

Correspondence

Sir,

I am grateful to Karl Hack for putting me in touch with my historical sub-conscious (“Iron Claws on Malaya”, *JSEAS* [March 1999]). I am, of course, flattered to be bracketed with Professor Northcote Parkinson, but was hitherto unaware that being at school in wartime Britain could have affected my view of Templer’s part in the Malayan insurrection. I hadn’t, I admit, realized there was an image of Montgomery turning the World War Two “tide” at El Alamein. But I think there is quite a lot of agreement that there was a crisis of confidence in the Eighth Army before he took command, not to mention endless rumours of British withdrawal from Egypt. Obviously, things weren’t that bad when Templer arrived in Malaya, but it’s difficult to ignore the sense of deepening crisis, even before Gurney was ambushed and killed in October 1951. At least that was my impression, and so, in a way, for government it was the worst of times. If Hack had turned the page, however, he would have noticed I also said “At the same time it might be argued that while it was probably not the best of times then, at least with the advantage of hindsight, there were ‘good times’ coming!” Naturally, I blame Charles Dickens for this confusing paradox but obviously I have had no more luck in my choice of Shakespearean quotations.

Hack, presumably, thinks it inconceivable that “charismatic” leadership can have instant, transmuting effects on complex and dispersed campaigns. (Why, incidentally, “dispersed”? And aren’t most campaigns “complex”?) I’m not a military historian but in the case of Montgomery and the Eighth Army, Slim and the Fourteenth Army, I could be persuaded that he is wrong. He, in turn, might be persuaded that, to take another example from my wartime nostalgia, Churchill’s arrival as Prime Minister in 1940 had some importance, too.

Templer’s arrival in Malaya, however, if I have understood his argument, made little or no difference to what was anyway going to be a successful counter-insurgency campaign. As Hack rather quaintly puts it, “the ingredients were in place”. Unlike “most historians” who may not yet have realized that the Emergency had not reached what he calls “a high level stalemate”, he knows that with Gurney’s death the Emergency had reached “a murderous climax and the turning point”. But there are one or two points that still need to be cleared up. (I hadn’t realized, incidentally, that my own questions were “counter-factuals”.) If Gurney had not been killed, would his relations and the Malayan Chinese have improved? “If the Chinese were prepared to cooperate in the Emergency, once given a measure of protection, the end would soon be in sight, but they are still content only to talk and to criticize, but not to act.” How would the differences between the Director of Operations and the Commissioner of Police have been resolved? Would Gray or Briggs have had the last word on resettlement?

Before the end of 1951 these were real and serious problems. There were others. In particular one has to ask how secure were the resettlement areas? Had they ceased to supply the guerrillas with their food, supplies, intelligence and recruits? Had social or material conditions in the New Village done much, or anything, to change the allegiance of their inhabitants? Was there, or wasn’t there, a crisis in the police force, not to mention the special constabulary? Of leadership, morale, command and control, efficiency? Why wasn’t the war executive committee system working properly? As for evidence of

“dangerously hardening communal attitudes”, which Hack appears to dismiss, was it or wasn’t it ominous that *Mentri Mentri Besar*, in the aftermath of Gurney’s death, were reluctant to attend a meeting at which Chinese would be present? Because “they would not be able to speak freely on the subject which was uppermost in their minds: the complete failure, in their eyes, of the Chinese community to play its proper share (sic) in the effort to end the Emergency.”

It may be an exaggeration to say that after three years in the job Gurney was running out of steam; but if Lyttelton’s predecessor in the Colonial Office did confess that his government had been baffled by Malaya no doubt he, and they, should have known better. And to say, whether “sadly” or not, “at this stage it has become a military problem to which we have not been able to find the answer” presumably shows that he hadn’t got the big picture, or lacked moral fibre, or both. Whichever, the big problem — real, or, apparently, in Hack’s opinion, imaginary or inconsequential — gave me the impression of a crisis of confidence, so that what, and who, happened next was going to be important.

