

**THE ORIGINS OF THE COLD WAR IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: THE  
CASE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF MALAYA (1948–1960)–  
A SPECIAL BRANCH PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>**

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*The origins of the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960) have been debated over the years in both the academic world and in the intelligence community. This paper incorporates the contemporaneous views of the Malayan Special Branch that have not been recorded previously. It also examines the role of Lawrence (Lance) Sharkey, the acting Secretary-General of the Australian Communist Party, who was in Singapore en route back to Australia after attending the February 1948 Conferences in Singapore, in allegedly passing instructions to the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) to revolt against the British colonial government in Malaya. The essay will conclude that there is little evidence of any direct Soviet intervention in the decision made by the CPM to revolt, and it will argue that the decision to resort to armed conflict was made after its failure to establish a Communist People's Democratic Republic by "open front" activities.*

Keywords: Malayan Special Branch, 1948 Malayan Emergency, Cold War in Asia, Communist Party of Malaya, 1948 Calcutta Conferences, Australian Communist Party

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## **THE BACKGROUND**

The academic world and the intelligence community have long debated the origins of the 1948–1960 communist uprising in Malaya. Was the decision to raise the standard of revolt in June 1948 part of a global revolutionary movement orchestrated by the Soviet Union as part of the Cold War in Asia, or was it instead arrived at by the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) based on the local situation in Malaya?<sup>2</sup> Or was it rather a mix of both? Many thousands of words have been written on these questions in the intervening years, but a definitive answer will likely have to await the release of the Soviet Union documents.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, this paper presents the viewpoint of a Special Branch officer who served as a Malayan Police Special Branch officer during the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960) and who participated in the discussions (referenced later) that took place at Federal Special Branch headquarters in Kuala Lumpur during the early 1949. These discussions concerned the origins of the uprising of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) against the government.

Firstly, we summarise the background. The first question postulated above takes its starting point from Andrei Zhdanov's well-known speech at the inaugural meeting of the Cominform on 27 September 1947. Zhdanov argued that the world had been polarised into two opposing camps, that is, the communist bloc led by the Soviet Union and the Western capitalist countries led by the United States.<sup>4</sup> His speech encouraged a militant

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<sup>2</sup> See Tilman Remme, *Britain and Regional Cooperation in South-East Asia, 1945–1949*, London & New York: LSE /Routledge, 1995, 134, and A.J. Stockwell (ed.), *Malaya, Part 1. The Malayan Union Experiment 1942–1948*, London: HMSO, 1995, xiii.

<sup>3</sup> The conclusion reached by the Malayan Special Branch in 1949, as related in this paper, that the Soviets were not behind the Communist Party of Malaya's uprising against the Malayan government in June 1948 was subsequently corroborated by Dr. L.M. Efimova, a Soviet delegate to the ARI Roundtable, 10–11 July 2008, who has carried out extensive research into the Soviet archives in Moscow. As far as is known, this is the first time that the Soviet archives have been consulted.

<sup>4</sup> Andrei Zhdanov (1896–1958) was a Politburo member and Stalin's representative on the COMINFORM. In the mid-1940s, he was seen by many observers as the likely successor to Joseph Stalin as head of the

approach by worldwide communist parties to propagating revolution in the Third World. The same line was repeated by E.M. Zhukov, who had attended the inaugural meeting of the Cominform with Zhdanov, in his article in the December 1947 issue of the *Bol'shevik* that referred to the “sharpening crisis of the *colonial system*” (author’s emphasis) being “perhaps one of the most significant efforts to apply Zhdanov’s doctrine to Asia”.<sup>5</sup> On this basis, a Soviet Conspiracy Theory has been developed that postulates that the Soviets had in some way transmitted “instructions” to the representatives of Southeast Asian communist parties attending the Communist Youth Conference, held from 19 February to 24 February 1948 in Calcutta, to take advantage of the unstable conditions prevailing in Southeast Asia at the end of the Second World War to rise up against their colonial rulers.<sup>6</sup>

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Communist Party of the Soviet Union. He postulated that foreign communist parties should be in the vanguard of spreading communism throughout the world, and he was particularly critical of the failure of the French and Italian communist parties to seize power by militant revolutionary action. He anticipated Soviet foreign policy shifting its focus to the Far East, where the Chinese Communist Party was gaining control of China, and he thought of the national liberation movements of Southeast Asia forming the vanguard of the colonial emancipation struggle in support of international communism (see “The Zhdanov–Malenkov Relationship”, *Caesar, Polo, and ESEU Papers. Cold War Era hard target analysis of Soviet and Chinese policy and decision making 1953–1973*, Washington, DC, CIA, top secret, 2007 (declassified); Australian Public Records Office, Canberra, A56189/A2908/1, 1950, “Situation in Malaya”, item M108, secret cipher telegram, Harrison from Menzies, 41; J.H. Brummel, *A Short History of the Malayan Communist Party*, Singapore: Donald Moore Press, 1956, 19; and Tilman Remme, op. cit., 134.

