

By Noor R Ampssler

Winning the "hearts and minds" of the people has become enshrined as a pivotal component of counter-insurgency warfare ever since 1952 when General Sir Gerald Templer declared it would be the key to success in fighting the communists. The Malayan Emergency is still regarded as the shining paradigm of how to properly wage a counter-insurgency campaign and Templer's emphasis on hearts and minds established in military circles a fixation with these operations. However, what if during the Emergency the hearts and minds campaign was not the crux upon which victory turned and if the evidence for the effectiveness in this area is ambivalent at best. What if other factors during the Malayan Emergency, especially the unique context in which the counter-insurgency campaign was fought, more plausibly explain the victory of the government security forces? Does one then question the established wisdom and think the unthinkable: that an overriding emphasis on hearts and minds is simply overrated and even misplaced?

General Sir Gerald Templer first used the phrase, "hearts and minds" soon after his arrival in Malaya in February 1952 when he took up his combined post as High Commissioner (head of the civil administration) and Director of Operations (military). He arrived at the nadir of the counter-insurgency campaign. The Emergency had been dragging on since June 1948. The Malayan Communist Party forces appeared to be getting progressively stronger and in October of 1951 had scored a massive propaganda victory when the preceding High Commissioner was killed in a roadside ambush. Templer's arrival during this tense period is generally acknowledged as the turning point in the Emergency. Within a year of his arrival and his declaration of winning hearts and minds as a priority, the tempo of communist military operations had decreased dramatically; by 1953 it was clear that the communists were on the ropes. This dramatic reversal under Templer's leadership captured the imagination of the Malayan public and later military analysts.[i]

Templer's leadership and stress on hearts and minds have been seen by analysts and historians as pivotal to the success of the security forces. Yet the seeds of the communist defeat predated the introduction of the hearts and minds campaign and were rooted in the unique context in which the Emergency was fought, specifically, the ethnic nature of the insurgency, Britain's political authority in Malaya, a solid economy, and Malaya's geography. These factors were much more critical to the defeat of the communists than Templer's hearts and minds campaign; these factors would eventually determine the communist defeat.[ii]

Malaya was then, as it is today, a multi-ethnic country. The population in 1952 was approximately 50% Malays, 38% Chinese, 11% Indian, and 1% others. In sharp contrast the Malayan Communist Party(MCP) was approximately 94% Chinese having spiritually been an offshoot of the Chinese Communist Party.[iii] For many years the MCP had been focused on events in China whereby Malays had taken little interest; recruiting efforts were additionally stymied by language and cultural barriers. Thus, during the Emergency the base of support for

the communist guerrillas was limited to the Chinese community which became the target of Templer's hearts and minds campaign.

The British exploited this demographic weakness. Before Templer's arrival General Sir Harold Briggs had already started steps to separate the communist forces from their base of support through what has become known as the "Briggs Plan". About 43% of the Chinese population lived in urban areas and were therefore of little practical assistance to the jungle guerrillas. Only 30% of Malaya's rural population was Chinese.^[iv] Moreover, due to land reservation laws enacted by the British in the early 20th century the rural Chinese did not have title to the land; legally they were merely squatters. Consequently, the British could uproot the rural Chinese minority from the land and consolidate them into "New Villages" under the control of the security forces. Surrounded by barbed wire fences, the rural Chinese were limited by strict curfews and checkpoints and not permitted to leave the villages with food other than cooked lunches which were highly perishable in the tropical heat. The New Villages effectively starved the communist jungle forces; they were either forced to curtail offensive operations and devote increasing amounts of time to eking out a living from gardens in small jungle clearings or to risk greater exposure to the security forces by making more forays into populated areas. The American Strategic Hamlet program in Vietnam, though similar in concept, failed because communism in Vietnam was not limited by ethnicity; it simply was not feasible to control the entire rural Vietnamese population in significant areas. Because of Malaya's unique demographics, the British were able to effectively starve the communist forces in the field.

