Lessons from the British: Counterinsurgency Strategies Applied in Malaya, Kenya and Cyprus

by **MAJ Timothy Ang**

Abstract:

The major challenge facing militaries in the 21st century will not arise from large scale wars of the World War II variety, but from small-scale, low intensity insurgencies. And if the historical annals of the last century are anything to go by, attempts at counterinsurgency have been dismal. It is the aim of this essay to closely examine three case studies in Malaya, Kenya and Cyprus, evaluating them along the full spectrum of British counterinsurgency strategies used against the armed insurgents in each of these locales. The essay will also determine the extent to which the strategies used in Malaya were successfully transplanted in Kenya and Cyprus, which lends insight to the ways in which successful strategies in the past can be adapted and effectively applied in contemporary conflicts.

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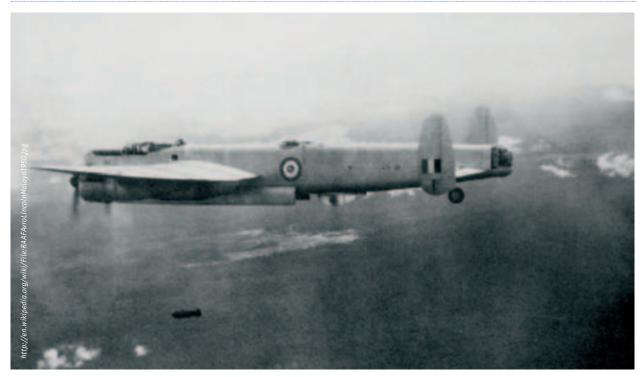
INTRODUCTION

"Counterinsurgency, and not major war, is the most important military problem facing humanity in the present and foreseeable future."[1]

The major challenge facing militaries in the 21st century will not arise from large scale wars of the World War II variety, but from small-scale, low intensity insurgencies. And if the historical annals of the last century are anything to go by, attempts at counterinsurgency have been dismal. The recent experiences of the world's sole military superpower in Iraq and Afghanistan are reflective of this. Such is the record of failure that Martin van Creveld suggests that we should throw overboard ninety-nine percent of the current literature on counterinsurgency, since most of it has been written by the losing side and is thus of little value. What is needed is greater focus on the relatively small number of cases where counterinsurgency operations actually succeeded.[2]

Of the few cases of success, the British colonial emergency in Malaya (1948-1960) stands out as the counterinsurgency operation *par excellence*.

The Malayan emergency has often been singled out as a model campaign and therefore serves as a useful "textbook case" against which to benchmark counterinsurgency strategies.[3] In fact, the strategies used in Malaya encompassed not just military tactics but a much broader set of social, economic and ideological measures that served over-arching political imperatives. Also instructive is how the British, having achieved success in Malaya, attempted to transfer the same strategies to other insurgency situations occurring during the same period in Kenya (1952-1960) and Cyprus (1955-1959). It is the aim of this essay to closely examine these three case studies and evaluate them along the full spectrum of British counterinsurgency strategies used against the armed insurgents in each of these locales. The essay will also determine the extent to which the strategies used in Malaya were successfully transplanted in Kenya and Cyprus, which lends insight to the ways in which successful strategies in the past can be adapted and effectively applied in contemporary conflicts.

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Bomber Attacks Communist Rebel Jungle Positions during the Malayan Emergency

DEFINING COUNTERINSURGENCY SUCCESS

A study like this necessitates the definition of a counterinsurgency "success." On a basic level, a strategy can be considered successful if it denies the insurgents their objectives, be they military, socio-economic, moral, political or otherwise. However, this rudimentary definition does not do justice to the multi-dimensional nature of counterinsurgency campaigns, where, more often than not, success at one level (e.g. military) could represent failure at another (e.g. moral or political). A more sophisticated assessment has to weigh up the relative achievements at these different dimensions in relation to the larger aims of insurgency and counter-insurgency. Understanding the nature of insurgency is critical in this context. Whilst sometimes similar in appearance to guerrilla wars, insurgencies are in fact defined more by their overarching political objectives.[4] The overall success of a counterinsurgency campaign should therefore be judged according to its political achievements and the relative success of individual strategies should be considered in the light of their contribution to this larger political objective.