<sup>5</sup> See Yano Toru, “Who Set the Stage for the Cold War in Asia?” in Yonosuke Nagai & Akira Iriye (eds.), *The Origins of the Cold War in Asia*, Columbia University Press, 1974, 333.

<sup>6</sup> In 1948, communist uprisings started in Burma, the Philippines, and Hyderabad (India). Meanwhile, armed communist revolts had already broken out in Indonesia and Vietnam (Lennox A. Mills, *British Malaya, 1824–1867*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1966, 51), and a “Communist League” had been formed in Thailand (Remme, op. cit., 137). The armed struggle of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) against British colonial rule in Malaya and Singapore, which became known as the “Emergency”, started in June 1948. A crisis arose, too, in Europe when Soviet forces closed entry by road to Berlin from the west. The US and

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There were two Communist conferences held in Calcutta in February and March 1948. The first was the Communist Youth Conference, held from 19 February 1948 to 24 February 1948, which was sponsored by the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY) and the Conference of Youth and Students of South-East Asia fighting for Freedom and Independence.<sup>7</sup> The other was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of India (CPI) held from 28 February 1948 to 6 March 1948. The conferences were well attended by a wide range of communist delegates from Vietnam, Indonesia, Ceylon, Burma, India, Pakistan, Nepal, the Philippines and Malaya, with observers from Australia, Korea, Mongolia, Soviet Central Asia, Yugoslavia, France, Hungary, Canada, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union.

According to what Chin Peng, Secretary-General of the CPM, told the author in Canberra in February 1999, the CPM did not receive an invitation to attend either of the Calcutta conferences,<sup>8</sup> although Lee Soong, General Secretary of the Malayan WFDY, received an invitation to attend the Youth Conference.<sup>9</sup> The CPM's Central Executive Committee approved Lee's attendance at the Conference.<sup>10</sup> Lee was a Singapore-Chinese of

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British forces responded by airlifting supplies to the city, and the blockade was eventually lifted in May 1949.

<sup>7</sup> The WFDY was one of the main instruments for the implementation of Soviet international policy. See Alexander Kharlamov, "Youth Conference in Calcutta", *Moscow News*, 3 April 1948, for an interesting Soviet account of the Conference, at which a resolution was passed supporting "the national liberation struggle against imperialism" but there is no mention of the resolution going beyond this.

<sup>8</sup> Conversation Comber/Chin Peng, Ruby Restaurant, Dickson, Canberra, 19 February 1999. This was subsequently confirmed in Chin Peng's autobiography that was published a few years after the author's conversation with him in Canberra. (Chin Peng, with Ian Ward & Norma Miraflor, *Alias Chin Peng. My Side of the Story*, Singapore: Media Masters, 2003, 202). It is, however, rather strange that the CPM did not receive an invitation to attend the conferences if it was the intention of the Soviets to issue "instructions" to the Southeast Asian communist parties to take up arms against their colonial masters.

<sup>9</sup> Conversation Comber/Chin Peng, Ruby Restaurant, Dickson, Canberra, 19 February 1999.

<sup>10</sup> CO 537/3751, *MSS Political Intelligence Journal*, Secret, No. 1/48, *Who's Who*, Serial No. 10. P.F. 1.97, Singapore. Lee Soong, also spelt in Romanised form Lee Sung, was a Teochew, born in Singapore in 1927. In

CPM State Committee rank who, like many Singapore-Chinese, was fluent in English, the language used at the conference.

Returning to the Soviet Conspiracy theory, the best known exponents of the theory are probably the US scholars Walt W. Rustow, A. Doak Barnett, and Frank N. Trager, who argued that instructions to start armed uprisings had been passed on from the Soviet “centre” to representatives of the Southeast Asian communist parties attending the Calcutta conferences.<sup>11</sup> The leading proponent of the opposite school of thought was Ruth T. McVey, who called into question whether the Soviet Union had issued any such instructions. Over the years many, other historians followed this critical path, with Anthony Stockwell’s paper “Chin Peng and the Struggle for Malaya” (2006) as a recent example.<sup>12</sup> In her 1958 study, McVey had summed up the situation by saying that in the unsettled conditions that prevailed in Southeast Asia after the Japanese surrender at the end of the war, “it does not seem likely that the two-camp message [sic] lit the revolutionary spark in Southeast Asia though it may well have added the extra tinder which caused it to burst into flames”.<sup>13</sup> In his classic study of

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September 1945, he was a member of the British Military Administration’s Singapore Advisory Council as well as being a member of the CPM’s Singapore Town Committee. In July 1947, he attended with Chen Tian the WDYL meeting in Prague as a representative of the Pan-Malayan New Democratic Youth League. Both men returned to Singapore in November 1947. During their stay in Prague, they had been tasked *inter alia* by the CPM’s Central Executive Committee to find out whether Lai Teck, the then CPM’s Secretary-General, who had absconded from Malaya in February 1947 taking with him the main part of the CPM’s funds, had fled to Europe, and whether there was any truth in his claim to have international Comintern status. Lee Soong was later killed in an engagement with the security forces in Johore in 1954.