The New Villages also highlight another critical advantage enjoyed by the British in Malaya, their direct control of all the security forces and almost all aspects of civil administration. American efforts in Vietnam, El Salvador, Iraq, or Afghanistan have been hampered by the need to deal with separate local government. In contrast, the British in Malaya could act directly and forcefully where needed. They carried out needed reforms without having to gain the permission of a local, and perhaps ineffective and corrupt, government. Since the late 19th century, when the British had gained control of the Malay peninsula, they had established an extensive, effective, and honest civil service and police force who were well paid, paid on time, tightly supervised, and enjoyed a good esprit de corps. The professionalism and lack of large-scale corruption in the Malayan civil service and police cannot be stressed enough. Civil servants did not divert funds needed for projects or services and police officers did not form death squads or shake down merchants and other civilians in order to support themselves. This meant that the population could be effectively monitored through the medium of mandatory identity cards which allowed the police to better identify and penetrate communist cells.

As a further advantage, Malaya's economy was not only stable but relatively prosperous. Malay's most profitable exports, tin and rubber, enjoyed a boom in the early 1950's due to increased demand because of the Korean War. The export taxes meant that the British administration in Malaya generated money within Malaya to pay for the considerable expenses of constructing the New Villages and expanding the police force. A booming economy (not related to drugs) during an insurgency is a very rare but very fortunate circumstance. Moreover, the development of the tin and rubber industries in the late 19th and early 20th century meant that Malaya already had a well developed infrastructure of roads, bridges, and railroads allowing for rapid deployment of the British and Commonwealth forces around the populated portions of

the country.[v]

Finally, the British benefited greatly from Malaya's geographic situation as a peninsula. The Royal Navy and marine police units prevented supplies reaching the communists by sea. Malaya's only neighbor was bordered on a narrow, remote, dense jungle at the northern end of the peninsula. If these physical circumstances were not favourable enough for the British, they also had the co-operation of the Thai government and security forces in sealing off the border. As the chairman of the MCP, Chin Peng, would later lament, the communist forces never received even a bullet from outside Malaya during the Emergency.[vi]

Prior to Templer's arrival in early 1952, the factors noted above were already at work defeating the communists. Having learned from tactical blunders made at the beginning of the Emergency, the military, by 1952, had become increasingly sophisticated and with the greatly expanded police were hitting their stride. The New Villages were being rapidly established. In 1951 alone, 429 New Villages were created and 385,000 people relocated.[vii] The villages were extensively fenced and staffed by sufficient police to ensure the population was monitored and no food or other supplies left the villages, thus, slowly strangling the Communist forces. Templer's arrival accelerated the process even more by improving civil and military co-operation and emphasizing intelligence gathering and distribution. Most importantly, his aggressive leadership reinvigorated the security forces who relentlessly pursued the guerrillas into the deep jungle.

While Templer undertook aggressive civil and military action he also sought to win over the hearts and minds of the Chinese community. He ensured that the housing and services, especially education and health, in the New Villages were of good standard and that elected village councils were established so that residents could manage their own affairs. He ensured the passage of legislation that granted citizenship to the majority of the Chinese for the first time in Malaya's history. Templer's administration also oversaw Malaya's first municipal and district elections which allowed the Chinese to participate in Malaya's developing democracy. These elections fostered the development of party politics in Malaya and transformed the Malayan Chinese Association from a welfare organization to a muscular political party.[viii]

Despite Templer's attempts to win the hearts and minds of the Chinese community, the MCP still enjoyed the support, active or passive, of significant portions of the Chinese community. A series of reports prepared by Sir Donald MacGillivray, Templer's successor as High Commissioner, on the position of the Chinese community stressed that gaining the hearts and minds of the Chinese remained an elusive goal and that the Chinese lacked, "any feeling of loyalty towards Malaya or her Governments". MacGillivray's observations reflect the general consensus amongst British administrators and officers who believed that the Chinese remained very much "on the fence." It is telling that these assessments were prepared in 1955, by which time the communists had been soundly defeated as a significant military force. Even though the term "hearts and minds" as we know it today was coined and popularized during the Emergency, victory in Malaya was achieved without unambiguously winning the hearts and minds of the Chinese community.[ix]

