

The Terminology of Terrorism: Malaya, 1948-52

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Although Cold War propaganda is now the subject of close scholarly scrutiny, the main method by which it was communicated – language – has been overlooked. The Malayan Emergency illustrates how the British government grappled with the issue of political terminology within the broader context of anti-communist propaganda. This article will analyse the use of political language; the change from ‘bandit’ to ‘communist terrorist’; and the problems of delineating the Malayan from the international audience.

In so far as the Cold War was a psychological war for the ‘hearts and minds’ of populations at home and abroad, the language used by combatants on both sides of the ideological divide assumed immense significance. Those fighting on the front line of Cold War propaganda devoted considerable attention to nomenclature believed to be the most appropriate, evocative or efficacious. ‘In political and ideological struggles’, Conor Cruise O’Brien has observed, ‘words are weapons, not analytical tools. That has always been so.’¹

It is surprising, therefore, that the literature on the language of the Cold War is so sparse. None of the numerous recent studies of America’s propaganda offensives and ‘cultural cold war’ against the Soviet Union, for example, has discussed the role of political language in the projection of Western values or the dissemination of anti-Communist propaganda through written and spoken word.² This omission repeats the pattern of earlier studies.³ Similarly, despite the Soviet claim that propaganda generally and radio in particular constituted ‘the most important peacetime weapon of psychological warfare’, analyses of sociolinguistics behind the ‘Iron Curtain’ are absent.⁴ Phillip Deery is Associate Professor in the Dept. of Asian & International Studies, Victoria University, Melbourne. His e-mail contact is phillip.deery@vu.edu.au.

1 Conor Cruise O’Brien, ‘Terrorism under democratic conditions: The case of the IRA’, in *Terrorism, legitimacy, and power: The consequences of political violence*, ed. Martha Crenshaw (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), p. 93.

2 Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *The rhetorical presidency, propaganda, and the Cold War, 1945-1955* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), especially ch. 4; Frances Stoner Saunders, *Who paid the piper? The CIA and the cultural Cold War* (New York: New Press, 2000); Gregory Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin: America’s strategy to subvert the Soviet Bloc, 1947-1956* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Scott Lucas, *Freedom’s war: The American crusade against the Soviet Union* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997); and Alvin A. Snyder, *Warriors of disinformation: American propaganda, Soviet lies and the winning of the Cold War* (New York: Arcade, 1995).

3 See, for example, Thomas Sorenson, *The word war: The story of American propaganda* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968); John Whitton and Arthur Larson, *Propaganda: Towards disarmament in the war of words* (New York: Oceania, 1964); and Sig Mickelson, *America’s other voice: The story of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (New York: Praeger, 1983).

4 Vladimir Artemov, *Information abused: Critical essays* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1981), p. 13. See

Even in the vast literature of US counterinsurgency and psychological operations (or 'psyops') during the Vietnam War, this dimension remains missing.⁵ It is almost entirely overlooked in analyses of the Malayan Emergency, with which this article is concerned, that have dealt with propaganda, psychological warfare or 'the war of words'.⁶ In the most recent study of propaganda during the Emergency, the question of political language is relegated to less than one paragraph.⁷ Even in a rare analysis of the political uses of the word 'terrorism', the focus is so narrow, the extrapolation so limited and the historiographical clothing so threadbare that its tantalising title – 'the logomachy of terrorism' – delivers less than it promises.⁸

The article therefore aims to fill a partial historiographical gap in studies of both the Malayan Emergency and the Cold War generally. I have chosen the Emergency as a case study since it clearly shows the British government grappling with this issue of political terminology within the broader context of anti-Communist propaganda.⁹ Whilst the

Deception operations: Studies in the East-West context, ed. David A. Charters and Maurice A. J. Tugwell (London: Brassey's, 1990), pt. 1; Richard H. Schultz and Roy Godson, *Dezinformatsia: Active measures in Soviet strategy* (London: Brassey's, 1984); and Roger Beaumont, 'Soviet psychological warfare and propaganda', *Signal*, 42, 3 (1987): 75-84.

5 See, for example, Caroline Page, *U.S. official propaganda during the Vietnam War, 1965-1973* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996). An exception is Jeffrey Race's fascinating semi-anthropological study, *War comes to Long An: Revolutionary conflict in a Vietnamese province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), especially chs. 4-5. A very comprehensive bibliographic essay on US psyops can be found in Christopher Simpson, *Science of coercion. Communication research and psychological warfare 1945-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. : 123-32.

6 This phrase was the chapter title of Noel Barber, *The war of the running dogs. How Malaya defeated the Communist guerrillas* (London: Collins, 1971), ch. 10. Psychological warfare – but not semiotic warfare – is also discussed by Michael Tracey, *A variety of lives: A biography of Sir Hugh Greene* (London: Bodley Head, 1983), pp. 126-37; Greene was the Head of Information Services in Malaya, 1950-51. Other studies include R. W. Komer, *The Malayan Emergency in retrospect: Organization of a successful counterinsurgency effort* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corp., 1972), section IX; Robert Jackson, *The Malayan Emergency. The Commonwealth's wars 1948-1966* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 109-18; John Coates, *Suppressing insurgency: An analysis of the Malayan Emergency* (Boulder: Westview, 1993), pp. 114-37; Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and minds in guerrilla warfare: The Malayan Emergency 1948-1960* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 155-64, 180-4; Brian Stewart, 'Winning in Malaya: An intelligence success story', in *The clandestine Cold War in Asia, 1945-65: Western intelligence, propaganda and special operations*, ed. Richard J. Aldrich et al. (London: Frank Cass, 1999), pp. 267-83. The one notable exception is Susan L. Carruthers, *Winning hearts and minds: British governments, the media and colonial counter insurgency, 1944-1960* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995), ch. 2. A passing reference to the use of the term 'bandit' can be found in Lucian Pye, *Guerrilla Communism in Malaya: Its social and political meaning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), p. 88, n. 5.

7 Kumar Ramakrishna, 'A matter of confidence: Propaganda of word and deed in the Malayan Emergency June 1948–Dec. 1958' (Ph.D. diss., Royal Holloway, University of London, 1999), p. 152. Even this fleeting reference disappeared from the published version; see Kumar Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda: The winning of Malayan hearts and minds 1948-1958* (London: Curzon, 2002).

8 Victor T. LeVine, 'The logomachy of terrorism: On the political uses and abuses of definition', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 7, 4 (1995): 45-59. LeVine's forensic-like dissection of a terrorist act (a deliberate bus crash in July 1989) by a Palestinian member of Islamic Jihad precludes broader lessons: 'the transformative power of names – including labels, characterisations, and definition – needs no elaboration here' (p. 49).

9 There is now a vast literature on the Malayan Emergency. The seminal studies are referred to by Karl Hack in his "'Iron claws on Malaya": The historiography of the Malayan Emergency', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 30, 1 (1999): 99-125. Noteworthy recent discussions of the Emergency can be found in *idem.*, *Defence and decolonisation in Southeast Asia: Britain, Malaya and Singapore 1941-1968* (London: Curzon, 2001) and Timothy N. Harper, *The end of empire and the making of Malaya* (Cambridge:

article is not located within any conceptual framework of linguistic or communications theory, it accepts as a starting point that language has a political function; it is not only determined by political institutions and interests but is itself a determinant of political perceptions and behaviour.¹⁰ By charting the shift in the language used to depict Communist insurgents in Malaya, this article seeks to throw some new historical light on the use of political language during the early years of the Emergency. The focus here is not the domestic reaction to such language – from Singapore, Kuala Lumpur or the jungle – on which the documentary record is silent in any case, but on its formulation and dissemination by the British government.