Almost everyone I talked to when writing my book spoke of the impact which Templer had when he arrived in Malaya. Most seemed to admire him, some disliked him, some perhaps did both. When Templer asked me why I hadn’t been to see him, in London, before I wrote the book, in Scotland, I had to say that I thought it might have confirmed a certain prejudice against him. Purcell’s indictment, as I’m sure Karl Hack would agree, was pretty formidable and I think I may also have reacted to Parkinson’s account, which I agree verged on hagiography. In the event, apart from the anecdotal evidence, and admitting to a mounting respect, it seemed to me there was a tide that was there for the taking, and Templer took it. (Sorry about the “hydraulic metaphor”, but it’s one which even Karl Hack can’t resist: twice.) But of course he was able to build on the success of others. For example, on the acceptance of non-Malays into the MCS, I wrote “Gurney had paved the way for Templer’s success.” Or, “It is difficult to overrate the importance of the Briggs plan both in its spirit and innovation.” In a third instance I have suggested that “Templer’s political programme may be regarded as the product of suggestive governments, High Commissioners and Civil Service advice”. Or, more specifically, “the Village Charter was a culmination of government policy that went back far beyond the arrival of Templer; but again it stood to Templer’s credit”.

Hack claims that, for me, the “decisive factor” or, in his culinary approach, the extra ingredient — needed to turn stalemate into victory was Templer’s coordinating position. He may infer that. I didn’t say it. But it’s an important proposition. I wasn’t at all certain that there was one, decisive, factor but, in any case, in the twenty-five years since my book was published one expects new interpretations and new approaches to the Emergency. Having, in effect, been banned in Malaysia, presumably not that many people have read my understanding of what happened. When the book is reprinted this year in Singapore (Cultured Lotus) it will be easier to compare my account of unresolved problems in 1951 with Karl Hack’s view that the Malayan government by 1952 was, apparently, of its own accord and momentum, freewheeling downhill to victory.

Yours etc,

Anthony Short

British and Communist Crises in Malaya: A Response to Anthony Short

What if Henry Gurney had not been killed? Didn't the Mentri Mentri Besar ask to exclude Chinese from a meeting? By such questions, Anthony Short evokes a counter-factual world in which Gurney survived and struggled. The implication: he had to die, or at least he had to go. He does add that "with hindsight" good times were coming, but clearly argues the opposite: late 1951 leadership problems were so critical they had to be solved before things could improve significantly.

Short's reply adds that given others' "successes" (my "ingredients"), Templer then "energized" the campaign at a time of slack water. So he confirms his 1951 "stalemate" thesis. The dialectic between us does, however, suggest a useful refinement of my survey. It seems Short is emphasising the crisis and need for leadership change more than Templer *per se*. Templer's leadership is then presented as a sufficient, if not strictly necessary change, when "what, and who, happened next was going to be important". Sufficient to restore the "confidence" essential to victory. (Short, "The Malayan Emergency", in *Regular Armies and Insurgency*, ed. Ronald Haycock [London: Croom Helm, 1979], pp. 62–63.) I also note that, though Templer's transmogrifying abilities seem less implausible if we assume his coordinating position cut red tape and disputes, Short endorses this only as an "important proposition". So this can be seen as one claim of works that stress Templer's role, rather than being attributed to Short in specific.

My own suspicion is that, given local conditions and ongoing refinement of the Briggs Plan, Gurney or any other general Britain was likely to send to its vital Malayan dollar-earner would probably have sufficed. With four-fifths of squatters moved by 1952 (Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya* [London: Muller, 1975], p. 293), and the MNLA planning reduced activity from late 1951, morale was likely to improve and energy be released for other tasks. Police retraining, already sought by Gray, would become possible. By 5 October 1951, the day before he died, Gurney felt the emphasis in resettlement might soon switch from quantity to quality. As for resettlement's impact, Short's method of judging its effectiveness seems to centre on questioning its state of completion. This is not without merit, but the best judge of resettlement is surely not its achievements or deficiencies, but how its targets, the MNLA and Chinese, reacted. "Iron Claws" shows how by late 1951 the MCP was feeling its effects, feared its development, but was failing to defeat it (pp.104–108, 110–13).

