

Military Government and its Discontents: The Significance of the British Military Administration in the History of Singapore and Malaya

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Abstract

The post-war British military government in Singapore and Malaya has often been relegated to a marginal place in historiography. In this article, I argue that this period bears closer study, because its legacies were central to the subsequent turbulent political history of the region, and therefore has much relevance to both researchers and educators.

An Epilogue, a Footnote, and a Case of Historiographical Neglect

In the late summer of 1945, a great reckoning loomed across Southeast Asia. In Burma, a mechanised British army had pursued ragged and demoralised Japanese forces across the Chindwin and Irrawaddy rivers and raced to liberate Rangoon before the monsoon broke. At the other end of Asia, America's unparalleled transoceanic campaign had arrived at the doorstep of the Japanese home islands. Starved by submarine warfare, its urban centres levelled by firebombing, the Japanese imperium was on its last legs. Throughout the occupied Southeast Asian territories, Japanese garrisons without hope of resupply or evacuation prepared to fight to the end. The battle-hardened British and Indian troops gathered to avenge the disasters of 1942 faced a grim struggle.

But the final, and most dramatic, turn of the Second World War spared Southeast Asia from this savage prospect. The atom bombs brought the war to an end with both a bang and a whimper. The Japanese general surrender meant that there would be no contested amphibious invasion of Malaya; no campaign of manoeuvre down the peninsula towards the glittering prize of Singapore; no guerrilla armies surging out of the jungle. Overnight, XXXIV Corps, the principal British formation assigned to the liberation of Malaya, had its role transformed. An army of conquest now had the staggering work of reoccupation and reconstruction thrust upon it all at once.ⁱ

For six months following the return of British forces in September 1945, Malaya and Singapore came under a military government, the British Military Administration (BMA). It was not unique – transitional British military governments had followed the liberation of enemy-held territory in other fronts of the war: in Somalia, Libya, and Burma, for example. The BMA assumed the function and powers of government in Malaya, and operated under a separate chain of command from the combat formations, although ultimate authority still resided in the person of Lord Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander, Southeast Asia.

The BMA faced immense problems. Restoring the prosperity of these strategic British colonies was of utmost priority. But infrastructure was neglected, port facilities had been damaged by Allied bombing, food and medicine scarce. Unlike territories where previous British military governments had operated, such as Somalia and Upper Burma, Malaya and Singapore had highly monetised economies and thus a vast black market flourished. 110,000 Japanese personnel had to be disarmed, interned, and then repatriated. Pre-war nationalism had been catalysed by the Japanese occupation, and popular discontent and mass politics was coming to a boil. Lurking in the wings was the ever-present spectre of insurgency, conjured by the variety of armed groups roaming the Malayan countryside.

Considering the diversity and scale of these challenges, did the BMA acquit itself satisfactorily? The BMA managed, in most parts, to reintroduce the physical and bureaucratic infrastructure of government, and there were notable successes in improving agriculture and health and sanitation. However, the period of military government is also associated with inflation, the rampant black market, and widespread labour unrest. To the casual student of history, the outcomes of the BMA appear ambiguous at best.

It is therefore unsurprising that the period of military government should occupy a muted place in various historical narratives. In the story of the Allied war against Japan, the BMA comes as an epilogue to victory, overshadowed by the exhilarating sweep of events in the final year of the conflict: Field Marshal Slim's headlong pursuit of the Japanese through Burma, the dropping of the atom bombs, the pomp and circumstance of Lord Mountbatten's return to Singapore. This is most obvious in the British *Official*

History, which treats the events of the reoccupation from an oppressive general staff perspective, where the movement of units are described with the dry tone of a sandbox exercise, and the complexity of the BMA's challenges are glossed over.ⁱⁱ Likewise, the period of the BMA is often written as a mere footnote in the histories of nationalism and independence, emphasising successes and failures according to the prevailing political mood of the day. Earlier works such as Dartford's *A Short History of Malaya* incorporates the BMA as an energetic but brief moment in the story of progressive Malayan nationhood.ⁱⁱⁱ Later historians such as Rudner^{iv}, writing during and after the turbulent 1960s, with its experiences of communal violence, confrontation with Indonesia, and superpower conflict in Vietnam, depict the BMA as a wretched interregnum, but not an inflexion point in the longer trajectory of Malayan history.