One of the agencies responsible for coordinating anti-Communist propaganda activities in Malaya was the Information Research Department (IRD), a top secret semi-autonomous unit created within the British Foreign Office in early 1948.¹¹ Until this time the Foreign, Colonial and Commonwealth Relations Offices were still largely autonomous and the responsibility for British propaganda within the colonies lay with the Information Policy Committee of the Colonial Office. From 1948 this changed and the IRD became the directing arm of anti-Communist propaganda. Soon it was the key instrument in Britain's clandestine ideological offensive against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In June 1948, almost immediately after the Malayan Emergency commenced, an IRD base was established in the compound of Phoenix Park, the Singapore residence of the Commissioner-General for the UK in Southeast Asia, Malcolm MacDonald, and by August the following year it was fully operational.¹²

Officially, the IRD Office in Phoenix Park worked under the umbrella of the Regional Information Office; as Ralph Murray, the first IRD Head, wrote in January 1949:

As you know we are proposing to set up a Regional Information Office there [Singapore]...which will take care of our material: re-writing it for local consumption and putting it through the various media such as the press,

Cambridge University Press, 1998). In none of these analyses is there more than at most a fleeting reference to the terminology used by the British.

10 Mueller, *Politics of communication*, pp. 18-24. There are, of course, numerous examinations of the political uses of language ranging from the classic essay by George Orwell, 'Politics and the English language', in *The collected essays, journalism and letters of George Orwell. In front of your nose 1945-1950 IV*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), pp. 127-40; to Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the mind: A history of propaganda from the ancient world to the present era* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 1-16. Neither of these deals with the Cold War period.

11 Paul Lashmar and James Oliver, *Britain's secret propaganda war: The Foreign Office and the Cold War, 1948-1977* (London: Sutton, 1998), ch. 4. The IRD predated by one year its American counterpart, the United States Information Agency, which funded the 'Voice of America'. At its peak in the early 1970s, the IRD was a massive operation, employing 400 staff based at River-walk House on the South Bank in London and with an annual budget in excess of £1,000,000. See Brian Crozier, *Free hand: The unseen war 1941-1991* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 104; Crozier worked for the IRD throughout the 1960s and early 1970s.

12 Public Records Office, Kew, London (henceforth PRO), FO 1110/143, 'Anti-Communist propaganda in Far East; opening of information bureau in Singapore', 10 Dec. 1948; PRO, FO 1110/277, 'Progress report: Information Research Department 1st January to 31st July, 1949', para. 19. According to Foreign Office historians, this Singapore office produced 'effective and widely-circulated output'; Library and Records Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *Origins and establishment of the Foreign Office Information Research Department, 1946-48* (London: HMSO, 1995), p. 15.

broadcasting etc. The Commissioner General attaches considerable importance to the project, which has become even more necessary now that the Communists look like becoming the masters of at least most of China.¹³

Part of its brief was to collect and disseminate 'anti-Communist material and such propaganda and psychological warfare items as have bearing on the Communist effort'.¹⁴ It also published numerous pamphlets and booklets of relevance to Malaya; these included *Communist principles and tactics in South-East Asia*, *The danger and where it lies*, *The expansion of Russia's East Asian empire* and *Communist propaganda attacks in South-East Asia*.¹⁵

Unofficially, IRD operations were run by the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), specifically Maurice Oldfield, the station chief in Singapore. It was funded from the 'Secret Vote', the same mechanism through which MI6 received its budget and which placed both bodies beyond parliamentary scrutiny. The links were personified by the second head of the IRD, John Rennie, who became head of MI6.¹⁶ In Malaya the IRD also collaborated with both the CIA, which had a relatively sizeable presence in Singapore, and the local MI5 office, Security Intelligence Far East (SIFE), but the latter was small and 'not much involved in the day-to-day [Malayan] Emergency'.¹⁷ The importance of covert anti-Communist propaganda within the broader context of intelligence activities was always stressed, as indicated by the position of the British Cabinet Committee on Colonial Information Policy that 'we regard the Foreign Office publicity work in foreign countries as very important in the "cold war"'.¹⁸ 'Publicity work' was a euphemism for the propaganda arm of psyops.

The IRD used both 'black' propaganda – strategically placed lies and false rumours – and 'grey' propaganda, whereby deliberately slanted, non-attributable information was

13 National Archives (Washington, DC), General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, 841.20246 D/1-1049, Extract from letter, 6 Jan. 1949, from R. Murray, sent by US Embassy, Singapore, to Washington. (My thanks to John Prados for this reference.)

14 PRO, FO 1110/277, 'Progress Report'; see also PRO, FO 1110/210, 'Methods used in anti-Communist propaganda in foreign countries' (n.d.). Coates, *Suppressing insurgency*, p. 126, makes a tantalising reference to 'the Psychological Warfare Section' of the Emergency Information Services but does not elaborate. It seems certain this section was the jointly-run MI6/IRD operation.

15 See *Index to the correspondence of the Foreign Office for the year 1950* (London: HMSO, 1980), p. 447; PRO, FO 1110/277, 'List of articles despatched between April and July 1949', Annexe 'c'; PRO, FO 1110/1166, confidential correspondence, C. G. Costley-White, 15 Jan. 1958, 'Use of IRD material in the Federation of Malaya'.

16 For MI6 involvement with the IRD see PRO, FO 110/184, correspondence from MI6 officer (identity withheld) to A. S. Halford, 31 Dec. 1948. See also Paul Lashmar, 'Covert in glory', *New Statesman and Society*, 8, 342 (3 Mar. 1995): 14. There is some debate over whether the relationship between the two organisations was marked by warmth or rivalry. Jonathan Bloch and Patrick Fitzgerald, *British intelligence and covert action: Africa, Middle East and Europe since 1945* (Dingle, Ireland: Brandon, 1984) argue for closeness (p. 91), while Stephen Dorril, *MI6: Fifty years of special operations* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000) alleges that MI6 regarded the IRD as 'amateurs' (p. 488).

17 The CIA connection is mentioned in Dorril, *MI6*, p. 711. SIFE is discussed in Richard J. Aldrich, *The hidden hand: Britain, America and Cold War secret intelligence* (London: John Murray, 2001), p. 507. The Director of SIFE was Jack Morton, who Hack contends was influential primarily because of his accessibility to high officials and commanders in Singapore; Karl Hack, 'British intelligence and counter-insurgency in the era of decolonisation: The example of Malaya', *Intelligence and national security*, 14, 2 (1999): 150, n. 47.