The Malayan emergency is widely considered a model counterinsurgency campaign precisely because of successes on these accounts. Yet the considerable physical, cultural and political differences between Malaya, Kenya and Cyprus meant that strategies used in Malaya had to be heavily adapted to suit the local contexts of Kenya and Cyprus in order to bear the potential for success. Even then, some strategies exported from Malaya were irrelevant or even inimical to the counterinsurgency successes achieved in the alternative environments. It shall be argued here that the transferability or adaptability of each strategy depends ultimately on the depth of the solution sought and the extent to which local factors are considered, as was the case with the British in these case studies. This pattern will emerge with increasing clarity as this essay examines, in turn, the military, socio-economic and political strategies that constituted each counterinsurgency campaign.

MILITARY STRATEGIES

We shall first turn to the military side of each campaign, which aimed specifically at tackling

the armed rebellion led by the insurgents—the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in Malaya, the Mau Mau movement in Kenya and the EOKA (National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters) in Cyprus. Military strategies were important, not just to curb the violence, but to create the "breathing space" necessary for more far reaching social and political reforms to be evolved.[5] They also constituted the one area where the pattern and principles of the British response in Malaya could be most readily and successfully adapted in Kenya and Cyprus. This was due to the typically blunt nature of the use of force, and more importantly, because of the relative similarity of the military problem across the three territories, especially when compared to the more fundamental and entrenched differences in their troubled socio-political situations. Of course, adaptation to differing local conditions such as in climate and terrain was still crucial for the successful redeployment of Malayan strategies.

Military successes achieved in Kenya and Cyprus can be largely attributed to the appropriation from the Malayan experience of what shall be identified here as three key strategies: access to adequate resources, tactical flexibility and civil-military cooperation. The first, access to adequate resources and experience, was a vital precondition for the successful use of force against the insurgents. Success in the Malayan emergency, which began on 18th June 1948, was bought at the price of a resource-intensive campaign that at its peak in 1952 involved around 23 battalions, 67,000 police and over 250,000 Home Guards.[6] Experience came most noticeably in the form of the accomplished military general, Gerald Templer, who successfully dispatched his duty as High Commissioner and Director of Operations from 1952 to 1954. When emergencies were declared in Kenya in October 1952 and Cyprus in November 1955,

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the ongoing Malayan campaign provided a ready pool of resources and experience to draw on. Knowledge and experience on imperial policing, for example, was passed down the line on a significant scale, most notably through policing conferences organised in 1951, 1954 and 1957.[7] Military manuals such as the comprehensive Malayan publication in 1952, *The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations* in Malaya, ensured that accumulated wisdom would be "presented to those whose knowledge and experience is not so great."[8] In addition, the policy of appointing military "supremos" like Templer to lead the counterinsurgency campaign was followed in Kenya and Cyprus with the respective appointments of Erskine and Harding as Director of Operations there.

The actual guerrilla wars in Kenya and Cyprus were met with a combination of military and police forces that conducted operations largely according to the Malayan blueprint. The earlier stages of each campaign were characterised by conventional large-scale operations, such as jungle-sweeps or extensive cordon-and-search operations, meant to pressure the insurgents and keep them on the run. These methods, although notoriously inefficient, kept up the pressure on the insurgents and could reap handsome rewards on occasions. For example, the massive cordon-and-search operation around the Paphos forest in Cyprus in June 1956, Operation Pepperpot, secured the highly valuable personal papers of the EOKA commander General Grivas.[9]

Still, victory ultimately depended on the second key strategy: tactical flexibility, embodied most in the small-unit tactics that intensified as the emergencies progressed. The decentralisation of command and control was crucial in achieving this in Malaya. It is

illuminating to note that Templer's success lay not in his ability to impose a rigid control of operations from Kuala Lumpur, but in his ability to delegate authority effectively.[10] Counterinsurgency is a subaltern's or even a corporal's war. This was appreciated in Kenya, where Frank Kitson was given sufficient freedom to develop his highly effective "pseudo-gang" strategy, which involved creating counter-gangs of surrendered Mau Mau insurgents that made contact with and gain intelligence from real Mau Mau units.[11] In Cyprus, where urban terrorism was more rampant than in Malaya or Kenya, small-unit tactics were successfully adapted to the terrain of urban warfare. A favourite tactic, well established by 1957, was the "snatch," where a small party darted into a specified house to snatch EOKA terrorists from their very beds.[12] Tactical flexibility in adapting Malayan small-unit strategies to the environments in Kenya and Cyprus was instrumental to successes there.