A key problem that has consigned the BMA to the margins of historiography is the exclusion of a military perspective from these treatments of the topic. The historical lens has been overwhelmingly focussed upon the political and social upheavals of this period, and historians often neglect the military reality that underpinned these developments. It was this military reality, and not abstract notions of moral decay or nationalist teleology, that lay at the heart of the BMA's problems. When one examines the military record more closely, through War Office and Colonial Office memoranda, the war diaries of individual formations and units, and the private accounts of military personnel involved in the reoccupation, the significance of the BMA reveals itself. Intriguing questions then emerge about the origins of the Malayan Emergency, racial conflict in post-war Singapore and Malaya, and the legacies of Britain's global war and the late colonial

state. Such an enterprise may perhaps rescue the BMA from its undeserved marginal place in history.

The Best Laid Plans of Major-Generals and Men

Ever since the tide of war turned, Britain had started preparing for the reconquest of Malaya with the establishment for the Civil Affairs, Malaya Planning Unit (CAMPU) in July 1943.^v As the campaign in Burma wound down, the next phase of the war in Southeast Asia would involve a landing along the western coast of Malaya, Operation *Zipper*. As in Africa and Burma, it was envisaged that a military administration would follow the progress of the front, providing the bare essentials of government: law and order, sanitation, and ensuring a minimum level of food supply to the civilian population.

These parameters changed overnight with the Japanese surrender. All at once, the entirety of Japanese-occupied Southeast Asia – Malaya, Indonesia, and Indochina – fell under British control. The handful of divisions gathered for the liberation of Malaya now had their area of operations expanded on an enormous scale. Units which should have contributed to the task of stabilising Malaya and Singapore would be diverted to Indonesia and Vietnam. Instead of a gradual consolidation of territory that would allow military government to be introduced at a manageable pace, the BMA had to restore functional government across the length and breadth of Malaya almost at once. CAMPU's carefully prepared plans were thrown into disarray.

Was the BMA up to this task? In contrast to claims by Rudner and others that the BMA was ridden with an inferior quality of officers, the BMA's cadre comprised men with experience of

governing in difficult circumstances, and others who were veterans of modern warfare. With the bulk of the pre-war Malayan Civil Service (MCS) captured in Singapore in 1942 and interned in Japanese prison camps, an effort was made by CAMPU to gather as many officers with relevant experience into the BMA. About 230 MCS officers had escaped from Singapore, but a wide net was cast to bring in almost any individual who had experience of Malaya in some capacity or other. 'Contact registers' opened in Oxford and Delhi soon compiled thousands of names. This allowed CAMPU to draw on a variety of talented individuals.^{vi}

Heading the BMA was Major-General Ralph Hone, the Chief Civil Affairs Officer (CCAO), who had prior experience of military administration in Africa and the Middle East. While he had no experience of Malaya, he counted many seasoned Malaya hands amongst his senior officers. His deputies, Brigadiers McKerron and Willan, were pre-war MCS men; Colonel Victor Purcell, previously of the Chinese Protectorate, was an expert on the Chinese in Southeast Asia; Colonel M. C. Hay was a former advisor to the Sultan of Johore; Colonel A. W. Wallich, who had worked in Singapore for the shipping house Boustead, was put in charge of supplies.^{vii}

New blood was also injected into the BMA in the form of junior officers redeploying from combat roles, as major operations drew to a close in Europe and Asia. For example, Major Harold Shaw, a veteran Guards officer who applied for a career in the colonial service after ending the war in Europe, was promptly assigned to CAMPU and sent for civil affairs training.^{viii} John Michael Gullick, who served as a civil affairs officer in Africa and then a lecturer at the civil affairs staff centre in London, also asked for a transfer to the BMA to avoid the fate of

supernumerary staff officers being assigned to dubious new roles as part of the vast shuffling of Allied forces following the defeat of Germany.^{ix} Far from the cast of morally decrepit and venal characters often portrayed by the BMA's critics, the men who formed the backbone of the military government represented a good mix of local experience and fresh talent.

