded that, in order to achieve national independence, armed struggle or people's revolutionary war was unavoidable. It was seen as a process of revolution and as the highest form of struggle, and it was noted that the current situation underlined the significance and importance of such a method of struggle. It further defined the Party urgent tasks as:

1. To openly mobilise the masses, lead the masses without hesitation, and dispel the legal struggle concept from the mind

of the masses so as to continue the uncompromising anti-imperialist struggle.

2. To expose and criticise the right deviationist and capitulationist political line, eliminate right deviationist thinking and liquidate Loi Teck's pernicious influence, and to firmly establish a class stand and class viewpoint. It was also necessary to consolidate the party organisation so as to strengthen the leadership of the masses.

The MCP March 1948 statement was an internal Party document. However, following the Politburo meeting in April at Saleng, Johor, while calling the ex-MPAJA soldiers to order and digging up the hidden weapons, a public announcement was considered necessary. Therefore, the Politburo decided that the "Voice of the People" should carry an article with the title "Recognise the situation, master the orientation" under a pseudonym. This condemned British imperialist policies as well as the party's right deviationist capitulationist political line, called on the people to unite and hinted that the party in correcting the mistaken line would resort to armed revolution.

### **THE BRITISH DECLARATION OF AN EMERGENCY**

The British offensive commencing in June 1948 with the declaration of emergency in combination with mass arrests and the mobilising of forces was planned well in advance.

Though the MCP had planned to initiate the armed revolt in the month of September, the British offensive acted three months in advance and caught the MCP by surprise. This had created a chaotic situation for the MCP.

There is no documentary proof that the MCP had in hand any proper plan of mobilisation or a military structure and strategy for the revolt.

The MCP relied solely on the experience and practice of the MPAJA, and depended upon the local units to mobilise and organise the guerrilla units.

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The armed forces were originally named MPABA and the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) was only officially formed on 1 February 1949. The armed forces were so ill-prepared and this caused tremendous difficulties to every independent regiment. This situation gave rise to the “South Johor Incident” and the “Xiao-Liu Incident”.

From late 1948 till early 1949, the rank-and-file of the MNLA Fourth Regiment (South Johor) were frustrated with the ill-preparations made for the uprising, airing their grievances and criticising the commanding central committee member Ah Dian) who had brought his wife to work alongside him (MCP instructions were that husband and wife must be separated and be posted in different units) and refused to carry any weapons (for fear of being caught with arms and be executed under the Emergency Regulation). The complaint reached the Central Committee and Lam Swee who was the leading complainant was seriously condemned by the Central Committee for not only not been able to pacify the rank-and-file but for taking the lead in so-called demoralising the fighting spirit of the regiment. Lam Swee was demoted and Ah Dian was then transferred to Pahang. This event was named the “South Johor Incident” and a statement of condemnation was issued. The result was that Lam Swee defected and surrendered to the British and later worked as a Special Branch officer under C.C. Too. He issued his own account of events entitled “My Accusation” in response to the MCP denunciatory statement “The Lam Swee Incident” directed against him.

In late 1949, the Johor-Negeri Sembilan-Malacca Border Committee Secretary Xiao Liu @ Peng Yi Fu issued a pamphlet detailing his views of the Malayan Revolution suggesting that, upon the victory of the revolution, a fair distribution of rubber estates to the workers based on neo-democratic principle be effected so as to gain support from the masses for the revolution. He specifically mentioned the Malay workers in this respect. This pamphlet was condemned by the MCP Central Committee which noted that the rubber estates were classified as national assets. Xiao Liu was so demoralised that he proceeded to disband the Border MNLA units. Subsequently Xiao Liu was executed for violating MNLA military discipline and a statement of condemnation entitled “The Xiao Liu Incident” was issued by the MCP Central Committee.