18 PRO, CAB 130/37, 'Cabinet Committee on Colonial Information Policy – Three-year plan for the expansion of publicity services in Commonwealth countries and the colonies', C.I. 49(66), 15 July 1949.

produced and disseminated to influential elites at home and abroad. The 'correct' political phraseology was crucial to the success of such propaganda and the IRD worked hard to ensure that its propagandists – speechwriters, broadcasters, journalists and politicians – used the most effective words and phrases in their articles and speeches. From the very outset of the Cold War, therefore, the Information Research Department was preoccupied with political language. Its recently declassified files provide a fascinating picture of the lexicography of the Cold War at its genesis: words and phrases to which the post-war generation became accustomed, even intimate, are here being debated and decided upon.

'The persistent use of particular words or phrases to convey a meaning is an elementary step in any organised publicity. In the present battle for world opinion ... it is essential that we should recourse to this technique.'¹⁹ The expression 'communazi', which foreshadowed the widely used 'Red Fascism', was floated but not endorsed. In describing 'imperialism', the adjective 'Russian' was preferred over 'Red' because the latter had 'favourable associations' and could 'cause confusion with Socialist Parties'. The use of the phrase 'Soviet fear-belt' to describe Eastern Europe, and the revival of the term 'Czar' to describe Stalin was recommended. However, at this stage in late 1948, there was not a clear consensus:

'Czar' tie[s] up quite well with the line of harping on 'barbaric' ... but this sort of thing may well become ludicrous if overdone ... I think there is much to be said for simple words like tyranny and tyrant, which people really understand. I am a little hesitant about *too much* Czar stuff, since the differences are so easy to point out, and then the whole case seems to fall down I have not dealt with 'backward', 'out-of-date', 'barbaric' etc. These phrases ... make the Soviet bosses madder than any others. Let us always use them²⁰

A term that was adopted and thus entered the vocabulary of the Cold War was 'Kremlin', which was 'the most useful single word for general audiences in order to fix in people's minds' the character of Russian communism. Thus, 'Kremlin Imperialism' – a 'graphic and sinister term' – was strongly endorsed.²¹

Such naming of the enemy was not, of course, confined to the role of the Soviet Union, real or perceived, in Europe. The IRD also confronted the challenge of

19 PR 704/G, 'Memorandum on the use of words in publicity about Communists', 1948 (Box: Anti-Communist propaganda, Labour Party International Department, Labour History and Archive Centre, Manchester). The link between the British Labour Party and the IRD was personified by Denis Healey, who worked for the first (in the International Department) and collaborated with the second. See Denis Healey, *The time of my life* (London: M. Joseph, 1989), pp. 106-7, and *idem.*, 'The Cominform and world Communism', *International Affairs*, 24, 3 (1948): 339-49.

20 PRO, FO 1110/191, emphasis added; FO 1110/2297, 'Standard words for use in propaganda about Russia'. Other terminology issues are discussed in memos from R. Murray, 26 Nov. 1948; R. Fraser, 4 Sept. 1948; A. Watson and C. Mayhew, 16 Dec. 1948; J. Cloake and A. Watson, 31 Dec. 1948. See also the series of internal memos in late December 1948 relating to the criticisms made of the language used in the BBC's Russian broadcasts by Boris Shub, who helped establish the Voice Of America. In January 1949 a memo summarising and commenting on his criticisms was prepared for – but finally not sent to – Sir Ian Jacob at the BBC; see PRO, FO 110/16.

21 PR 704/G, 'Memorandum on the use of words'. In the US, in contrast, 'red' was used with less compunction and more freely; Les K. Adler and Thomas G. Paterson, 'Red fascism: The merger of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in the American image of totalitarianism, 1930s-1950s', *American Historical Review*, 75, 4 (1970): 1046-64.

communism in the Far East. With the onset of the Emergency, the IRD acquired a large measure of the responsibility for how the colonial insurgents – the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) – should be labelled and depicted.²² The word chosen, in this battle for political authority, was ‘bandit’. This was not a new appellation: Chinese Communists, for example, had been called ‘bandits’ by the Japanese during World War Two, by the Kuomintang before 1949 and Chiang Kai Shek’s regime in Taiwan after 1949. According to Tim Jones, it was ‘normal practice’ and had been used in both inter-war Palestine and post-war Greece. This terminology was also used, more surprisingly, in the 1960s: ‘In Vietnam there is aggression similar to that which occurred in Malaya, which is being fomented by the Vietcong who are also Communist bandits’.²³

In all instances the aim was to deny the legitimacy of the opponent. The term ‘bandit’ is an epithet which invokes negative reactions and which, if it sticks, can isolate and detach the guerrillas from the population they are trying to influence or penetrate. In the highly charged atmosphere of the early Cold War, in which international communism was regarded as both iniquitous and ubiquitous, the vocabulary employed became all the more important. In Malaya it became a critical part of counterinsurgency operations. The act of labelling an opponent was, after all, more than a question of semantics; it was a profoundly political process. The political motivations of the communist insurgents could be stripped, their widespread support from the Malayan Chinese diminished, and their nationalistic credentials maligned. The aura of patriotism would be replaced by the stigma of illegitimacy. In late 1948 the Colonial Office informed the Defence Department that

It has been decided that the criminal elements engaged in acts of violence in Malaya should be referred to as ‘bandits’. On no account should the term ‘insurgents’, which might suggest a genuine popular uprising, be used. I should be grateful if you could bring this to the notice of your dept.²⁴

The Colonial Office thus showed a keen awareness of how language shaped meaning and, consequently, public perceptions of politically motivated violence. The MCP was to be projected not as a legitimate political movement operating within and drawing inspiration from broader anti-colonialist sentiments, but instead as an isolated band of thugs and criminals. Yet the Colonial Office was not altogether disingenuous. O. H. Morris, one of its top officials, genuinely could not tell whether the present ‘outrage’ was ‘the work of gang robbers, or of gangsters employed by political groups’.²⁵

In fact, the Malayan Races’ Liberation Army (MRLA), the military wing of the MCP, was a guerrilla force. It was similar to, for example, the Communist movement in China during 1928–45, the Huks in the Philippines from 1946 to the mid-1950s and the Vietminh in Indochina from 1941. Although historians have readily discerned the

22 PRO, FO 953/1637, Top Secret, ‘The work of the Regional Information Office at Singapore’ (1949).

23 National Archives of Australia (ACT) [henceforth NAA], A4940/1, C3380, ‘Nuclear weapons for Australian forces’, Cabinet Minute 15 May 1962, Decision No. 241. Tim Jones, *Postwar counterinsurgency and the SAS, 1945–1952: A special type of warfare* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), p. 82. The Hindu term ‘dacoits’, referring to an organised gang of robbers, was applied to the insurgents in Burma in 1946–7.

24 PRO, CO 534/4762, ‘Designation of bandits in Malaya’, Minute, J. D. Higham to K. Blackburne, 12 Nov. 1948. Indicative of the importance attached to political terminology, this document was classified ‘Top Secret’ and was to be ‘circulated by hand at all stages’ (emphasis in original).

25 PRO, CO 717/172/52849/9/1948, Minute, O. H. Morris to A. Creech Jones, 21 June 1948.

strategies of guerrilla in these rural-based rebellions and insurgents have often identified themselves as guerrillas, it was rarely a term used by authorities at the time. Guerrillas are proud to be called guerrillas, but to call them 'bandits' is to link them with criminality. A guerrilla is not a bandit; as Eric Hobsbawm points out, 'banditry has next to no organization or ideology, and is totally inadapted to modern social movements ... [It] was and is inefficient in every way ... [and] is incapable of effective guerrilla organization'.²⁶ This obviously was not the case with the MRLA.