XXXIV Corps, which provided the muscle-power to re-occupy the country and enforce the writ of the BMA, was similarly impressive at first glance. Its senior commanders were all veterans of the war against Japan. Corps Commander Lieutenant-General Ouvry Lindfield Roberts had led 23rd Indian Division during the pivotal fighting at Kohima-Imphal, while his divisional commanders, Major-Generals Robert Mansergh (5th Indian Division), Douglas Hawthorn (23rd Indian Division), and George Wood (25th Indian Division) had been similarly blooded in Burma. XXXIV Corps was also augmented by Malaya hands who were attached in an advisory role. For example, Lieutenant-Colonel Noble, one of the last civil servants to escape from Singapore in 1942, overseeing the evacuation of the Malayan Survey Department to Australia, was attached as a staff officer to Corps Headquarters (HQ).^x A Malayan Corps of Guides was also formed in March 1945 to perform intelligence and interpretation duties, and comprised officers with Malayan experience, as well as Other Ranks who were Malays and Malayan Chinese and Indians.^{xi} XXXIV Corps certainly did not lack the leadership and specialist knowledge it required.

However, the best laid plans of CAMPU and XXXIV Corps went awry even before the dropping of the atom bombs. The fighting in Burma, expected to drag on throughout 1945, was brought to a

de facto conclusion when 14th Army completed the epic race to Rangoon by May. As civil affairs assumed greater importance in Burma and other theatres, demand for manpower increased. Civil affairs courses, conducted at Wimbledon, were reduced from eight weeks to a mere three weeks, with a resultant loss in readiness amongst the officers who passed through them.^{xii} CAMPU's training cycle was disrupted, and many new officers who could only be assigned to the BMA after May 1945 had to skip the course at Wimbledon altogether, heading straight for the forward depot at Pallvaram in southern India. The military government was off to a shaky start.

XXXIV Corps also faced its share of organisational problems as the date of the landings approached. Although combat units were at a satisfactory state of readiness, there were widespread shortages of signals equipment, engineer stores, and motor transport reported.^{xiii} Manpower was also affected by *Python*, the plan to repatriate British servicemen who had spent three years and eight months in the Far East, a promise that the politicians were reluctant to retract or alter. This denuded many units of veteran officers and non-commissioned officers, with signals and supply units worst hit, while Indian engineer units also suffered badly.^{xiv} Engineer and transport capabilities are vital to reconstruction efforts anywhere, and particularly so in Malaya because of the country's difficult geography, with its central mountain range obstructing lateral communications, and underdeveloped road and rail systems in the eastern states. These shortcomings were to have serious consequences.

A Race against Time

In the three-week interregnum between the Japanese capitulation and the return of

British forces, a chaotic situation unfolded across Malaya. Chinese resistance groups – mostly communist and nominally Allied – took over many rural and some urban areas as the Japanese retreated into their main bases. The guerrillas took responsibility for law and order – invariably settling old scores – and restored basic infrastructure, such as running electric plants in Johore, thereby setting themselves up as a functioning alternate government before the British arrived.^{xv} Their influence increased as the uncertainty of this interregnum dragged on. The Japanese had also set the Malays against the Chinese during the war, and serious communal clashes took place in its last months and carried on into September.^{xvi} Elsewhere, *Kuomintang* organisations and Chinese triads resurfaced,^{xvii} as did Malay militias in Kedah, Pahang, and Kelantan.^{xviii} A deteriorating security situation could only allow revolutionary political forces to took root and frustrate the re-establishment of a stable colonial state. What was needed in the aftermath of the British landings was a rapid re-imposition of British authority. Everything the BMA hoped to accomplish – economic resuscitation, law and order, political stability – hinged upon this.