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Military success also relied heavily on the third key strategy: civil-military cooperation. The sheer complexity of the counterinsurgency campaigns necessitated close cooperation between the civil administration, the police and the military. The apparatus for such cooperation was provided in Malaya through an elaborate committee system at the district, state and federal levels, designed under Harold Briggs, Director of Operations from 1950 to 1952.[13] This system, which provided for regular liaisons between all the parties engaged in counterinsurgency operations, was closely replicated in Kenya and Cyprus.[14] An important corollary of such inter-agency cooperation was the effective collection and dissemination of intelligence, which was critical to the success of small unit operations.[15]

The successful adaptation of the strategies of tactical flexibility and civil-military cooperation, underwritten by the necessary level of resources and experience, ensured that the colonial administration regained the military initiative against Mau Mau by late 1954, and the EOKA by early 1957. The brief resurgence of EOKA terrorist violence in Cyprus in 1958 in the form of the "smearing campaign" against the British was indeed a symptom of growing desperation rather than renewed strength.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STRATEGIES

Military strategies could not have turned the tide against the insurgents without the deployment of more far-reaching socio-economic strategies. The importance of this second dimension to counterinsurgency is cleverly illustrated in Mao Tse-Tung's fish analogy on countering subversion. In the analogy, the insurgents and their armed groups are likened respectively to a fish's head and body, whilst the local population is likened to the surrounding water. If the fish eludes capture, it can nonetheless be killed by manipulating the water.[16] Socio-economic strategies thus aim to deprive the insurgents of their vital support-bases in the population. In Malaya, and to a significant extent in Kenya and Cyprus, this was achieved through a pattern of repression, resettlement and the redress of grievances—a complex combination of "carrot and stick."

Repression formed a substantial part of each of the campaigns. This is underscored by Anderson's and Elkin's latest research on Kenya.[17] Anderson has revealed, for instance, that Kenya saw the most number of executions in the history of British colonialism.[18] Repression went hand in hand with reform. The scope for repression was inherent in the very nature of the emergencies, which, as civil operations, allowed emergency administrations to sidestep Geneva Conventions in the conduct of what were really fully-

fledged colonial wars in all but name.[19] The tradition in Malaya of relying on wide-ranging special emergency powers—detention without trial, harsh penalties for offences and a host of collective punishments—was adhered to in Kenya and Cyprus with mixed success.

The Malayan example of mass repression was followed in Kenya on an even larger scale, given the relative obscurity of Kenya from international scrutiny and the particularly savage nature of Mau Mau killings. White settler agitation in Kenya was an added complication that placed more pressure on the administration to act inordinately. "The Europeans of Kenya have made the country; they also make most of the trouble," Governor Baring quipped in October 1953.[20] The consequence was a spate of hasty decisions early in the emergency, meant partly to placate settler opinion that achieved ambivalent results. Operation Jock Stott (October 1952), meant to deprive Mau Mau of its leaders, succeeded only in capturing moderate Kenyan African Union (KAU) leaders such as Kenyatta, whilst radicalising the insurgent movement.[21] Subsequent operations were given more thought and hence more successful, such as Operation Anvil in April 1954, which managed to break Mau Mau's mass Kikuyu support network in Nairobi. Even then, success was bought at the expense of the indiscriminate repression of the entire Kikuyu population in Nairobi, the majority of whom were innocent.[22]

The use of repression in Cyprus, although more circumscribed, was nonetheless considerable. Harding, in accordance with the Malayan precedent, sought permission from Whitehall to use collective punishment right from the outbreak of the emergency. Templer's imposition of collective punishment in the

Even so, the overall strategy of exploiting divides to recast mass anti-colonial politics along local or tribal or communal lines was largely successful in each case as the existing divides fell in Britain's favor.

infamous case of Tanjong Malim in Malaya did receive the "full support" of then Secretary of State Lyttelton after all.[23] However, collective punishment in Cyprus backfired due to the detention and punishment of large numbers of Greek Cypriot youths who had been mobilised for the insurgent campaign. Such overt brutality, workable in Malaya and Kenya, failed in Cyprus under the stronger international spotlight there.[24] All in all, Malayan "population control" strategies floundered in Kenya (and more so in Cyprus) because they were reproduced without sufficient regard for local conditions. It is worth considering as well that the success of these strategies in Malaya was itself a function of fortuitous local factors, such as the fact that the Malayan emergency was the least reported of the three cases discussed here.[25]