By late 1952 the tide was turning against the communists. By late 1953 the guerrillas who

remained in the jungle were starving, demoralized, and ineffective. So much so that Templer believed that the Emergency was won and would only require mopping up operations for several more years. There is conclusive empirical proof that the New Villages and aggressive patrolling into the jungle degraded the communist forces in the field, yet the evidence for the success of the hearts and minds campaign is much more ambivalent. [x]

More recently in Northern Ireland a resolution to the "troubles" was found without a similar clear cut hearts and minds success. The British Government did not win the hearts and minds of the nationalist community yet a practical and peaceful resolution was achieved. Most recently in Iraq violence decreased sharply but again it was a function not of winning hearts and minds but rather a series of pragmatic compromises by the participants. In each case the resolutions were specific and not applicable to the other.

The resounding defeat of the communists in the Malayan Emergency made that counter-insurgency effort a paradigm for future efforts without often understanding the unique context of the Emergency. The Malayan context and its exploitation by the British best explains the success of the security forces. However, Templer's success and his emphasis on hearts and minds have become inextricably but incorrectly intertwined. The success of the hearts and minds campaign in Malaya is debatable yet the legacy of that conflict is that almost all planning for counter-insurgency warfare includes a thoughtless knee jerk emphasis on hearts and minds. Hearts and minds efforts might resolve social problems and are therefore a worthwhile goal for long term stability but their achievement is not necessary for defeating the insurgents in the short term. When we think the unthinkable, that hearts and minds are not a panacea for counter-insurgency warfare, it forces us to think hard on specifics, the particular context of the insurgency and how that context can best be exploited to defeat the insurgents, and how a peaceful resolution might be found.

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[i] Anthony Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya: 1948-1960* (New York, Crane Russak & Company, 1975), 274-306, 336-344.; John Coates, *Suppressing Insurgency: An Analysis of the Malayan Emergency, 1948-1954* (Boulder Colorado: Westview Press, 1992), 114-136.; Kumar Ramakrishna, "'Transmogrifying' Malaya : the Impact of Sir Gerald Templer (1952-54)." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* Vol 32 No. 1 (Feb 2001): 79-92.; For an alternative interpretation of Templer's role see: Karl Hack, "'Iron Claws on Malaya": The Historiography of the Malayan Emergency." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* Vol. 30 No. 4 (March 1999): 99-125.

[ii] Robert O. Tilman, "The Non-Lessons of the Malayan Emergency," *Asian Survey* 6 (August 1966): 407-419.

[iii] Federation of Malaya, *Annual Report on the Federation of Malaya, 1952* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printer, 1953), 21.; Federation of Malaya, *Communist Banditry in Malaya: The*

Emergency, June 1948-December 1949 (Kuala Lumpur: Department of Public Relations, n.d.), 36.

[iv] Federation of Malaya, A Report on the 1947 Census of Population by M.V. Del Tufo (Kuala Lumpur: The Government Printer, 1948), 47.

[v] Richard Stubbs, Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare: The Malayan Emergency 1948-1960 (Singapore: Oxford University press, 1989), 107-114.

[vi] C.C. Chin and Karl Hack, ed., Dialogues with Chin Peng: New Light on the Malayan Communist Party (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), 150.

[vii] Federation of Malaya, Annual Report on the Federation of Malaya, 1951 (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printer, 1952), 12-13.

[viii] Stubbs, Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare, 155-220.; Ramakrishna, "Impact of Sir Gerald Templer" JSEAS, 79-92.; Simon C. Smith, "General Templer and Counter-Insurgency in Malaya: Hearts and Minds, Intelligence, and Propaganda," Intelligence and National Security 16 (Autumn 2001): 60-78.

[ix] Colonial Office 1030/174/ no 10 MacGillivray to Lennox-Boyd, 26 Jan 1955 Colonial Office 1030/174/ no 9 MacGillivray to Lennox-Boyd, 28 Jan 1955 in A. J., Stockwell, ed., British Documents on the End of Empire, Malaya: Part 3, The Alliance Route to Independence, 1953-1957 (London: HMSO, 1995), 83-95.

[x] John Coates, Suppressing Insurgency, Appendix A.2-A.4, 192-197.