<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that R.B. Smith (China and Southeast Asia: The Revolutionary Perspective, 1951, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, XIX, No. 1, March 1988, 98) writes that before 1951, the British official view was inclined to accept the Soviet Conspiracy Theory, but afterwards they changed their view and played down the suggestion of external involvement in the CPM’s decision to take up arms.

<sup>12</sup> Ruth Y. McVey, *The Calcutta Conferences and the Southeast Asian Uprisings*, Ithaca, NY: Department of Far Eastern Studies, Cornell University, 1958, and Anthony Stockwell, “Chin Peng and the Struggle for Malaya”, *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 6(1), 2006, 279–297.

<sup>13</sup> McVey, *op. cit.*, 24.

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the Emergency, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya*, Anthony Short was rather more circumspect, and while he did not specifically support the Soviet Conspiracy Theory, he reasoned that while the “(Calcutta) conference did not openly declare for insurrection its mood was one of extreme belligerence towards colonial rule”.<sup>14</sup> This is undoubtedly correct as it reflects the standard communist line, and in fact during the post-war period, even the US, the leader of the Western capitalist countries, expressed reservations about the continuation of British, French and Dutch colonial rule in Southeast Asia.<sup>15</sup>

Professor Mary Turnbull’s essay in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* (1992) came out clearly against the “Soviet Conspiracy Theory” in the following words: “In fact the period was one of confused ambitions for the communists. Their various revolts and wars in Indonesia, Malaya, Vietnam and Burma, were *not part* (author’s emphasis) of a grand pre-planned Soviet strategy, such as Lenin’s dream of communist revolution in Asia or the Comintern’s ambitious design to use China in the 1920s as the means of realising this dream. While the Soviet Union had shown little interest in Southeast Asia, apart from the 1920s Comintern interlude, the Chinese Communist Party posed a more immediate threat.”<sup>16</sup>

As of 2007 however, it was clear that the controversy was still attracting scholarly attention, as the subject was discussed again in Philip Deery’s paper “Malaya, 1948: Britain’s Asian Cold War”<sup>17</sup>, which was the focus of an interesting *H-Diplo* review article by Karl Hack. In his review article,

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<sup>14</sup> Anthony Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya 1948–1960*, London: Frederick Muller Ltd., 1975, 45–49, (reprinted in 2000 by Cultured Lotus Press, Singapore, under the title *In Pursuit of Mountain Rats*).

<sup>15</sup> Short, op. cit., 46–47.

<sup>16</sup> C.M. Turnbull, “The Beginning of the Cold War, 1948–1954”, in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, The nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (ed. Nicholas Tarling), 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 600. See also John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War*, London: Allen Lane, 2005, 121, 122, and 126, who reasoned that the propagation of revolution in the Third World was less important to the Soviet Union in the immediate post-war period than recovery from the war and attempting to spread Communist influence.

<sup>17</sup> Philip Deery, “Malaya: Britain’s Asian Cold War”, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 9(1), 2007, 29–54.

Karl Hack argued that the “Soviet role needs to be given at least some weight within nuanced, multicausal models of the outbreak of the “Asian Cold War”, and that the MCP did have a programme intended to end in armed revolt within months, even though the British precipitated this’.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, the debate appears to have largely overlooked the fact that *The Times* (London) had long ago (June 1948) taken the view there was little evidence of direct Soviet intervention in the rise of revolutionary movements then taking place in Malaya and other parts of Southeast Asia, though *The Times* conceded that several of the revolutionary leaders, such as Aliman of Indonesia and Ho Chi-Minh of Indo-China, had spent several years in Russia or in communist service abroad.<sup>19</sup> *The Times* considered instead that communist parties were taking advantage of the unsettled conditions prevailing throughout the area at the end of the war, identifying themselves with nationalist anti-West feelings and opposing landlords and factory managers as well as the colonial governments in power.<sup>20</sup>

### **Malayan Special Branch Perspective**

It may, therefore, be opportune to document the discussions that took place at Federal Special Branch headquarters in Kuala Lumpur at the early part of 1949, which were triggered by *The Times* (London) report. These discussions provide an interesting indication of the contemporaneous Malayan Police Special Branch perceptions, especially as they were not made public at the time. The author was then a junior Special Branch officer heading the Chinese section of Federal Special Branch headquarters. Two senior pre-war Malayan police officers, Ian S. Wylie, and his deputy Claude Fenner, then headed the Federal SB headquarters. They had both served with Force 136 in the Malayan jungle with the communist Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) in the latter part of WWII, and they were considered well informed about the CPM and its intentions.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Karl Hack, *H-Diplo* review article, ‘Malaya: Britain’s Asian Cold War’, 15 June 2007.