There was a further reason – a non-ideological one – for employing this vocabulary, for calling the British counterinsurgency an 'Anti-Bandit Campaign' and, indeed, for labelling what was in essence a colonial war an 'emergency'. It was not, as Frank Furedi alleges, merely for 'public relations' purposes.²⁷ The overriding reason was economic: the Malayan estates were dependent on London insurance companies for cover whose terms only covered losses of stocks and equipment through 'riot and civil commotion' *in an emergency*. If the conflict in Malaya were described in terms that implied a state of war, or actions committed by 'rebels', 'insurgents' or – worse – an 'enemy', then the insurance companies could repudiate their policies. In this event, a cash-strapped Attlee administration that had barely survived the 'dollar gap crisis' of 1947 would be obliged to bear the burden. As one British MP stated: 'If that international insurance ceased, it would have a very bad effect on the commercial interests of this country in Malaya.'²⁸ The alternative to this was semantic dissembling.

Such dissembling for a mixture of political and pecuniary purposes created three sets of problems. The first and least important problem – except to those British soldiers fighting 'bandits' on the ground – was raised in early 1949 by military authorities in Malaya. They feared that whilst the insurgency 'continue[d] to be classified as nothing more than an outbreak of banditry', the awarding of campaign medals would be 'prejudiced', and they recommended that the MRLA be designated as 'the "enemy"'. The Joint Intelligence Committee rejected this recommendation.²⁹

The second problem concerned the disjunction between description and actual circumstance. Until 1950, the Colonial Office did not see the MCP as a significant threat and 'bandit' rather than 'insurgent', irrespective of other considerations, seemed a

26 Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive rebels. Studies in archaic forms of social movement in the 19th and 20th centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1963), pp. 5, 26. On Asian movements see, for example, Benedict J. Kerkvliet, *The Huk rebellion. A study of peasant revolt in the Philippines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) and *Peasant rebellion and Communist revolution in Asia*, ed. John W. Lewis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974). For the semantics of the original Spanish word *guerrillero* see Coates, *Suppressing insurgency*, p. 355, n. 32. Despite this attention to etymology, Coates elsewhere and within the space of two pages (pp. 148-9) uses interchangeably the terms 'bandits', 'guerrillas', 'terrorists' and 'insurgents'.

27 Frank Furedi, 'Creating a breathing space: The political management of colonial emergencies', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 21, 2 (1993): 94. Furedi, however, is one of the few writers to recognise, even if fleetingly, the role of language in psychological warfare and the differences between the Colonial and Foreign Offices regarding the more appropriate euphemisms when referring to the forced repatriation of Chinese Malaysians; see his *Colonial wars and the politics of Third World nationalism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1994), pp. 218-19.

28 *Parliamentary debates* (House of Commons), vol. 473, 6 Apr. 1950, col. 1380. For an overview of the insurance issue, see PRO, FO 371/84478, R. H. Scott, 'Brief for the Minister of State for 3rd meeting of the Malaya Committee, 18 May 1950', FZ1017/11G; and Barber, *War of the running dogs*, p. 10.

29 PRO, CO 534/4762, JIC (48), 112th meeting, Minute 3, 4 Jan. 1949; No reason was given, presumably because the JIC decision was then consistent with government policy.

suitable description. In a memorandum written just three weeks before the Emergency was declared, a senior Colonial Office official, J. Williams, did not believe that 'any serious trouble is brewing in Malaya'. He argued that 'a real threat to Malayan internal security seems unlikely to arise unless the Communists succeed in gaining control of China', but that even then, the 'immediate threat is slight'. Notwithstanding this potential international dimension, Williams' assessment exemplified the downgrading of the conflict by the Colonial Office throughout 1948-9. According to a Colonial Office article, the Malayan Communists were 'a small and mostly alien minority ... [whose] violence is of a most morbid kind consisting of intimidation, extortion and murder'.³⁰ This inability or unwillingness to take seriously the communist threat caused frustration within the Foreign Office and the IRD in particular. The IRD officer responsible for liaison with the Colonial Office, John Cloake, recalled: 'One exercise I do remember was trying to wake the Colonial Office up, who were aware that there were some communists in Malaya, but at that time ... it was hard to get them to concentrate on that'.³¹

The vocabulary contrasted with the reality. In 1949, the MRLA killed 229 members of the security forces and 344 civilians. None of its military leaders had been captured, the 'Anti-Bandit Month' of March 1950 (which sought to mobilise Malays against the mainly Chinese MCP) was a failure and British counterinsurgency operations had stalled.³² Despite their various internal problems, their lack of external assistance, and an ill-prepared and half-cocked slide into armed struggle, the MCP insurgents were able, by drawing on residual support from non-Kuomintang sections of the Chinese rural population, to develop a base from which to conduct guerrilla operations. As the US acting Secretary of State noted ruefully at the end of 1948: 'In Malaya, the British with up to 50,000 troops under arms have been able to eliminate only about 500 guerrillas, this in the course of an eight months campaign'.³³

The inability to 'eliminate' the guerrilla force deeply troubled sections of the Attlee administration. In March 1950 the Secretary of State for Defence, Emanuel Shinwell, informed his Prime Minister how 'very disturbed' he was by the 'grave' situation in Malaya. In May 1950 the newly established Cabinet Malaya Committee, chaired by Shinwell, was told to expect 'for a very considerable time ... a rapid recrudescence of terrorist activity' and of 'the danger of relaxing security precautions and of prematurely withdrawing troops'. In October 1950 the Defence Committee was informed that the situation in Malaya should be viewed with 'grave anxiety'.³⁴ Indeed, anxiety became more intense twelve months later after the insurgents ambushed and assassinated British High Commissioner Sir Henry Gurney in October 1951, a month which had the highest security force casualties since 1949. That year, 1951, saw 504 killed along with 533

30 PRO, CO 537/6089, 'Attitude to be adopted in publicity towards Communism in Malaya and China', Dec. 1949. See also PRO, FO 1110/1166, 'Use of IRD material in the Federation of Malaya', n.d.; Williams' comment is in PRO, CO 537/3755, Memorandum, 'Communist influence in Malaya', 28 May 1948.

31 Interview with J. Cloake, 10 Dec. 1997, cited in Lashmar and Oliver, *Britain's secret propaganda war*, p. 86.

32 PRO, CO 104/263, Minutes of Malaya Committee, 14 Apr. 1950.

33 *Foreign Relations of the United States* [henceforth *FRUS*], 761.00/12-1748, 1948(6), p. 615, Acting Sec. of State Lovett to US Embassy (Moscow), 30 Dec. 1948.