Resettlement was another important "population control" measure exported from Malaya. As part of the Briggs plan, resettlement played a pivotal role in dealing with the MCP's mass support network, the Min Yuen, by relocating half a million Chinese squatters to closely supervised "new villages." The predominantly urban support-base of the EOKA in Cyprus made such an operation irrelevant, however. Forcibly relocating half a million people in Cyprus would also have demanded a scale of repression unacceptable there. Resettlement was to have more scope for success in the more rural Kenya, where it was effectively adapted as "villagisation." By the end of 1954 some one million people in the entire Kikuyu area were "villagised."[26] This proved decisive in isolating Mau Mau from their passive wing and forcing the movement on the defensive.[27] Relocation, both in Malaya and Kenya, also reaped additional tactical benefits by allowing the British to deny food to the insurgents through rationing. "Food

denial" would become a key operational concept that contributed immensely to military success in both emergencies.[28] The mass repression that necessarily accompanied mass resettlement was but the one major drawback of these otherwise highly successful social control measures. The enclosed villages into which the Kikuyu were relocated were, according to Elkins, submitted to so much repressive control that they became detention camps in all but name.[29] Clearly, other inducements were necessary to secure the allegiance of the population.

Winning the "hearts and minds" of the local population—a concept popularised by Templer in Malaya—could only be achieved in the long run by addressing popular grievances.[30] Firstly, this involved simply recognising that genuine grievances lay at the root of each insurgency—a feat of imagination that seemed to elude the administrations in Malaya, Kenya and Cyprus in the early stages of the each of the disorders.[31] Once recognised, grievances could then be addressed through a host of reforms. The social control policies discussed here were used in Malaya as an effective platform to address socio-economic grievances. Resettled squatters were rehabilitated by being given a combination of self-help and government aid, as well as titles to plots of land, to wean them away from radicalism. That the new village became a permanent part of the Malayan landscape—only six of 480 villages were abandoned at the end of the emergency—speaks of its long-term success as a socio-economic reform.[32] The Kenyan administration took the cue from Malaya in its efforts to rehabilitate the large number of Kikuyu detainees by employing them on public-work projects, for which they were paid. They were also aware, based on the Malayan precedent, that any resettlement scheme had to be considered as "a new and permanent feature of the country's development and not merely as an emergency measure" in order to work successfully.[33] Hence, Baring used the emergency to push through a land-reform programme. Mass acquiescence from the population could not have been secured without clear attempts to meet their socio-economic demands.

POLITICAL STRATEGIES

We finally turn to the last and most decisive dimension in each counterinsurgency campaign: the realm of political strategy. Just as anti-colonial insurgencies were politically motivated, so colonial emergencies were, in Darwin's turn on the Clausewitzian phrase, "the continuation of colonial politics by other means."[34] British counterinsurgency campaign leaders were all well aware of the political problems that lay behind each insurgency, which had to be tackled if any lasting solution was to be achieved.[35] It is interesting to note that Whitehall chose Templer over Harding for Malayan High Commissionership in 1952 because Harding had shown little interest in the political side of the conflict.[36] Incidentally, Harding resigned from his Cyprus Governorship in October 1957 due to his inability to reach a solution on the political front.[37] Political strategies were the most complicated and the least exportable because they dealt with the set of fundamental problems that differed the most from colony to colony. Political success hinged on the fulcrum of subjective local conditions more than any other dimension of the campaign.

A broad pattern can nonetheless be discerned from the political reforms employed in each of the three emergencies. Counterinsurgency reforms were all primarily concerned with what had been, from the outset, a perennial preoccupation of colonial rule: finding and creating local collaborators. This end was sought in the campaigns through two age-old tactics: divide-and-rule and cultivating "moderates."

The strategy of playing one local grouping against another, a tactic as old as colonialism itself, was a regular feature of each campaign. Yet to say that the British divided-and-ruled would be misleading, considering that the main divides they exploited—between the Malays and Chinese in Malaya, the Kikuyu and non-Kikuyu in Kenya, and the Greek

and Turkish Cypriots—were arguably pre-existent. Furthermore, insurgencies themselves were inherently divisive, by raising the stakes of radical nationalism or by bringing one section of the population against another, thus affording the British even more local divisions to capitalise on.[38] The communal pattern of Malayan politics, for example, made it easy for the British to play the "ethnic card" by backing the "special position" of the Malays against the Chinese-dominated MCP.[39] Similarly in Kenya, the inability of Mau Mau to extend its appeal beyond the Kikuyu community made it easier for the British to stem the spread of their ideology to other tribes. Nevertheless, the administration, under Governor Baring, should be credited for their awareness of these divisions and their efforts to institutionalise them, through establishing local and tribal councils and by discouraging inter-tribal politics in Kenya.[40] The "ethnic card" was played in Cyprus by filling the ranks of the Cyprus Police with Turkish Cypriots—a clear parallel with the case of Malaya—in order to exploit the EOKA's reluctance to attack the Turks.[41] At an international level, "divide-and-rule" was wrought by using the Turikish lever to deny the Greeks *enosis*. These divides did not always fall according to British interests however, as most clearly observed in how the same Turkish lever that the British exploited also constrained the scope of the political concessions they might otherwise have been able to offer the Greek Cypriots to their mutual benefit.[42] Even so, the overall strategy of exploiting divides to recast mass anti-colonial politics along local or tribal or communal lines was largely successful in each case as the existing divides fell in Britain's favor.