<sup>19</sup> *The Times* (London), 17 June 1948.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. The situation was further complicated by the civil war then raging in China between the Kuomintang and the Chinese communist armies that would lead eventually to the defeat of the Kuomintang and its retreat to Taiwan in 1949.

<sup>21</sup> Author’s contemporaneous notes. Wylie was subsequently to become

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At the beginning of the Emergency in June 1948, the Special Branch was inclined to downplay the importance of the CPM's uprising unless it received external support, and no reports of any such external assistance had been received. It began to look more closely at the situation, however, when captured documents revealed that the CPM was in written contact with Liu Shao-che, a top-ranking member of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee and Lee Siu Nin (Li Hsien Nien), a PLA commander and top-ranking member of the CCP's Central Committee.<sup>22</sup> It was apparent as well from an examination of CPM documents that fell into SB hands that the CPM attached importance to Mao Zedong's *On New Democracy* (1940) and his "Theory of National Democratic Revolution", which essentially adapted Marxist-Leninism for Chinese conditions to provide an ideological justification for China's supporting communist revolutions in Southeast Asia.<sup>23</sup> In the early days of the Emergency before censorship of the press became more stringent, the local Chinese press

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Deputy Commissioner of the Malayan Police while Fenner (who had by then been knighted by both the Malayan and British governments as Tan Sri Sir Claude Fenner) was to become in 1963 the first Inspector-General of the Royal Malaysian Police before the post was Malayanised in 1966 and taken over by a local officer, Tun Mohammed Salleh (see Haji Asli Mohamed Redian & Haji Ibrahim Mohd. Radzua, *Polis Diraja Malaysia: Sejarah, Peranan dan Cabaran*, Kuala Lumpur: Kumpulan Karangkrif Sdn Bhd, 1987, 547).

<sup>22</sup> Later, as the Emergency progressed, the Special Branch was soon to revise its view of the seriousness of the situation as it became clear that the CPM and its guerrilla army, the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA), was an extremely formidable enemy that was following a long-established plan to overthrow the government and replace it with a Communist People's Democratic Republic of Malaya. (See John Josiah Coe, "Beautiful Flowers and Poisonous Weeds. Problems of Historicism, Ethics and Internal Antagonisms – The Case of the Malayan Communist Party", Appendix 3, "The Malayan Communist Party – A Chronological History", PhD thesis, Department of History, University of Queensland, April 1993 (restricted). See CO 967/84, "Briefs Federation of Malaya, Political Developments in Malaya for fortnight ended 15 January 1949", Secret (closed until 1981).

<sup>23</sup> Author's notes. See also Chen Jie, "Shaking off a Historical Burden: China's Relations with the ASEAN-based Communist Insurgencies in Deng's Era", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 1994, 27(4), 443–462.



reported these matters in some detail and undoubtedly made a deep impression in the minds of local Chinese readers.<sup>24</sup>

After weighing all of these factors and their knowledge of the local situation, the Special Branch came to the view that Soviet influence, as opposed to Chinese influence, was negligible in Malaya, and although the Soviets gave verbal support to the Malayan uprising in 1948, trade came before politics. In coming to this view, the Special Branch also took into account that the Soviets were interested in developing trade with Malaya, especially in purchasing rubber to build up their stocks that had been depleted during WWII. In 1946 and 1947, for instance, Exportkhleb, a Soviet trading corporation, had attempted to establish a representative trade office in Singapore to purchase rubber, and Soviet trade representatives had been allowed to make brief visits to Singapore.<sup>25</sup> There would therefore seem to be little purpose in the Soviet Union propagating revolution in Singapore or Malaya.

The Special Branch also argued that it was only to be expected that Chin Peng, who was in favour of an armed uprising against the British colonial government and had meanwhile become secretary-general of the CPM in April 1947, would introduce his own policies after the disappearance of the former secretary-general, Lai Teck, who had absconded with the CPM's

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<sup>24</sup> Author's notes. See also CO 967/84, "Appeals of new China. Briefs Federation of Malaya", Feb/March 1949, Secret (closed until 1981).