## **THE MCP STRATEGY IN THE EARLY 1950S**

A review of the MCP's early strategy, especially during the period from June 1948 to October 1951, is rather important in terms of understanding the MCP's revolutionary course. A few observations can be made:

1. Though the MPABA or later the MNLA [earlier wrongly translated by the Special Branch as the "Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA)] was not well organised, it did gain an upper hand in its offensives against the British forces during this period. The British military casualties were very high, and it seemed at one stage that the British had lost confidence and they would be defeated.
2. There were MCP weaknesses in terms of preparation for the uprising and the proper strategy to be formulated for the offensive. The obvious ones were:
  - (a) Lack of an overall plan and strategy in terms of preparation for an uprising planned for September 1948.
  - (b) The Party did not make a thorough study of the Malayan physical (geographical) situation and had failed to understand the changes in the political and human environment as well as the social conditions after WWII. In particular, they failed to understand the ethnic and political divisions as well as the changes and improved weaponry of the British forces.
  - (c) There were various detrimental factors that led to the failure of the MCP's early armed struggle. These included the strategy, modes and methods of economic sabotage against British economic interests in Malaya, and the aggressive handling of the general masses in terms of soliciting support and contributions.
  - (d) Wrong decisions were made in terms of military strategies and tactics. Specifically, this included the "Small Long March" and the handling of diverse opinions on overall revolutionary strategy, of which, the "Small Long March"

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and “Xiao Liu Incident” mentioned above were of particular significance.

The British offensives, both in terms of military attacks and mass arrests, coupled with the banning of all MCP front organisations and Leftwing organisations, including the arrest of more than 1000 members of the Malay Left and the banning of their organisations had caught the MCP and the Left generally by surprise. The MCP Central Committee estimated that the British might begin the suppression sometime in September 1948. But why was it thought that the British offensive would be in September? On what scale would the oppression be? Neither Chin Peng nor other prominent Left leaders have been able to provide an answer to this question. It appears to have been merely guesswork. As such, they seemed too relaxed in preparation for the deadly blows which came their way.

The MCP had, following the Japanese surrender, buried half of their better weapons to save for possible future use. An order to dig up the weapons was issued in April 1948 but it seems that the recovery process was slow.

There were also no documentary records setting down the structure of the MPABA. The MCP based their actions mainly on the experiences and organisational methods of the MPAJA. Each state was given autonomy in getting organised following the MPAJA hierarchical structure, except that the State Secretary was to be appointed by the MCP Central Committee. It seems that there was no central coordinated effort to streamline the structure and the chain of command was loosely structured. Therefore, when the British struck, the MCP was caught off-guard and all units found themselves in a chaotic situation. In particular, as the key figures of the MCP Central Committee politburo were located in different places, no meeting could be convened to discuss how to tackle the British offensive or to issue a Central Committee order on how to counter the situation. Chin Peng himself was actually known to be in a tin mine near Ipoh trying to recover funds that had been put into a tin mine joint-venture and was almost caught by the British army during their siege of the mine.

It was not until 1 February 1949 that the MNLA was officially formed. The manifesto of the MNLA was in the form of a directive on military strategies, *Min-Yuan* (mass movement) operational guidelines and other

instructions. The directive was modeled after Mao Zedong's guerilla strategy and adopted to the Malayan revolutionary situation. Most significantly, it called upon all independent regiments to prepare to move northward to form military bases, one to be located at Tasik Bera in Pahang and the other at Pulai in Kelantan. The move was compulsory and each regiment was to select its best soldiers for the so-called "Small Long March". There were different opinions on this issue within the Central Committee and Politburo. Yeung Kuo, the Deputy Secretary General of the Party was of the opinion that the then current stage of MNLA military activity should still be in the form of small group guerrilla units operating at the jungle fringes. As a result, Yeung Kuo chose to stay back in Selangor operating around the Kajang-Semuyir area till the day he was killed. The commissar of the 12th Regiment and a member of the North Malayan Politburo also objected to the idea but was compelled to follow the resolution and brought those rank-and-file members chosen from the 1st Regiment, 5th regiment, 6th regiment and the 8th regiment – close to 1,000 fighters – across the central mountain range to Kelantan. The result was disastrous as the shortage of food, sickness and disease, the harassment by British armed forces, air strikes and many other obstacles posed severe threats to the MNLA on the move. Both the concentration in Tasik Bera and that in Pulai failed. By then, many had died and those who survived were badly shaken and demoralised. After eight months of arduous marching, the concentrations were broken up and the rank-and-file troops were told to go back to where they came from.

The Small Long March proved to be strategically wrong and the loss of steam was never able to be reversed. The subsequent directive issued as a supplement to the MNLA manifesto openly criticised the move and, in rectification, re-emphasised that *Min-Yuan* operation was key.