The main urban and economic centres were quickly reoccupied. 5th Indian Division landed in Singapore on 5th September 1945;^{xix} 23rd and 25th Indian Divisions landed on the Morib beaches on 9th September and took Port Swettenham, Port Dickson, Kuala Lumpur, and then most of Selangor, Seremban, and Malacca in the following week.^{xx}

Recognising that the movement of combat troops across the country would be a ponderous process, small teams of civil affairs officers were formed into Civil Affairs Detachments (CADs) and pushed ahead of the troop columns to establish the

rudiments of government in various states. CADs fanned out across Malaya in the days following the landings, and reintroduced a veneer of British authority in many areas within a week.^{xxi}

CADs generally proved well-suited to the task, benefiting from their officers' knowledge of the country. Lieutenant-Colonel David Somerville, commander of the Kelantan CAD, had been an MCS officer, and his next ranking officer, Major Rancey, an engineer in the Kelantan State Civil Service.^{xxii} Their past experience proved valuable when liaising with local community leaders. Brigadier Willan, as Deputy CCAO, used his status as chief justice to great effect when conducting the delicate task of conveying to the sultans that they had no authority while military rule lasted.^{xxiii} In Selangor, local knowledge assisted Colonel James Calder and his executive officer John Gullick to dampen inter-ethnic tensions amongst the native population.^{xxiv}

However, the deployment of CADs was not a comprehensive measure. Deficiencies in transport delayed CADs from reaching Kedah and Trengganu until the middle of September, leaving governance in the hands of the special warfare officers of Force 136 who lacked the means to administer it.^{xxv} While CADs could establish a skeletal form of government, they could not project military force into the restive countryside, which had to be tamed for the BMA's authority to be upheld. This was nigh impossible in isolated parts of the country. Well into October 1945, there were only three British officers in Kelantan, alongside a (fortunately well-behaved) Japanese battalion and a Communist regiment.^{xxvi}

The countrywide presence of British combat units was therefore essential to the

success of the BMA's mission. Unfortunately, the pace of the reoccupation soon became sluggish, especially in the north and east. It was only on 27th September, almost three weeks after the Morib landings and six weeks after the Japanese surrender, that Indian troops finally arrived at Baling near the Thai border, which was thick with armed groups. Poor rail communications with Kelantan likewise meant that the Punjab battalion assigned to Kota Bahru – where Japanese forces first landed in 1941 – had to be routed through a railhead in southern Thailand, and only arrived on 18th October.^{xxvii} For many parts of the country, it was at least a month, if not two, after the Japanese surrender before British troops arrived in any appreciable numbers.

This was a classic example of misinterpreting intelligence, and misreading the evolving nature of the army's role. States like Pahang and Kelantan were low on British priorities because their very remoteness meant that few Japanese troops were to be found there. Yet this precisely made the presence of large armed groups possible – indeed, intelligence reports from Force 136 clearly identified the locations of guerrilla forces^{xxviii} – and should have highlighted these as areas of concern to British high command. Unfortunately in this initial phase, rounding up Japanese troops was viewed as a more urgent task than suppressing potentially hostile armed groups. This development would have lasting repercussions for the security situation in Malaya.

During the ceremonial surrender of Japanese forces in Singapore, Lord Mountbatten announced that on the Morib beaches 'men were landing in an endless stream...The Japanese are submitting to superior force, now massed here.'^{xxix} The Supreme Commander had unfortunately

missed the point of the problem. What was needed in September 1945 was not the concentration of force, but the dispersal of British forces throughout the Malayan peninsula. The BMA's mission and the authority of the colonial state required the stability and monopoly of force that this alone could provide. It was a theme that would be repeated in the subsequent months of military government.

How to Win a War and Lose the Peace

In the six months of military government, the BMA struggled manfully with the daunting task of stabilising and resuscitating Singapore and Malaya. There were notable successes. Famine was averted, and agricultural programmes yielded good results in Selangor and Pahang.^{xxx} Mobile dispensaries were organised to treat thousands of malaria cases, and malaria figures even showed an improvement over pre-war statistics.^{xxxi} Local police were stiffened by combat troops – the RAF Regiment in Penang and the crack 5th Parachute Brigade in Singapore – bringing a drop in crime figures by March 1946.^{xxxii} Despite these efforts, there were ominous developments which boded ill for the political future of Singapore and Malaya.

The common theme of black markets and their attendant criminality cannot be ignored. Despite improving rice yields, food shortages were a constant feature under the BMA, and the rice price reached forty times its pre-war levels.^{xxxiii} The BMA's policy to import relief supplies through a Supplies Distributing Unit that comprised private merchants and the appointment of civilian food controllers opened the way for misallocation and black market corruption.^{xxxiv} This also applied to the import of medical opium, which soon exploded into a considerable

illegal drug trade with 50 million grains entering the country.^{xxxv} British authority suffered an immense blow from its association with these criminal activities especially at a time of great civilian deprivation.