<sup>25</sup> A.M. Arinitohev and Papel Ivanovich Sizov, representing the Soviet trading corporation Exportkhleb, were granted temporary visas to visit Singapore from Hong Kong from 2–28 December 1946 and again on 18 January 1947. However, nothing came of the Soviet attempt to establish a purchasing office in Singapore, and eventually most of the Soviet orders for natural rubber were placed through the London rubber market. (See the author's *Malaya's Secret Police 1945–1960. The Role of the Special Branch in the Malayan Emergency*, Singapore: ISEAS: Monash University Press, 2008, 14–15). For Soviet rubber purchases, see Geoffrey Jukes, *The Soviet Union in Asia*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson in association with The Australian Institute of International Affairs, 1973, 146. By 1963, according to Jukes, the Soviet Union surpassed the US as the largest purchaser of natural rubber from Malaya (*ibid*, 145).

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funds.<sup>26</sup> Lai Teck, who had been inserted as a Special Branch agent in the CPM before WWII, had advocated an “open front” policy and was not in favour of an armed struggle, possibly because he was working secretly as a Special Branch agent.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the Special Branch came to the conclusion that because the CPM had been thwarted in its attempts to penetrate the trade union movement and bring about its aims to establish a “Democratic People’s Republic of Malaya” by “open front” activities, it had decided that the only way forward was to resort to violence to overthrow the government.<sup>28</sup>

Regarding the questions posed at the beginning of this paper concerning the origins of the uprising, the author recollects that the Special Branch received at this time (1949) a copy of a classified report on the Calcutta Conferences from Simla, the Indian Intelligence Bureau. Although it went into some detail and described the general atmosphere of the meetings as

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<sup>26</sup> It is often overlooked that the policy advocated by Lai Teck was actually continued for a while after he absconded in March 1947. It was not until the CPM’s politburo met at Kuala Lumpur on 31 January 1948 some ten months later that his “right wing” policies were repudiated as “treacherous to the cause of the revolution” (Short, *op. cit.*, 42).

<sup>27</sup> During the Japanese occupation, Lai Teck became a Japanese *kempetai* agent though this information did not become known to his comrades in the CPM until the early part of 1947, and he was to lead to his fleeing from Malaya, until he was finally tracked down several months later in Bangkok and killed.

Lai Teck’s pre-war case officer in the Singapore Special Branch was F.I. (Innes) Tremlett. He escaped from Singapore at the time of the Japanese invasion, was commissioned in the British army, and became head of Force 136’s Malayan country section in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). He returned briefly to Singapore at the end of the war and contacted Lai Teck, but he was tragically killed in an air crash in October 1945 on his way back to Ceylon (see the author’s *Malaya’s Secret Police 1945–1960. The Role of the Special Branch in the Malayan Emergency*, Melbourne & Singapore: Monash University Press/ ISEAS, Singapore, 2008, 95).

<sup>28</sup> As Stockwell put it, by the time a state of Emergency was declared in Malaya on 18 June 1948 – and in Singapore on 24 June – the situation was already tense and “teetering on the brink of a revolutionary situation”. See A.J. Stockwell, “A widespread and long-concocted plot to overthrow government in Malaya? The Origins of the Malayan Emergency”, in Robert Holland (ed.), *Emergencies and Disorder in the European Empires after 1945*, London, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1994, 67.

being extremely hostile to colonial rule, the report did not refer to the issuing of any “directives” that would fit in with the Soviet Conspiracy Theory.<sup>29</sup>

### **Malayan Communist Party Viewpoint**

What was the view of Chin Peng, Secretary General of the Communist Party of Malaya? At the “Chin Workshop” held at the Australian National University, Canberra, in February 1999, many years after the Special Branch had come to its conclusion, Chin Peng explained that the CPM’s change from “open front” policy to armed confrontation was brought about by the British colonial government’s pressure in tightening control over the trade unions, which placed the CPM in an intolerable position with only one way out.<sup>30</sup> According to Chin Peng, when the CPM decided to start an armed struggle, there had only been time to draft a “rough” plan of action, as it had originally intended to delay the uprising until October 1948, when the plan would have been finalised.

Too Chee Chew (C.C. Too) who later became head of the government’s psychological warfare section, supported the Special Branch’s analysis. Writing much later in the *New Straits Times*, he quoted an old Chinese adage “Rather be the head of a chicken than the hindquarters of a bull” to demonstrate his point. He explained that while the head of a chicken cannot exert much actual physical force, “it contains the brain, which issues orders and controls the actions of the whole chicken, the hindquarters of a bull pack a powerful kick but without a will of its own, it has to obey what the brain of the bull (chicken) orders”. From this analogy, he reasoned that while the CPM leaders could be expected to take note of such international communist directives that happened to serve

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<sup>29</sup> Author’s notes. While the author was carrying out research in London in 1992, he tried unsuccessfully to find a copy of this report in the India Office Records and Library and though an earlier publication under the aegis of the Indian Intelligence Bureau (Sir Horace Williamson, *India and Communism*, Simla Government Press, 1935, revised edition) dealing with international communism was available, it was not possible to trace the report referred to.