34 PRO, CAB 21/2510, no. 1A, Shinwell to Attlee, 27 March 1950 ('disturbed'). Shinwell successfully pushed for the creation of a Cabinet Malaya Committee, which met regularly throughout 1950. PRO, CAB 21/1681, MAL C (50) 23, Appendix, para. 28, 24 May 1950 ('recrudescence'). PRO, CAB 21/1682, DO (50) 92, 'Present situation in Malaya', 24 Oct. 1950 ('grave anxiety').

civilians. An internal report written after the end of the Emergency was therefore quite accurate when it stated that 'there is no doubt that in the first two years of its activities [the MRLA] was a very real threat to the security and economic recovery of Malaya after the war'.³⁵

Confronted by inescapable evidence of this 'very real threat', Whitehall and particularly the Colonial Office viewed the Malayan Emergency with much more seriousness than previously. Euphemistic terminology had impeded this process and, arguably, contributed to the worsening situation itself. As the second meeting of the top-level Malaya Committee was informed, the IRD Regional Information Officer in Malaya

has been consistently hampered in his work by the ban on describing the real organisation and nature of the MCP and its solidarity with international communism. This ban ... has had the effect of preventing public opinion both inside and outside Malaya from obtaining a clear picture of the seriousness of the MCP threat, and this may account for the deterioration of public confidence as a result of recent MCP successes.³⁶

Critical opinions about the veracity and efficacy of painting insurgents as bandits were now articulated. A. E. Franklin from the Foreign Office declared, 'it seems to me largely nonsense to refer to the Guerrillas as "bandits, pure and simple, a motley band of ruffians" ... There is an extremely high degree of political training and organisation and to refer to them as bandits is to misunderstand the whole problem which they present.'³⁷ His colleague R. H. Scott was concerned that when calling the MRLA 'ruffians', 'it seems to be forgotten that this is only a propaganda convention'. Significantly, he pointed to the implications of this confusing policy: 'If anti-bandit policies are based even to a slight degree on the belief that [the MCP] are only terrorists and ruffians, they cannot be expected to produce lasting results.'³⁸

Similarly, the new Secretary of State for the Colonies, James Griffiths, who made a ministerial visit to Malaya in May 1950 with the Secretary of State for War, wrote:

Before I left for Malaya I had been advised not to refer to the operations as 'war' but as 'the emergency', and to the Malayan Liberation Army as 'bandits'. It did not take John [Strachey] and me long to find out that the so-called bandits were a well-trained, highly disciplined and skilfully led force.³⁹

More tellingly, the new Director of Anti-Bandit Operations, Lieutenant-General Sir Harold Briggs, held a press conference in Singapore on 17 April 1950, soon after his arrival. Instead of 'bandits' he spoke of 'Communists'; instead of 'the emergency' he referred to a 'War Cabinet'. This last phrase, especially, according to a Cabinet official, was

35 NAA A452/2, 1968/4248, 'Review of the Emergency in Malaya from June 1948 to August 1957 by the Director of Operations, Malaya' (Secret), p. 7. Casualty statistics are from Department of Information, *Communist banditry in Malaya. The emergency. With a chronology of important events* (Kuala Lumpur: Dept. of Public Relations, 1951).

36 PRO, FO 371/84478, Minutes of 2nd meeting of the Malaya Committee, 24 Apr. 1950.

37 PRO, FO 371/84478, Minute, A. E. Franklin to Malaya Committee, minutes of 3rd meeting of the Malaya Committee, 7 May 1950.

38 PRO, FO 371/84478, R. H. Scott, Brief, 'Top Secret', for Malaya Committee Meeting, 28 Apr. 1950, FZ1017/8.

39 James Griffiths, *Pages from memory* (London: J. M. Dent, 1969), p. 97.

'unfortunate as it dignifies the status of the terrorists into belligerents, or at least implies a kind of civil war in Malaya'. In particularly revealing remarks, the same official continued that Briggs' identification of the insurgents as communists

runs counter to our hitherto accepted publicity line about the campaign in Malaya. Perhaps in the past we have leaned too far the other way, in describing the terrorists as thugs and blood stained ruffians and so forth. The truth is that there is a hard core of disciplined Communists, with a long record of activity in Malaya, stimulated by wartime resistance activities ... but for general policy purposes we have not been anxious to stress the Communist aspect, as by so doing we are apt to create that very fear of communism which in South East Asia will help the Communists.⁴⁰

Despite the criticism that greeted Briggs' comments in London – 'he would be well advised to avoid publicity for some time to come'⁴¹ – his and other Foreign Office assessments (including those from Franklin, Griffiths and the IRD Regional Information Officer) obliged Whitehall to re-examine its propaganda policy. The gulf between image and reality was too wide. Accordingly, nomenclature was modified and in May 1952 the inaccurate, misleading and counterproductive designation, 'bandit', was abandoned in favour of 'Communist Terrorist' or, simply, 'CT'.

The third problem concerned the depiction of the MPLA *vis-à-vis* international communism. Once again, the problem would be resolved when its source, semantic dissembling, was dealt with. As we have seen, officially the insurgents were simply 'bandits', a small, isolated band of 'thugs and blood stained ruffians', and there were 'sound domestic reasons' for portraying them in this light – at least for local consumption specifically, to prevent the insurgents from pulling a communist 'bandwagon' onto which Malayan Chinese might believe it 'wise to climb'.⁴² An attempt to reconcile the differences between the Colonial Office and Foreign Office over 'publicity policy' was undertaken with a jointly prepared paper, but it exposed more than smoothed the contradictory positions that each embodied:

For the sake of world opinion it is desirable to represent the struggle in Malaya as being directed against the Malayan Communist Party, and not as operations by Government against mere banditry. In Malaya, however, publicity should avoid writing-up international communism, or emphasising the role which the Malayan Communist Party is playing in a world-wide movement.⁴³

This contradiction created a conundrum. How could the official appellation be reconciled with the portrayal of Malayan Communists, at the behest of the Kremlin,

40 PRO, FO 371/84478, Memo by R. H. Scott, 'Publicity in Malaya', 18 Apr. 1950; Scott went on to observe that 'however, the damage has been done and it is perhaps not worth while to take him up on this point'.

41 Ibid.; see also PRO, CAB 104/263, minutes of 1st meeting, Cabinet Malaya Committee, p. 5 for Shinwell's critical remarks about Briggs' press conference.

42 PRO, FO 371/84478, Minutes of 2nd meeting of the Malaya Committee, 24 Apr. 1950; PRO, FO 371/84478, Brief by Scott, 28 Apr. 1950.

43 PRO, CO 537/6089, 'Attitude to be adopted in publicity'. The contradictory policy was brought into sharp focus by the Attlee government's recognition of the People's Republic of China, as this document shows: 'The Chinese Communist Government must be distinguished from the Communist terrorist movement in Malaya, and it should not be suggested that the latter receives any aid from the Chinese Communist Government ... It is desirable to keep separate the issues of Communist subversive activities in Malaya and the relations of His Majesty's Government to the Communist Government of China.'

waging the Cold War on a Southeast Asian battleground? Such a conundrum had implications for the level of American support for British policy: 'would Washington perceive London as waging a valiant struggle against communism or as fighting a dirty colonial war designed to hang on to sterling balances and the remnants of colonial pretensions?'⁴⁴ American support could only be ensured by portraying the Emergency not as an outgrowth of indigenous banditry but as integral to the Cold War machinations of international communism – a point seen starkly by a senior IRD official:

It seems to us very dangerous to pretend that the troubles in Malaya are not caused by Communism but only by a kind of local banditry. As we saw in the case of Greece, where the Greek Government were for long anxious to describe the Communists only as bandits, international public opinion in the United States ... is inclined to take the line that when wholesale military operations are required to suppress mere internal unrest, it is in some way due to bad government. This is especially so in a colony; and instead of receiving sympathy and support from American public opinion in our praiseworthy struggle to combat the well-known international Communist menace, we shall merely be regarded as a bad colonial power coping with rebellions.⁴⁵

The external threat of international communism posed by the Cold War was the predominant explanation advanced for both the origins of the insurgency and the British campaign to defeat it. It is important to establish this since it differed so sharply from the 'publicity policy' adopted for counterinsurgency operations within Malaya. That it was a genuinely held – though, in retrospect, not necessarily correct – interpretation is evident from the sources in which it was expressed: classified reports, secret memoranda and closed committee meetings. An official report, marked 'Secret' and written by the Director of Operations in Malaya, Lieutenant General R. H. Bowen, summarised the main elements of this view:

The Malayan Communist Party campaign is part of a wider Soviet-inspired drive to obtain control of what is strategically and economically one of the most important areas of South-East Asia ... In June 1948, on the instructions of the Cominform issued at two conferences in Calcutta four months earlier, the MCP started a campaign of murder, sabotage and terrorism designed to paralyse the Government and develop into armed revolution.⁴⁶

These assertions – of Soviet inspiration, Cold War expansionism, MCP initiation and, significantly, Calcutta as the conduit for Cominform instructions – were echoed in various forms by the Attlee administration. Both the Colonial Office and the Cabinet Malaya Committee emphasised the 'substantial grounds for regarding the Malayan outbreak as stimulated by Moscow' and the existence of a 'Communist plot' to overthrow

44 Aldrich, *Hidden hand*, p. 513.

45 PRO, FO 371/76005, correspondence, 'Top Secret', J. H. Watson to O. H. Morris, 1 Dec. 1949; Watson was Britain's psywar liaison officer in Washington. Lessons for the Malayan experience were learnt and applied by Great Britain through its earlier involvement in the Greek Civil War (as well as in Burma); Jones, *Postwar counterinsurgency and the SAS*, pp. 88-90, 93-6.

46 NAA A452/2, 1968/4248, 'Review of the Emergency in Malaya', p. 3. This document was made available to the Australian Prime Minister's Department by the British High Commission in July 1967 for a meeting concerning defence and security arrangements in the South Pacific.

the Malayan government by armed force.⁴⁷ A lengthy and detailed article prepared for Cabinet by the Permanent Under-Secretary of State warned of dangers that 'will affect the whole security of South-East Asia' from 'a powerful Communist Fifth Column, corroding from within'. The Soviet role was stressed by the Russia Committee: 'the Soviet Legation at Bangkok was clearly designed to be the centre of Soviet activity in the whole of South East Asia and Soviet couriers passing through Singapore en route for the Far East or Australia were a constant source of danger'.⁴⁸

The link between the inaugural conference of the Cominform, which postulated the 'two camp' thesis,⁴⁹ the Calcutta meetings, and 'the marked increase in Communist activity in South-East Asia immediately afterwards', was also articulated by the South-East Asia Department of the Foreign Office and by the Chiefs of Staff Committee.⁵⁰ A 'Top Secret' joint memorandum submitted to the Cabinet Defence Committee by the Minister of Defence and the Secretary of State for War located the Emergency in a wider context, arguing that strong armed action 'against the guerrilla in Malaya is a vital step in the "cold war" against communism in the Far East. The Malayan campaign is not isolated and must be considered in relation to the Far East theatre as a whole'.⁵¹ The Chief Intelligence Officer in Malaya, Major Harry Fisher, stretched the geographical context to include Europe. In a private conversation with the US Consul in Kuala Lumpur, William Blue, he suggested that the terrorist campaign 'was merely one phase of a war which

47 PRO, CO 537/2638; PRO, PREM 8/1406/2, MAL C(50) 12. It should be noted, however, that in regard to China's role, the Foreign Office sharply disagreed with the Colonial Office: 'We endeavoured to persuade the Colonial Office that the aim of the Chinese Communist Party was probably to persuade the Chinese community in Malaya to support the M.C.P. The Colonial Office remained unconvinced of this as late as Feb. this year [1950], believing that the M.C.P. was not an important enough force for the C.C.P. to support it'; PRO, FO 371/84478, Brief, 'Top Secret', R. H. Scott to Minister of State, FZ1017/8, 28 Apr. 1950. However, as Colonial Secretary Griffiths noted, the Attlee government's recognition of China in January 1950 considerably complicated matters; PRO, CAB 134/497, Minutes of Malaya Committee, 19 Apr. 1950.

48 PRO, FO 1110/33, Minutes of Meeting, Russia Committee, 14 Oct. 1948 ('Top Secret'). The 'Fifth Column' remark is in PRO, CAB 129/37/1, 'The United Kingdom in South-East Asia and the Far East', 27 Oct. 1949. Similarly Lt. General Briggs believed that 'the roots [of the uprising] may well lie outside Malaya, in Russia in particular'; PRO, CAB 104/263, statement by Sir Harold Briggs, 20 Apr. 1950. Briggs was appointed 'Director of anti-Bandit Operations' in Malaya in March 1950; he arrived in Kuala Lumpur on 3 April.

49 This referred to Andrei Zhdanov's widely distributed keynote speech to the inaugural conference of the Cominform, held in Szklarska Poremba, Poland in September 1947. The most famous thesis of his report was that the world was divided into 'two camps': a peace-loving, progressive camp led by the Soviet Union, and a war-mongering, imperialist camp led by the United States. For an illuminating discussion of the beginnings of the Cominform, see Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), ch. 4.

50 PRO, CAB 21/1682, COS (50) 468, 'An appreciation of the military and political situation in Malaya', 16 Nov. 1950; the 'marked increase' quotation is from PRO, FO 1110/189, PR 2887/11/913, 'Outline of Communist strategy in South-East Asia', 15 Aug. 1949. For comprehensive discussions of the 1948 Calcutta conferences see Ruth T. McVey, *The Calcutta Conference and the Southeast Asian uprisings* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1958) and Michael R. Stenson, *The 1948 Communist revolt in Malaya: A note on historical sources and interpretation* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1971). It needs to be appreciated, which some historians do not, that there were in fact two Calcutta conferences. The first, organised by the World Federation of Democratic Youth and the International Union of Students (19-25 Feb.), was attended by an MCP delegate; the second, the Congress of the Indian Communist Party (28 Feb.-6 March), was not.