Logistical difficulties also fuelled discontent. Although hostilities were over, the Malayan people appeared to have traded one wartime occupier for another. Due to the lack of motor transport, commandeering of private vehicles was commonplace, and a frequent cause of complaints.^{xxxvi} Actions that might have been acceptable in conquered enemy territory were not when imposed on the king's own subjects. The flood of British and Dutch troops into the country taxed infrastructure to the limit. Many civilian buildings were requisitioned, and civilian construction programmes postponed. Much of Taiping's population went homeless until August 1946 when new accommodation became available.^{xxxvii} Purcell noted that 'there is not a single Chinese girls school open because their premises are occupied [by the Services]. They cannot receive grants-in-aid, the teachers are unemployed, the children roam the streets.'^{xxxviii} In some cases, two years would pass before houses were returned to their owners. Was it surprising that civilian discontent would converge with Mountbatten's lenient attitude towards the Communists to result in a surge in labour unrest from October, culminating in a vast 173,000-strong general strike in January?^{xxxix}

Above all else, the BMA's greatest shortcoming was the failure to re-establish the monopoly of violence. The changing strategic situation imposed dilemmas. The reoccupation of Malaya ceased to be the endpoint of the war against Japan, and soon transformed into the forward base for continued British operations elsewhere in

Southeast Asia. To this end, British forces were often concentrated to facilitate training and potential deployments out of Malaya, instead of dispersing throughout the country to deal with widespread, low-intensity threats. The arrival of Dutch forces transiting for Indonesia also detracted from the mission of pacification, as British battalions were required to host and train their Dutch counterparts.^{xl}

Although urban crime was brought under control, various armed groups still roamed the countryside. Ethnic militias provoked racial clashes in Negri Sembilan and Pahang.^{xli} Communist groups actively opposed the British through sizable raids. On 5th February, 7th Anti-Tank Regiment faced off against 300 armed Chinese. The murder of an assistant district officer on 26th February in Perak triggered a running battle between heavily armed Chinese and 33rd Indian Brigade, supported by armour from 16th Cavalry Regiment, which lasted till 4th March. The contest for the countryside continued even after the end of military rule. On 4th May 1946, 6th Brigade encountered a large group of armed Malays in Johore, while that very day, troops from 114th Indian Brigade pursued over fifty 'bandits' into the Yai Valley on the Thai border.^{xlii} It was evident that the military government failed to head off the nascent insurgency looming in the countryside. Without this monopoly of violence, the conditions for political stability could not be met. One might view the later Emergency and prolonged communal strife as a direct result of these troubles.

The Significance of the BMA

Reporting on the political situation in Singapore, Colonel Victor Purcell incisively observed: "Are the political parties so active in this country and with such a great following to be ignored? Like

the Bourbons, do we never learn?”^{xliii} But a deeper examination of the historical record suggests that the period of the BMA was not merely some sordid Bourbon Restoration to be glossed over as a minor caesura between the phases of wartime and late/post-colonial history. It was as significant a turning point in the history of Singapore and Malaya as the British defeat of 1942. The earlier event dealt a deathblow to the colonial state, but the BMA had the opportunity to make decolonisation less troubled than it proved to be. Its failures and lost opportunities facilitated and fuelled the dangerous discontents that would pave the way for years of radical politics, racial conflict, and full-blown insurgency. Military government and its discontents therefore cannot remain marginal to the history of war and empire.

For the educator, this topic can be used to stimulate inquiry into two important historical concepts: significance; and change and continuity.

With regards to the teaching of historical significance, the period of the BMA is aptly situated between the war and the events leading to self-governance and independence. The traumas of Japanese rule and the post-war agitation for independence are well known and often extensively covered in the classroom. Structuring a lesson package around the BMA can help to link these two major phases, and allow students to consider how the BMA affected subsequent developments and therefore to evaluate its significance in the history of Singapore. Three key areas for discussion can be identified. First, the uneven attempts to stabilise the security situation during the BMA had important repercussions for the political history of Singapore and Malaya, resulting in conditions that succoured a protracted Emergency and violent racial

politics throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Second, the tarnishing of British authority deepened and accelerated the growth of anti-colonial sentiment, setting the stage for the constitutional changes and mass politics of the 1950s. Third, the conditions of socio-economic deprivation that the BMA could not fully alleviate, or even worsened, arguably contributed to the radicalised politics in the years leading to independence.