Next let's tackle Short's counter-factual in which Gurney survives, alienated from the Chinese, communal relations simmering. Short's *Communist Insurrection*, pp. 302–303, quotes 80 per cent of a Gurney document (4 October 1951), which seems to show dangerous levels of frustration with the Chinese. But it omits the document's last, crucial paragraph. This calls for increased MCA cooperation by measures such as more fund-raising, putting men in resettlements and instituting a full-time central organisation. In this context, the note's "anti-Chinese" statements can be seen as combining harsh criticism with pleas for more action: "The wealth amassed by the Chinese ... is enormous, and all of it will be lost unless something is done by the Chinese themselves." It is true that draconian action against "recalcitrant" Chinese was long part of British policy. The MCA were also bitter about accusations they were not doing enough, and about local officials'

attitudes. But the MCA needed Britain, and Britain's targeted toughness was limited by recognition that the aim was still to secure more Chinese help. This was vital not just to the Emergency, but to Britain's core strategy of creating a united "Malayan nation" and a wider Southeast Asian federation.

Besides, in restating his position Short fails to address "Iron Claws", p. 111. This shows that Gurney was working with Tan Cheng Lock from September to improve MCA action. Gurney discussed MCA reorganization with Tan on 3 October. On the fifth — the day after the note Short cites — Gurney told the Colonial Office he intended increasing Chinese cooperation, and wrote to Tan that they that should meet formally in late October (see Durham University: Malcolm Macdonald Papers, 25/2/40, 54, *passim*). As Tan put it (also styled Dato Sir Cheng Lock Tan: Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Tan papers 3.271, MCA memo. to Oliver Lyttelton, December 1951): "I was working in the closest intimacy and harmony, with Sir Henry which encouraged and inspired me ... his death is a great blow to the Chinese community and to me personally." This MCA reorganisation in turn helped underpin the Alliance. So the British narrative Short spins misreads Gurney's policy, ignores the extremely complex interplay of tension and cooperation (which continued under Templer), and misses the way Asian nationalism, British policy and the Emergency were interacting.

As for Malay-Chinese relations, they were difficult, as they were some bitter Communities Liaison Committee meetings (CLC) of 1949. Deep Malay-Chinese suspicions continued after 1952 (my *Defence and Decolonisation: Britain, Malaya and Singapore, 1941–1968* [Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000], p. 136 and *passim*). But the CLC ended with compromises on citizenship. After the 1951 crisis came the January 1952 formation of the UMNO-MCA Alliance in Kuala Lumpur. Short seems to be implying that we should see the founding moment of the Alliance, with its model of elite accommodation, mainly as one of dangerously escalating communal tensions. Such tensions must be seen in the longer and Asian contexts of Malaysian history, with its sometimes creative, sometimes unstable, dynamic between communal friction and the forging of working relations.

Communist Insurrection, then, over-privileges British plans and leaders as active ingredients. It underrates the MCP's October 1951 Resolutions and Asian evidence in general. That London and many in Malaya perceived a severe crisis in late 1951 is not in dispute (though some have seen any loss of morale following Gurney's death as transient, Templer as less than transformative, see Leonard Rayner, *Emergency Years: Malaya 1951–1954* [Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1991], pp. 2–3). The real issue is that the British crisis, though it must have affected efficiency, was not the only one, and arguably not the one with the severest implications. Military activity continued apace even if Templer's era did see much better organization, especially in intelligence, and even if I could only accept that Britain was "freewheeling" in 1952 in a minimal sense. That is, if the continuous application of 40,000 troops, more police, air power, refinement of the Briggs Plan, and periodical adjustment to developments is "freewheeling". My basic point, however, is that the acid test of the crisis is what happened during it. What did happen was that British policy continued its normal path of trial and error, evolution and execution: contact rates held up, resettlement progressed; decisions reached included the arming of more Home Guards, tightening food control, and provision of land titles for New Villagers (see my "Corpses, Prisoners of War and Captured Documents: British

and Communist Narratives of the Malayan Emergency”, in *The Clandestine Cold War in Asia, 1945–65: Western Intelligence, Propaganda and Special Operations*, ed. Richard J. Aldrich, Gary D. Rawsley and Ming-Yeh T. Rawsley [London: Frank Cass, 2000], pp. 221–22, 228).