With local divisions exploited, the task still remained for the British to secure their interests by cultivating collaborators. These were to be the political "moderates"—a plastic category that, as the emergencies progressed and merged imperceptibly into exercises of controlled decolonisation, quickly began to refer to anyone who was willing to cooperate. Here, the wealth of potential collaborators from the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and Malayan

Chinese Association (MCA) in Malaya contrasts sharply with the situations in Kenya and Cyprus, where the British had to resort to working with Jomo Kenyatta and Archbishop Makarios III respectively, men whom they had earlier imprisoned and deported as incurable radicals. Securing the cooperation of these men no doubt required careful political manoeuvring. Only thus could Harding's successor in Cyprus, Hugh Foot, have succeeded in driving a wedge between Makarios and the radical EOKA commander Grivas.[43] Yet British achievements here must be balanced with the understanding that these "extremists" whom they converted were perhaps not quite as radical as once thought. Kenyatta, despite being the leader of KAU, had little control over Mau Mau from the beginning.[44] Makarios's constant willingness to negotiate, and his uneasy relationship with Grivas, also reflected moderate inclinations.[45] We thus observe again that British successes here depended just as much on fortuitous local factors as they did on superior political strategies.

Cultivating the "moderates" could not ultimately succeed, however, without a clear overall political direction in the campaign. In Malaya, Templer's promise in 1952 of independence by 1957 enabled political reforms to be rolled out uninhibitedly, ranging from the "Malayanisation" of the civil service to local municipal elections and the grants of citizenship to the Chinese. This was mirrored in Kenya, albeit at a slower pace, where the political process was advanced towards the latter stages of the emergency. Africans were first elected to the Legislative Council in 1957, and independence was secured in 1963. The situation in Cyprus was more complicated given the popular cry for *enosis*, which the British could never concede.[46] In light of this, shifting the agenda from *enosis* to independence was itself a considerable British achievement. Ultimately, the political solution in Cyprus was arrived at through a dialectic of its own—the successive syntheses of British, Greek and Turkish political demands—rather than through any preconceived Malaya-styled template.[47]

The generally favourable political outcomes achieved in these campaigns suggested that colonial emergencies served as more than just measures of last resort in irretrievable situations. Indeed, the local government, rather than the insurgents, usually dictated the timing and shape of the counterinsurgency campaign. After all, it was often the very act of declaring an emergency, rather than any purported insurgent plot (usually non-existent), that ironically triggered the armed rebellion.[48] Never did anti-colonial pressure automatically boil over into an emergency situation. Calling an emergency was therefore a deliberate decision by the British administration to respond to local pressures by entering into the politics of containment, to regain the initiative in an unfavourable political condition— this based on the dictum that military solutions evolved faster than political ones.[49] When understood thus, the spectrum of counterinsurgency strategies in each campaign was, in the broadest sense, part of a grander British political strategy to secure her interests in the altered context of a diminishing Empire.

CONCLUSION

All things considered, we may reasonably conclude that counterinsurgency strategies used in Malaya worked successfully enough in Kenya and Cyprus to significantly shape the outcome of campaigns there. Of course, the effectiveness of individual strategies varied. Tactical ground-level strategies, such as military tactics and social control measures, were usually more readily applicable—and hence effective—in the alternative environments of Kenya and Cyprus. Collectively, they were largely responsible for the similarity in the campaigns conducted in the three colonies. On the other hand, strategies designed as strategic long-term solutions, most notably political reforms, departed more radically from the Malayan template since their success depended more than anything else on dealing with entrenched local issues that differed fundamentally from one territory to another.

The British experiences in Malaya, Kenya and Cyprus hold important lessons for today's armed forces. Military strategies alone will not suffice. Instead, as the British have shown, a combination of military, socio-economic and ideological strategies need to be employed in a complementary way, geared towards well-defined political objectives. These strategies must also be applied with due sensitivity to the local context, culture and political dynamics, in order to reap long-term success. 🌐

ENDNOTES

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46. For the reasons why acceding to the demand for *enosis* was untenable for Britain, see Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency*, 134.

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