The teaching of change and continuity is also well-served by the topic of the BMA. Three main points can again be explored. First, given the continuing deprivation and violence, one should question the extent to which the formal cessation of hostilities reflected actual change in people's lived experiences, and whether there was a long and coherent thread of instability and violence that bound the traumatic wartime period with the post-war years of unrest and insurgency. Second, one can discuss whether the substantial presence of pre-war MCS officials in the senior echelons of the BMA mitigated against any truly new attitudes towards governance by the British, and whether pre-war views on the nature of the colonial state persisted during and after the BMA. Third, in view of the developments under the Japanese and the BMA, the degree to which people's political aspirations changed from simple anti-colonialism to more complex conceptions of the country's political future beyond the colonial state can also be debated.

Finally, for both researcher and educator, there is a broader historical point to be made. The experiences of the BMA were not unique. History is replete with examples of nations and armies who won wars only to lose the peace that followed. But the example of the BMA has special relevance today: an army caught up

amongst changing strategic imperatives, confronting fractious inter-ethnic tensions amongst the native population, caught on the wrong foot by the evolving mission – the echoes in recent conflicts are obvious and worthy of further study. The history of the BMA has lessons enough for those who would seek to understand it.

ⁱ For a recent survey of the situation following the Japanese surrender, see Bayly, C. and Harper, T. (2007). *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Asian Empire*. London: Allen Lane.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Dattford, G. P. (1956). *A Short History of Malaya*. London; New York: Longman.

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^v Hone, H.R. (1946). *Report on the BMA*. Rhodes House Library, Oxford University (915.13 s 4).

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} *Ibid.*

^{viii} Blake, C. (1995). *Oral History Interview*. National Archives of Singapore (001649).

^{ix} Gullick, J.M. (2000). *Oral History Interview*. National Archives of Singapore (002379).

^x Noble, C. (1952). *Evacuation of Malayan Survey Department*. Rhodes House Library, Oxford University (MSS IND OCN s 199).

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^{xii} Donnison, F.S.V. (1956). *British Military Administrations in the Far East, 1943-46*. London: HMSO.

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^{xiv} *Python*. (1945). Public Records Office, London, (WO 203/2821).

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^{xvi} Blythe, W. L. (1946). *Report on Chinese Affairs by Victor Purcell*. Rhodes House Library, Oxford University (MSS IND OCN s 116).

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^{xviii} *Deputy Chief Civil Affairs Officer's Report, 12-30 Sep.* (1945). Rhodes House Library, Oxford University (MSS IND OCN s 116).

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^{xx} *23rd Indian Division War Diary: Summary of Events, 9-16 Sep.* (1945). Public Records Office, London (WO 172/7021); *25th Indian Division War Diary: Summary of Events, 9-16 Sep.* (1945). Public Records Office, London (WO 172/7033).

^{xxi} Donnison, F.S.V. (1956). *British Military Administrations in the Far East*.

^{xxii} Comber, L. (1995). *Oral History Interview*. National Archives of Singapore (001613).

^{xxiii} Hay, M.C. *Diary*. (1945). Rhodes House Library, Oxford University (MSS IND OCN s 45).

^{xxiv} Gullick, J.M. (2000). *Oral History Interview*.

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^{xxvii} *25th Indian Division War Diary: Summary of Events, 17 Sep – 18 Oct.* (1945). Public Records Office, London (WO 172/7033).

^{xxviii} *Malayan Local Forces*. (1945). Public Records Office, London (WO 203/4333).

^{xxix} Kirby, S. W. (1957). *The War Against Japan*.

^{xxx} *BMA Monthly Reports: Jan 1946*. (1946). Public Records Office, London (CO 537/1572).

^{xxxi} Blake, C. H. F. (1946). *Report on General Conditions*. Rhodes House Library, Oxford University (MSS IND OCN s 276).

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