<sup>30</sup> Conversation Comber/Chin Peng, Ruby Restaurant, Dickson, Canberra, 19 February 1999, Chin Peng, Chin Peng Workshop, Canberra, 22–23 February 1999, and Chin Peng with Ian Ward & Norma Miraflor, *Alias Chin Peng. My Side of History*, Singapore: Media Masters, 2003, 204.

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their purpose, they would infinitely prefer to be masters of their own destiny than “running dogs” or puppets of international communism.<sup>31</sup>

### **Visit of Lawrence (Lance) Sharkey, Communist Party of Australia to Singapore**

Lawrence (Lance) Sharkey, the acting general-secretary of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), often figures largely in accounts of the beginning of the Malayan Emergency.<sup>32</sup> In February 1948, he had stopped off at Singapore on his way to Calcutta to attend the 2nd Congress of the Communist Party of India, and on his return, it is alleged that he was the emissary who carried a message from the Soviets to Chin Peng to take up arms against the British colonial government. According to what Chin Peng told the author in Canberra on 19 February 1999, Sharkey visited the CPM’s office at 218 Queen Street on 22 February 1948.<sup>33</sup> Chin Peng described it as a routine courtesy visit by an “older and respected member” of a fraternal communist party (Chin Peng was then twenty-four years old and Sharkey fifty). Although the two men had not previously met, their respective parties had been in contact with each other, and from time to time, they had exchanged fraternal greetings and copies of their respective

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<sup>31</sup> C. C. Too, “Armed Struggle that was doomed to Fail”, *New Sunday Times* (Kuala Lumpur), 3 December 1989.

<sup>32</sup> Lawrence (Lance) Louis Sharkey (1898–1967) was born in New South Wales, Australia. He was a coach maker by trade and later worked as a lift attendant. He was active in the trade union movement and after joining the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) in 1922, he was soon elected to the party’s central committee and became editor of the *Workers’ Weekly*. He visited Moscow in 1930 and was elected to the executive committee of the Comintern. From 1950 to 1965, he was general-secretary of the Australian communist party. In 1949, he was jailed for 18 months for sedition for asserting that Australian workers would welcome the Red Army into Australia. He was the author of several booklets and pamphlets such as *The Communist Party Speaks*, *Australian Communists and Soviet Russia*, *Australia Marches On*, *Outline History of the Australian Communist Party*, and so on (see John Arnold and Deirdre Morris (eds.), *Monash Biographical Dictionary of 20th Century Australians*, Melbourne: Reed Reference Publishing, 1994, 478–479, and W.A. Wood, *The Life Story of L.A. Sharkey: Fighter for Freedom*, Sydney: Current Book Distributors, 1950, *passim*).

<sup>33</sup> Conversation Comber/Chin Peng, Ruby Restaurant, Dickson, Canberra, 19 February 1999.

publications. Chin Peng said that aside from Sharkey's enquiring whether he would be attending the Calcutta meetings, nothing substantial was discussed.

On Sharkey's return visit to Singapore on his way back to Australia, however, it was a different matter. He stayed at the Raffles Hotel from 9 March to 20 March 1948 whilst awaiting an onward connection to Australia. Chin Peng invited him to attend the 4th Plenary Session of the CPM's Central Committee (17–21 March) at the CPM's Singapore office.<sup>34</sup> Sharkey was interested to hear about the CPM's activities in Malaya during the Japanese occupation, and he provided an account of what had been discussed at the 2nd CPI Congress in Calcutta. He took the opportunity to explain Zhdanov's "two-camps" doctrine and the new Cominform policy. He also described the intense "anti-colonial" feeling that had permeated the discussions at the congress. But Chin Peng stated that Sharkey did not convey any "instructions" or "message" from the Calcutta meeting to the CPM,<sup>35</sup> a denial that he subsequently repeated at the Chin Peng Workshop in Canberra, 22 February 1999.<sup>36</sup> In fact, in an earlier BBC TV interview in London on 19 June 1998, he had already denied that the hidden hand of the Soviets was behind the CPM's uprising.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> According to MSS sources, Sharkey invited the CPM to send a delegate to attend the 15th National Congress of the Australian Communist Party in Sydney, 7–10 May 1948. It is not known whether the CPM attended the Congress but in any event, it was then making final preparations for the armed struggle. (CO 537/3751. MSS "Malaya: Political Developments Political Intelligence Journals", Top Secret, *MSS PIJ* no. 3 of 1948, 15 February 1948).

<sup>35</sup> Conversation Comber/Chin Peng, Ruby Restaurant, Dickson, Canberra, 19 February 1999.

<sup>36</sup> C.C. Chin & Karl Hack (eds.), *Dialogues with Chin Peng: New Light on the Malayan Communist Party*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004, 119–123, 140 notes 2 & 3, 258, 279, 286–287, 289. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on 18 August 1948 that an authoritative source said in Singapore yesterday that reports that an Australian Communist prompted the Malayan revolution were "absolute poppycock".