In October 1951, the MCP Politburo issued a directive commonly known as the "1 October Resolution". This important directive instructed all rank-and-file members throughout the regiments to cease all aggressive tactics and acts in handling the general masses and to be selective and focused in term of economic sabotage such as derailing of trains, burning public transports, destroying rubber trees and confiscation of identity cards, etc. This was a move aimed at regaining

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the hearts and minds of the masses. It noted that the sabotage involving the slashing of rubber trees either in plantations or of some so-called un-cooperative small holders and the confiscation of identity cards had in fact achieved nothing. Rather, it had caused difficulties for the masses, and therefore should be discontinued with immediate effect. Nevertheless, the directive was ineffective in restricting certain local units and the aggressive tactics and acts continued until 1955. Other important directives related to the rebuilding of the *Min-Yuan* units and the re-establishment of the underground organisations.

Despite the defective strategies and failure to establish the bases, the MNLA was well-structured and the general fighting spirit of the rank-and-file was high. From the beginning of the uprising, the British had to fight against a determined enemy aimed at destroying British colonial rule. For the first three years of the so-called Emergency period, the MNLA had effectively inflicted heavy casualties upon the British forces, to the extent that the British colonial government had been worried at the end of 1950 that they might lose the war completely. The MNLA Manifesto was not only effective in bolstering the morale of the rank-and-file fighters and gaining the support of the masses, but also in gaining international support in terms of the establishment of the MNLA, and thus psychologically undermining the British forces.

After two to three years in combating the MCP and MNLA, the British security forces had gradually gained experience in fighting a jungle war. Beginning in 1952, the MNLA somehow lost its momentum in its offensive against the British and the British forces in turn shifted from a defensive to an offensive position.

The British had introduced a number of measures during the period that were effective in their efforts in containing the MCP and MNLA activities. It began with the introduction of the Briggs Plan, which involved gathering all Chinese living at the jungle fringe – amounting to close to 600,000 persons – and forcefully moving them to concentration camps known as new villages at various pre-selected locations. The purpose was to cut the supply lines to the MCP and MNLA, a tactic to deny them food and other essential supplies. The appointment of General Templer as the Director of Operations had also seen the initiation of a central command strategy which avoided the conflicts seen earlier between different operations. General Templer, while being harsh and cruel in his suppression, had initiated the so-called New

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Village Constitutions, a political move aimed at gaining the hearts and minds of the people. The MCP and MNLAs began to suffer heavy casualties and failed tremendously in their recruitment campaigns. The manpower began to drop in great number with few new recruits to replace those who had been killed in the war or had died due to illness or starvation. The MCP and MNLAs had no other option but to retreat to the border and cross into the jungles of southern Thailand. Left in the Malayan Peninsula were a few pockets of MNLAs guerrilla units isolated in southern Perak, central Selangor and northern Johor. At the height of MNLAs power, there were more than 8000 guerrillas, but by the end of 1953, the entire troop force which crossed the border totaled no more than 600, while those who remained in Malayan territory were less than 400 in total.

At the height of the struggle in January 1952, the military statistics well illustrated the lopsided warfare between the British and the MCP. The military strength was of ridiculous disparity. Though there were erroneous strategies and actions resulting in severe and irredeemable losses and damages, the MCP fought a courageous war and survived. The British deployed a total of 450,000 men consisting of 40,000 soldiers, 67,000 police, 45,000 special constables and 300,000 home guards. In addition 25,000 air strikes were made, more than 100,000 rockets fired and 33,000 tons of bombs dropped against the MCP & MNLAs, a force of only 7,000-plus guerrillas at the time.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

It appears that, though documentary MCP proof of a detailed plan of armed revolt has yet to be found, the MCP March 1948 Statement was imbued with sufficient indications that this was the aim. In addition, the MCP revolt in June 1948 bears the following characteristics which can serve as the conclusions to this paper:

### **The Party's significant first anti-colonial shot**

As a representative of persons who lived under colonial rule, the MCP should be proud of its bravery in firing the first shot against the British imperialists. It was a bold and daring confrontation against hostile

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British repression and a determined action manifesting a just war against colonial rule – a revolution to fight for the independence of Malaya. It was the most significant shot fired in the history of the liberation of Malaya.