51 PRO, CAB 21/1682, DO (50) 92, 'Present situation in Malaya', 24 Oct. 1950 (Top Secret brief for Defence Committee).

would soon break out in Europe over the Berlin situation'. Similarly, the Chief Secretary of Malaya, Sir Alexander Newbould, according to the US Consul whom he briefed, expressed the 'rather widely held belief that Moscow is making a push in the East now that she seemed to be stopped temporarily in Europe'.⁵² The Secretary of State for the Colonies, Arthur Creech Jones, was another who subscribed to this belief: 'once the path of the Communists was blocked in Europe', he wrote, 'there would be a very concerted effort in the East'. Thus, British success in Malaya was regarded as 'a vital step in the "Cold War" against communism in the Far East'.⁵³

We can see, then, that the broader framework of the Cold War was critical to contemporaries' understanding of, and response to, the Malayan Emergency, and that was how the government wished audiences outside Malaya to perceive the struggle. As indicated earlier, the Truman Administration was an important audience to whom London was keen to demonstrate its Cold War credentials. Despite the persistent exhortations of Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, however, the United States was initially unwilling to be drawn into the region. Until the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, the US State Department stepped back from any significant commitment – whether political, economic or military – to those parts of the Southeast Asian region which it regarded as British and French spheres of influence.⁵⁴ The British capacity to persuade the Americans, and others, of the importance of its frontline role against Communist expansionism in the Far East – in short, to convince the world that Malaya was a Cold War theatre – was undercut by the insurgency being relegated to mere 'banditry'. Propaganda was not cocooned by geography: as the IRD liaison officer in Washington, Adam Watson, wrote, 'communiqués put out in Malaya are read all around the world and may do considerable harm'.⁵⁵ Shinwell highlighted the inherent contradiction, though this was not his intention: 'our policy [is] to emphasise that the Malayan troubles were due to bandits, rather than to any Communist rising; this being so, it was illogical to try to ascribe to Russia responsibility for the Malayan troubles'.⁵⁶ This self-imposed conundrum remained unresolved until terminology was changed.

A captured MCP document was a crucial catalyst for this change. The document,

52 National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, RG59, 846E.00/10-2448, W. Blue to D. Acheson, 24 Oct. 1948 (conversation with Fisher); Confidential Memorandum, 23 June 1948, 'Enclosure No. 1 to Despatch No. 10 dated June 28, 1948' (conversation with Newbould).

53 PRO, PREM 8/1406, Part 2, DO(50)92, Memorandum from Minister of Defence and Secretary of State for War, 24 Oct. 1950. Creech Jones' remarks are in PRO, CO 717/172/52849/9/1948, no. 15, 22 June 1948.

54 FRUS, 890.00/9-1349, 1949(7), pp. 1204-8, 'Report of discussions of Far Eastern affairs in preparation for conversations with Mr. Bevin', 13 Sept. 1949. The Foreign Office believed that 'the full development of [Southeast Asia] can only be brought about with United States assistance, but at present there is an obvious reluctance on the part of the Americans to risk a further loss after their experience in China'; PRO, CAB 129/37/1, CP (49)207, Memorandum, E. Bevin, 'The United Kingdom in Southeast Asia and the Far East', 18 Oct. 1949. Richie Ovendale suggests that the American administration was 'wary' because it was 'conscious that much of Asia was unconvinced of its devotion to peace, its lack of imperialistic ambition, and its interest in Asian freedom and progress'. He also refers to American 'naivety and selfishness' at this time; Richie Ovendale, 'Britain, the United States, and the Cold War in South-East Asia, 1949-1950', *International Affairs*, 58, 3 (1982): 447, 462-3. On Bevin's urgings see, for example, a reference to his meeting with US Secretary of State Acheson, in which the former emphasised that Malaya was 'vitaly important for South East Asia'; PRO, FO 371/84478, 'Brief for the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for the 10th Meeting of the Malaya Committee', 16 Oct. 1950.

55 PRO, FO 371/76005, correspondence, 'Top Secret', J. H. Watson to O. H. Morris, 1 Dec. 1949.

56 PRO, CAB 104/263, 'Press conference given by Lt.-Gen Sir Harold Briggs'.

translated as 'Present day situation and duties', was extensively discussed by the Cabinet Malaya Committee throughout May 1950. According to Secretary of State for War J. Strachey, who deemed it of sufficient importance to compose a five-page response, the document provided tangible confirmation of what had long been suspected: the security forces were 'faced by [a] Communist insurrection and not a mere outbreak of banditry'. Indeed, banditry was only a tactical means towards a political end: 'the enemy's objective was nothing less than the seizure of the full power of the State in Malaya'.⁵⁷ In other words, British perceptions of the intentions of the MCP and the character of its insurgency altered; a local, albeit serious, disturbance had become a major Cold War problem.

Shinwell carried Strachey's assessment a step further, into the realm of policy-making: 'As this evidence has now come into our hands, he [Shinwell] suggested that we should publish the fact that the troubles in Malaya were Communist-inspired, and refer to our opponents there as "Communists" rather than bandits.' The British government's domestic and international reputation, combined with less concerns about American perceptions, constituted the rationale behind this recommendation:

The use of the word 'bandits' was in itself unfortunate, since it might be represented as very discreditable to the United Kingdom to have to use such large forces as we were in fact employing against a 'handful of bandits'. The captured document gave us ... the chance of attaching the Communist label to them ... We must think of the effect on public opinion in this country and in the world in general, where a considerable number of people tended to criticise our actions in Malaya.⁵⁸

Once the Malayan Emergency was described and seen for what it was – Britain's Asian Cold War – then certain benefits would flow. Counterinsurgency operations would be regarded more positively, and the immense military and non-military resources the government was sinking into the campaign could be justified more easily. Moreover, the tension between the vocabulary used ('bandits', 'ruffians' and 'thugs') and the threat confronted ('a well organised and almost wholly political revolt'⁵⁹) would be eliminated, obviating the inconsistency between the propaganda directives for Malaya and the propaganda line for the external world.

It was surprising, then, that the 'publicity policy', as it was termed, was merely adjusted, not overhauled. An updated version of the 1949 paper, 'Attitude to be adopted in publicity toward Communism in Malaya and China', was circulated throughout the relevant departments in Whitehall. Although the ideological motivations of the MRLA could now be officially recognised and its international connections with Communism explicitly acknowledged, the 'bandit' label stuck. So the government continued to incur opprobrium for its terminology: 'Does the Minister agree that the use of the term "bandits" is rather reminiscent of a comic opera show, and is not applicable to an enemy organised on this scale?'⁶⁰ Certainly the assassination of High Commissioner Sir Henry

57 PRO, PREM 8/1406/2, MAL C (50) 12, Note by J. Strachey, 12 May 1950. Malaya Committee discussions are in PRO, CAB 21/1681; CAB 104/263, CAB 134/497, DO (50) 42, 1 June 1950.

58 PRO, CAB 104/263, 'Summary of Malayan Communist Party publication'.

59 PRO, PREM 8/1406/2, Note by J. Strachey.

60 *Parliamentary debates* (House of Commons), vol. 475, 10 May 1950, col. 369. The reply to Col. Gomme-Duncan from A. Crawley, the Under-Secretary of State for Air, was cryptic: 'That is a matter of opinion.' See PRO, FO 371/84482, FZ10110/30G for the circulation of the paper.