<sup>37</sup> "Malaya: The Undeclared War (East Special)", BBC 2 Film (NBH/1.001D), 19 June 1998.

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In his autobiography, Chin Peng records the following exchange with Sharkey that took place during the CPM's 4th Plenary Session as follows:

A Central Committee member in charge of trade union affairs asked our guest the critical question for which we had been seeking answers for months. "Comrade," he requested, "how do you Australians deal with strike-breakers?"

The meeting eagerly awaited Sharkey's views on strikebreakers and how his party handled them... Sharkey gazed along the row of Asian faces at the table and said bluntly, "We get rid of them."... You mean you eliminate strikebreakers, Comrade... kill?" (Sharkey replied) "But not in the cities. Only in the outlying areas. The rural areas. The mining areas." However, in spite of Sharkey portraying the Australian communists in such a belligerent light there is no evidence that he urged the CPM to resort to arms against the British. Nevertheless, he must have made an impression on the CPM's Central Committee members as Chin Peng described his visit as "inspiring".<sup>38</sup>

After the Calcutta conferences, a group of foreign communists took the opportunity to visit Singapore. Among the group were Carmen Brickman, a member of the International Union of Students (IUS) Secretariat, Olga

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<sup>38</sup> Chin Peng, *op. cit.*, 203–205. During his stay in Singapore, the Malayan Security Service kept Sharkey under surveillance, and he was seen to keep company with Edward Lynch, assistant to the Movements Officer in the Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia's office, and a certain J.R.R. Towner, both of whom were known to have left-wing sympathies. Lynch had first come to notice during enquiries made by the MSS into leakages of secret information from the Commissioner-General's office although he himself was not implicated. It has not been possible to ascertain what action if any was taken against them. (See CO 537/3751, *MSS PIJ* no. 2/48, Secret Appendix no. 3, 61, *MSS PIJ* no. 6/48 dated 31 March 1948, p. 172; CO 537/3753 *MSS PIJ* no. 14/48, Supplement no. 9, dated 31 July 1948, 1–21; "How Moscow's Decisions Plunged South East Asia into Bloodshed in 1948" by Douglas Hyde, *Arkib Negara, Kuala Lumpur Misc.* 16, Malayan Federal Government Press Statement D.Inf. 7/60/160 (Emerg.) Appendix "I"; and Short, *op. cit.*, 52–53.

Tchet-Chetkins, a Russian, Jean Lautissier from France, Rajko Tomovic from Yugoslavia, and Dusan Puhalo, a Yugoslav journalist and a representative of the World Federation of Democratic Youth. While this is not mentioned in Chin Peng's autobiography, the CPM and other left-wing organisations welcomed the group at a mammoth public reception. Puhalo was later detained by the Singapore Police (the Malayan Security Service had no powers of arrest) and was put on an aircraft bound for Calcutta. The records do not reveal why Puhalo was singled out in this way, but the Yugoslav delegates to the Calcutta conferences were of particular intelligence interest as the headquarters of the Cominform was then based in Belgrade.<sup>39</sup>

Although no decision was taken to start an armed uprising during the 4th Plenary Session of the CEC held at the CPM's headquarters at Queen Street, Singapore, Chin Peng said that the CPM's post-war political line (i.e., the "open front" policy advocated by the discredited Lai Teck) was criticised as "right-wing opportunism".<sup>40</sup> Chin Peng made clear that it appeared inevitable from the tone of the meeting that the party would inexorably move to a policy of armed resistance.<sup>41</sup> The actual decision to start an armed uprising was taken at the 5th Plenary Session of the CEC on 10 May 1948, two months after Sharkey left Singapore, at the "Saling Rubber Estate", 17½ milestone Johore Bahru-Kulai Road, near Kulai in Johore.<sup>42</sup> A resolution was passed at this meeting to take "resolute action, concerted struggle and the use of violence when necessary", but there was no mention of any Soviet instruction.

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<sup>39</sup> CO 537/3753 *MSS PIJ* no. 14/48, Secret, Supplement no. 9, dated 31 July 1948, 11–21.

<sup>40</sup> Conversation Comber/Chin Peng, Ruby Restaurant, Dickson, Canberra, 19 February 1999 and ANU restaurant, 22 February 1999.

<sup>41</sup> Chin Peng, Chin Peng Workshop, The Australian National University, Canberra, 22–23 February 1999; Short, *op. cit.*, 49, 50–51; and Stubbs, *op. cit.*, 60–61. Short refers to it as "ideological preparation" (for an insurrection) (Short, *op. cit.*, 49), and Stubbs as a move to a policy of armed resistance' (Stubbs, *op. cit.*, 60).

