FARELF and the Malayan Emergency, 1948–50

The beginning of armed insurrection in Malaya placed an enormous strain on the British Army, which at the time was in the midst of a major reorganization to create Montgomery’s new citizen army. Despite the ‘parlous state’ of the Army, the government and the Chiefs of Staff squeezed it to produce reinforcements not only for Malaya, but beginning in April 1949, for Hong Kong as well. By early 1950, the Malayan and Hong Kong contingencies had devoured all the Army’s available combat formations.

The government clearly had to do something in response to the outbreak of insurrection in one of their most economically valuable colonies. Initial estimates of the situation indicated that the problem was little more than a serious outbreak of the sort of dacoity – organized robbery – endemic to parts of Malaya, Burma, and India. That was a familiar Imperial policing problem that could be easily handled by available police and military forces. Unfortunately, the Communist insurrection was qualitatively, quantitatively, and ideologically more formidable a threat than mere robber gangs. It would take years before the civil administrative apparatus of the Malayan Federation developed itself to deal with the problem. In the interim, many of the counterinsurgency tasks fell on the Army, and in particular, the Gurkhas. In order to make up for the shortfalls on the civil side, reinforcements equivalent to an entire division were diverted to Malaya over the course of the first two years of the Emergency. Yet senior military officials in London and Singapore did their best to limit the number of troops in Malaya in consonance with the defensive role accorded the Far East in global strategy.
The Communist threat

The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) was a legal entity until the Federation government banned it as part of emergency measures in June 1948. Its general strategy aimed to destabilize the colonial regime prior to a Communist take-over and creation of a people’s republic.¹ Prior to 1948, the Party had directed its efforts toward disrupting the economy of Singapore through control of the trade unions, an effort that failed because of vigorous police work. Thwarted in Singapore, the MCP in early 1948 shifted its focus to Malaya where, under the new, more militant leadership of Chin Peng, it prepared to follow the Cominform’s new line of opposition to Western powers.² At a meeting in March, the party’s Central Executive Committee approved a new policy of armed struggle.³ While its overt and known leaders went underground, the MCP began mobilizing guerrilla regiments it had raised during the war with training and equipment from Force 136, the wartime British Special Operations Executive (SOE) unit in the Far East. The regiments were supposed to complete their mobilization by September, at which point the Communists would initiate an armed general uprising in response to an expected declaration of emergency measures.⁴ In the meantime, the party’s activities would be aimed at increasing violence in the trade unions struggle, ultimately leading to a national revolutionary war.⁵ Thus, by June 1948, the predominately Chinese MCP had for some time been organizing strikes, carrying out industrial sabotage, and assassinating Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) supporters. It is now believed that in June 1948 the MCP’s armed forces consisted of approximately 5000 men and women, although other sources cite figures as high as 12000.⁶ At the time the British believed there to be ‘up to 600 armed gangsters and 3000 to 4000 armed guerrillas formed into small units lurking in and operating from the concealment of the difficult jungle country of the spine of Malaya’.⁷ The MCP initially called their guerrilla forces the Malayan People’s Anti-British Army (MPABA) but renamed them the Malayan Races’ Liberation Army (MRLA) the following year.⁸

The MCP’s preparations for armed struggle took place at the same time that the Russians initiated what British intelligence believed to be a centrally coordinated ‘cold war’ campaign in Europe and Asia.⁹ The February Communist coup in Czechoslovakia was followed in short order by Communist uprisings in Burma, Malaya, and Indonesia, and the Soviet blockade of Berlin. Nevertheless, when Communist terrorists murdered three European planters in the north Malayan district of Sungei Siput on 16 June, civil officials in Malaya were still trying to determine if they actually had an uprising on their hands and who was behind it.¹⁰