Gurney, alluded to earlier, would have shattered any lingering illusion about the apolitical complexion of the perpetrators. There appears to be no record in the relevant declassified Cabinet, Colonial and Foreign Office files for 1951 of further discussion of this issue.⁶¹ Thus an explanation for the protracted use, then sudden discarding, of the obviously inappropriate 'bandit' remains elusive. It seems plausible to assume, however, that the decision to abandon this epithet was triggered by the arrival of the highly authoritative British High Commissioner, Sir Gerald Templer, in February 1952. According to one contemporary report, Templer's 'immediate grasp of the situation ... quickly began to restore public confidence, which had fallen to a low ebb'. It would be consistent with what is known of Templer's character and *modus operandi* that he promptly discerned how the inconsistently applied propaganda policy contributed to this 'low ebb' and, armed with new wide-ranging powers, recommended change.⁶²

The other catalyst for the change in terminology may have been the capture by Singapore's Special Branch of MCP documents known as the October 1951 Directives in early 1952. One of the crucial directives, 'Struggle for Greater Victories in the War', painted the insurgency as integral to the world Communist movement and forecast a weakening of British imperialism by a capitalist economic crisis. This, patently, was not the posturing of 'bandits'. Indeed, it has been argued that the Directives echoed geo-political changes across Southeast Asia whereby the Communist Party of China (CCP) was asserting its authority. Although Karl Hack concludes that a central strand of the October Directives was the MCP's intention to increase 'political work and subversion', which reflected 'the need to prepare for the long haul, if not the influence of the CCP line', he notes that the evidence on whether the Foreign Office or Colonial Office saw the Directives as a product of the CCP line and international developments is 'mixed' and inconclusive.⁶³

It is thus extremely difficult to establish a link – if one existed – between MCP operations in the jungle and policy change in Whitehall. What is clear, and ironic, as Susan Carruthers points out, is that at the very time that the terminology was changed from 'bandit' to 'terrorist' in May 1952, the MCP had in fact relinquished terrorist activity such as assassinations, train derailments, arson and ambushes; 'activities would now concentrate on sabotage of hard targets, subversion, infiltration of trade unions and so on'.⁶⁴ Whatever was the final precipitating factor, the new policy was enunciated on 20 May 1952:

61 Even the minutes of the Joint Information and Propaganda Committee, which met thirty-eight times prior to the change of policy, are silent on this question; see PRO, FO 1110/499. In line with prevailing policy, however, Gurney's assassins were still described as 'a gang of armed bandits'; PRO, FO 371/93118, 'Expression of condolence following the assassination of British High Commissioner in Malaya, Sir Henry Gurney, by members of the Malayan National Liberation Army, 1951'.

62 The quotation is from PRO, FO 371/116939, 'Brief for Sir Anthony Eden's visit to the Far East: The Emergency in Malaya' (1955). Studies of Templer include John Cloake, *Templer: Tiger of Malaya* (London: Harrap, 1985) and Anthony Short, *The Communist insurrection in Malaya 1948-1960* (London: Frederick Muller, 1975).

63 Karl Hack, 'British intelligence and counter-insurgency in the era of decolonisation: The example of Malaya', *Intelligence and National Security*, 14, 2 (1999): 137, 144; the 'Struggle' directive is mentioned on p. 134. Regarding the CCP influence, Hack cites Ralph B. Smith, 'China and Southeast Asia: The revolutionary perspective, 1951', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 19, 1 (1988): 97-110.

64 Carruthers, *Winning hearts and minds*, p. 85.

It has for some time been considered that a single designation should be adopted to be employed in all official references to [the guerrilla] forces. It is accordingly proposed in future that the term 'Communist terrorist' will be the general designation for all members of these organisations [MRLA and *Min Yuen*], and in the particular context 'Communist Terrorist Army' for the words 'Malayan Races Liberation Army', 'Communist Terrorist Organisation' for the '*Min Yuen*'. The designation 'bandit' will not be used in future in official reports and Press releases emanating from the Government.⁶⁵

The hybrid term 'Communist terrorist' accomplished two objectives. 'Terrorist', like 'bandit', sought to deny the MCP political legitimacy while 'Communist', as A. J. Stockwell noted, 'located the emergency firmly in the Cold War'.⁶⁶ The use of the term 'terrorist' was, of course, intended to demonise the MCP. Terrorists' lack of legitimacy stems from their incapacity to effect change. Due to the disparity between the political aspirations of their resort to violence and the means at their disposal, they are forced to operate clandestinely, out of weakness, so the actions of the MLNA 'terrorists' – sabotage, intimidation, murder – were the tactics of the weak against the strong. From a position of weakness, their use of available resources was economical: insurgency is cheap, counterinsurgency costly. In this sense, 'terrorism' was more accurate and appropriate than 'banditry'. Even in the 1950s – before Palestinian plane hijackings, Irish Republican bombings or Italian Red Brigade assassinations (and certainly before '9/11', which unleashed a flood of inconsistent etymological analyses) – 'terrorist' was one of the most misleading words in the English language. Universally accepted definitions were and are elusive; there is not one terrorism, but a variety of terrorisms. Walter Laqueur recently remarked that although the search for definitions will continue, 'any attempt to find a common denominator, a formula as suitable for Irish 19th century terrorism as for narco-terrorism in Columbia or al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, is bound to fail'.⁶⁷

This article has contributed to the crowded historiography of the Malayan Emergency by focusing on the neglected aspect of terminology. Such neglect is symptomatic of a larger historical lacuna. Cold War propaganda is now the subject of close scholarly scrutiny but the main means by which it was communicated – words – has been overlooked. The Cold War was, to a large extent, a battle for moral superiority, and in this battle words replaced bullets. The article has revealed the importance attached at the time to choosing the 'right' words and the consequences, during the early years of the Malayan Emergency, of choosing the 'wrong' words. The slippery nature of political

65 PRO, CO 1022/48, Memorandum from the Minister for Defence, 'Official designation of the Communist forces', Executive Committee Paper No. 15/17/52. *Min Yuen* refers to the underground 'masses organisation' which provided the link between the rural population and the military wing (MRLA). The *Min Yuen* consisted of a district and branch organisation responsible for intelligence, political direction of the masses and obtaining money and supplies to sustain the insurgency.

66 Anthony J. Stockwell, "A widespread and long-concocted plot to overthrow government in Malaya"? The origins of the Malayan Emergency', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 21, 3 (1993): 79-80.

67 Walter Laqueur, 'We can't define "terrorism", but we can fight it', *Wall Street Journal*, 15 July 2002. For recent, contrasting attempts to define the word 'terrorism', see V. Keeley, 'Trying to define terrorism', *Middle East Policy*, 9, 1 (March 2002): 33-40; Michael J. Jordan, 'Terrorism's slippery definition', *Christian Science Monitor*, 4 Feb. 2002; John V. Whitbeck, "'Terrorism': The word itself is dangerous', *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, 21, 2 (March 2002): 52-3; and Peter Beinart, 'Word play', *New Republic*, 226, 15 (22 Apr. 2002): 6.

language was implied by one Whitehall official in 1948. 'The dividing line between the terrorist and the fighter for freedom', he wrote, 'is not always so clear in the minds of the outside world or the people of the terrorists' own country as it seems to us.'⁶⁸ But the British themselves – the sanctimonious 'us' – had blurred that line by transforming, within ten years, the MCP from a heroic resistance movement in World War Two to a troublesome gang of bandits to an insidious Communist terrorist organisation. Semiotic warfare therefore creates a perceptual prism through which combatants are viewed and judged. This applies to either military or ideological conflict and applies especially to those campaigns, such as the Malayan Emergency, that are both.

68 PRO, CO 537/3758, correspondence, T. Lloyd to F. Gimson and A. Newbould, 23 August 1948; this presaged the overused aphorism that 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter'.