<sup>42</sup> Conversation Comber/Chin Peng, Ruby Restaurant, Dickson, Canberra, 19 February 1999. Chin Peng said he had afterwards been unable to identify the name of the estate on the map of Johore. Stubbs, *op. cit.*, 61, gives the place of the meeting as Singapore, but this is clearly incorrect.

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On returning to Australia, Sharkey gave his version of what had transpired at the CPM meeting he had attended in Singapore, and on 18 June 1948, he wrote an account for the *Tribune*, the organ of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Australia for which he was then the editor: "I certainly told them (the CPM leaders) that a struggle for national independence to prevent the old colonial slavery from being imposed on them was justified and would be supported by the whole of progressive mankind. Such questions as when they should start an armed insurrection or whether they should start one at all ... are a matter for the Malaysians and one in which they are much more experienced than I am, as they had a very rich experience in the heroic struggle with the Japanese occupiers."<sup>43</sup>

In the *Tribune* of 14 August 1948, Sharkey pointed out that 'Always the Communist Party is supposed to be "ordered" from outside to do this, that or the other thing: whereas wars of national independence cannot be conjured up by "instructions" from anyone but arise out of existing conditions.'

Before moving on, it is fitting to refer to the allegation made by Cecil Sharpley, a disgruntled former member of the Communist Party of Australia, in his book *The Great Delusion*. Sharpley stated that Sharkey had informed the 15th Congress of the Communist Party of Australia, which was held at Sydney in May 1948, that he had been commissioned by the Cominform to pass on a message to the CPM to rise up against British colonial rule in Malaya.<sup>44</sup>

However, there is no mention of this announcement in the minutes of the Congress that have been examined by the author.<sup>45</sup> In his report, Sharkey spoke about post-war international tension and the potentially dangerous division of the world into two camps. He said that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress of the CPI, which he had attended, had been hostile to British, Dutch, and French

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<sup>43</sup> See Melbourne University Archives (119 Barry Street, Carlton, Melbourne), "CPA Congresses, 15th Congress, May 1948, *For Australia Prosperous and Independent*, Report by L.L. Sharkey to the 15th Congress of the Australian Communist Party", 3, 5, 12, and 31.

<sup>44</sup> Cecil H. Sharpley, *The Great Delusion. The Autobiography of an ex-Communist Leader*, London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1952, 92.

<sup>45</sup> See "Report by L.L. Sharkey to the 15th Congress of the Australian Communist Party, May 1948", pamphlet printed at Newsletter Printing, 21 Ross St., Forest Lodge.



imperialism, and he added that it had praised colonial liberation movements in Southeast Asia. Sharkey also paid tribute to the great struggle of the Chinese people against the forces of imperialism under the banner of the Chinese Communist Party. However, there is no mention anywhere of his having conveyed a directive for revolution to the CPM from Calcutta.<sup>46</sup>

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

To sum up, this paper has focused predominantly on the views of the Malayan Special Branch concerning the origin of the CPM's uprising against the British colonial government in Malaya. It has argued from the evidence assembled by the Special Branch that the CPM's uprising arose from its own local dynamics rather than from any "instruction" issued to it from the Soviets, and it has argued that the CPM made its decision to resort to armed confrontation because its efforts to overthrow the government by "open front" activities had failed. The CPM therefore considered that the only way for it to achieve its aims was by resorting to an armed uprising. Significantly, the views arrived at as early as 1949 by the Malayan Special Branch are corroborated by contemporary research that mined the recently

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<sup>46</sup> The Sydney *Morning Herald* of 18 June 1948 reported that "The officers (security officials) declare there is no evidence that Russia or any other overseas body is directing the challenge to the Malayan Government." The Japanese scholar Tanigawa Yoshihiko provides confirmation of this view in his study on the Cominform and Southeast Asia, in the following words: the basic cause of the Malayan struggle cannot be found in any external "directive" as argued by the Soviet conspiracy theorists, but rather in the indigenous independence movement itself.' (Tanigawa Yoshihiko, "The Cominform and Southeast Asia" in Yonosuke Nagai and Akira Iniye (eds.), *The Origins of the Cold War in Asia*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1977, 363, 372–373). In his study *The End of Empire*, Harper confirms this view as follows: "However, there is little evidence that this meant its (CPM's) strategy was dictated by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union or by any advice from outside." (T.N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 145).

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opened Russian archives in Moscow as confirmed by Dr L. M. Efimova at the Roundtable on the Sixtieth Anniversary of 1948 “Reassessing the Origins of the Cold War in Southeast Asia” at the Asian Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 10–11 July 2008.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> L.M. Efimova, “New Russian Evidence on the Calcutta Youth Conference (February 1948) and Soviet Policy toward Indonesia.” Presented at *the Roundtable on the Sixtieth Anniversary of 1948. Reassessing the Origins of the Cold War in Southeast Asia* at the Asian Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 10–11 July 2008.

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