The same cannot be said for MCP policy. The MCP’s October 1951 Resolutions said resettlement past and future implied supply problems. The MNLAs should not oppose resettlement to the last, must concentrate more on supply issues, increase deep jungle cultivation, and reduce many types of activity (for more detail, see my “British Intelligence and Counter-Insurgency in the Era of Decolonisation”, in *Intelligence and National Security* 14, 2 [Summer 1999]: 124–55). MCP plans were expected to transfer 1,500 from the MNLAs to support arms. By mid-1952, incidents were plummeting, the MCP Central Committee retreating to Perak, there deciding to continue to the Thai border. In theory the MCP could have reversed these changes and built on improved supplies, in practice the changes themselves made such a reverse difficult, and ongoing improvements in resettlement made this doubly so. Some of these issues were rehearsed at Canberra in February 1999. There, Chin Peng faced historians (myself and Short included), and questions on 1951 as a high point. In reply he told his own story: of mounting supply difficulties and the failure of their August 1950 anti-resettlement policy. On Gurney’s death he said one man “cannot decide the fate” of a war, “even myself”.

Hence my model begins to integrate bits of British, MCP, and Malaysian Chinese narratives, which have previously tended to float free of each other. It suggests Britain’s approach is best seen as one of population control and controlled coercion. Hearts and minds strategies were integrated into this as a vital auxiliary, often acting as a palliative to harsh controls. Through some mix of necessity and miscalculation, the MCP in 1951 decided this British strategy required them to alter their own policy. In turn, the approach was working despite the British crisis, and the MCP struggling, because of Malaya’s inter-communal and intra-communal patterns (“Iron Claws”, pp. 115–23). Also because Britain’s record elsewhere meant its promises of self-government did not ring hollow. In this context, Templer brought the campaign to peak efficiency. Recently I have argued the critical challenge comes not in downplaying either crisis, but in how we integrate apparently contradictory British and communist crisis narratives (“Corpses, Prisoners of War and Captured Documents”). My *Defence and Decolonisation* also places this in the wider picture: where Britain secured core strategic requirements, but only by changing policies in the face of Asian pressures; and where local forces were as important as colonial policy in settling decolonisation outcomes.

This is the context for footnote 5 of “Iron Claws”, which asks if notions of British military leadership in World War Two might influence some interpretations of Templer. This was, after all, Parkinson’s *leitmotif*. He saw Montgomery as the star example, Templer as learning from Montgomery and turning the tide in Malaya. Short also stresses British leadership, though giving Templer’s predecessors more detailed credit for their successes. Short’s letter now restates that leadership can be vital. It can, and Slim and Montgomery do seem to have helped restore confidence in their campaigns. But Slim and Montgomery were fighting conflicts — in one case a desert war — against armies that used large formations, sometimes including armour and air power. By contrast, Malaya’s insurgents were so dispersed that securing a single contact could require hundreds of patrol hours. MCP orders could take weeks to reach rank and file in the jungle, prolonging delays

between policy-making and impact. With major incidents halving in about half a year in 1952 (“Iron Claws”, pp. 107–109, 113), is it not likely that such changes were driven in large part by the MCP’s 1951 Resolutions, and by the communist problems and miscalculations underlying them?

“Iron Claws” call for more cross-fertilization between British policy perspectives and Asian evidence — Short’s *Communist Insurrection* being an important example of the former genre — thus stands. We have not yet captured the full complexity of British-Asian relations, with its mix of cajoling and coercion. When the likes of Chin Peng, MCP papers, Tan Cheng Lock and Loh Kok Wah receive still more attention, and are granted equal authority with colonial records, different and more nuanced pictures of the road to Merdeka may emerge. For what is decolonization, but the interlocking, combative and collaborative, of Asian and European narratives?

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