### **The Party's determination in fighting for the independence of Malaya**

The MCP members and the rank-and-file members of the MNLA were of high caliber in terms of political consciousness. There were high in spirits in terms of struggling for the building of a communist state in Malaya and in fighting to gain independence from the British imperialists. There are some who doubt the genuineness of the MCP in fighting for an independent Malaya as they consider that the MCP's aim was to build a Soviet republic in Malaya. This typical orthodoxy in political naivety reflects a one-sided political prejudice. Every political party has its ideology and the MCP rightfully pursued an end to colonial rule by means of an armed revolt. The determination and genuineness of the MCP to establish a democratic Malaya is to be highly recognised and respected.

### **The Party's unfortunate developments and the reformation of the Party's line**

The discovery of the betrayal and absconding of Loi Teck, the secretary-general of the Party in March 1947, astounded the MCP Central Committee. Subsequent actions taken in rectification of the situation allowed the Party to survive but the grievous financial conditions almost paralysed the Party. An investigation headed by Chin Peng and Yeung Kuo was carried out to establish the facts and assess the damage. Nonetheless, it is still an enigma as to why the absconding of Loi Teck was kept secret and the matter was not disclosed until April 1948 when a denunciatory statement entitled "The Loi Teck Incident" was issued to senior cadres by the MCP Central Committee. In May 1947, Chin Peng was elected Secretary-General in replacement of Loi Teck and Yeung Kuo was elected as his deputy.

The Party's constitution and the political line were strictly scrutinised and organisational tasks redefined by subsequent MCP Central Committee and Politburo meetings. The political line following the surrender of the Japanese was bitterly condemned as right deviationist

capitulationism. More aggressive agendas and programs were introduced. A new party constitution was issued and in April to May 1948, party reform and consolidation of the membership was carried out. As a result, some quite high-ranking cadres such as the Singapore MCP open representative Zhang Ming-Jin, Central Committee Members Luo Xu-Mou and Ah Shan as well as seven other important MCP figures including the Chairperson of the MCP Pan-Malayan Women Committee Jiang Li plus numerous others among the rank-and-file were expelled from the Party. This was known to have been preparation for the armed revolt in September 1948. These cadres were arrested during the Japanese occupation period or had been previously detained by the British. The expulsions were intended to prevent possible inside infiltration by British intelligence similar to the Loi Teck incident. There are also opinions that this internal purge was in fact, promoted by Chin Peng and while consolidating the Party structure he sought to strengthen his grip of the Party.

#### **The Party's inexperienced leadership and left-inclined policy**

The party leaders were all in their early twenties, young and inexperienced at this time. They were astounded by the betrayal by their supreme leader Loi Teck and were also greatly worried that there might still be infiltrated spies within the party. At the same time they began an examination of the Party's political line and policies. The inexperience was also reflected in their response to the escalating British repression as well as the preparations for the revolt as stated above.

#### **The Party relied solely on CCP experiences and doctrine**

As in the early day of the party, the MCP leadership looked upon the CCP as the guru for the revolution. In terms of sentiment as well as language and terminology, the MCP leaders were greatly dependent on the CCP. The revolutionary documentation and practices were to be supported by the CCP. In examining the MCP revolutionary process, one will immediately observe that the strategies and tactics at various stages during the MCP struggle were imitation of those of the CCP. In particular, the "Small Long March" in trying to establish a liberated base mimicked the CCP in establishing Yanan. In fact, during the Japanese occupation period, a few of the more established areas of the MPAJA were openly called "little Yanan".

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### **The Party's subjectivism and empiricism**

The MCP overly appraised the achievement of the MPAJA and considered the experience gained was of great value in fighting the British. The MCP subjectively looked upon the British as identical to the Japanese and thus fell miserably into the trap of empiricism without close examination of the current situation after the Second World War. Most unfortunately, a great opportunity to declare independence right after the Second World War while the MCP was well-armed and organised was lost. Also, they were too relaxed during the peace period and did not carefully plan, and therefore were so ill-prepared for the intended armed revolt. While gaining the people's full support during the early stage of the Emergency, the MCP did not win over and capitalise on their hearts and minds but embarked on a series of overly left strategies and policies. The British were successful with their food and supplies denial strategy by driving the jungle fringe dwellers into concentration camps which severed the close contacts between the Party and the people. The economic improvement in Malaya especially the growth in price of natural rubber was another decisive factor in reducing support for the MCP from the general masses. In short, while the international and domestic environments and conditions might have been unfavourable to the revolution, the MCP also adopted certain erroneous strategies and tactics during the course of the struggle, while also committing the errors of subjectivism and empiricism.

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