

REGIONALISM & REGIONAL SECURITY

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HEARTS AND MINDS IN GUERRILLA WARFARE

The Malayan
Emergency
1948 – 1960

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Introduction

The term 'the hearts and minds' first became associated with counter-guerrilla warfare during the 1948–60 guerrilla war in Malaya, commonly referred to as the 'Emergency'.¹ It was the British High Commissioner, General (later Field Marshal) Sir Gerald Templer who, shortly after his arrival in Malaya, in February 1952, coined the term — 'that nauseating phrase I think I invented' as he was to refer to it some fifteen years after the event² — and made it popular. Indeed, within a few months the term had caught on to such an extent that it became the label by which everyone referred to the campaign plan that Templer adopted in the Malayan Government's battle with the Malayan Communist Party's (MCP) guerrillas. Although it took time for the details to emerge, the main themes of his strategy were apparent almost immediately. He called for a total effort on all fronts—political, economic, cultural, social, as well as military — and emphasized that there was no reason to distinguish between the peacetime activities of the Government and the Emergency activities. The Government's co-ordinated effort was to be concentrated on gaining the support of the people of Malaya by addressing their grievances and bringing them under the Government's administrative control. The aim was to isolate the guerrillas from their base of support and thus make them vulnerable to the security forces' operations.³

Although coined by Templer, the term was clearly rooted in ideas that had been percolating for some time both internationally and within Malaya itself. At the international level such statements as the preamble to UNESCO's Constitution that, 'since war begins in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed', had contributed to the notion of the emerging cold war as 'a battle for men's minds'. For example, the American ambassador to China, J. Leighton Stuart, who, like other Western political leaders, was casting around for ways of countering the perceived threat of communist expansion, argued in early 1949 for a 'new approach' directed primarily at the 'mind and heart'.⁴ In Malaya, both 'hearts' and 'minds' were being discussed with reference to the Emergency. Chinese community leaders talked not only of the old Chinese saying, 'Gain the people's heart', but also of the need to eradicate 'the fear of Government found in the people's minds and hearts'.⁵ Sir Henry Gurney, the British High Commissioner in Malaya from 1948 to 1951, also spoke of the importance of the minds

and hearts of Malaysians in determining the outcome of the Emergency.⁶ However, whatever its origins, there can be little doubt that it was the publicity that Templer gave the term, combined with the eventual success of the Malayan Government in defeating a full-fledged, and initially very effective, Communist rural guerrilla army which has ensured that the idea of 'winning the hearts and minds' became well known as a strategy for countering rural guerrilla warfare.⁷

In focusing on cutting the link between the guerrillas and the population, the 'hearts and minds' approach developed by the Malayan Government under Templer, echoes what practitioners of guerrilla warfare have argued is the vital ingredient in any successful rural guerrilla campaign. T.E. Lawrence, using his experience in the Arab Revolt against the Turks between 1916 and 1918, has written the rebels 'must have a friendly population, not actively friendly, but sympathetic to the point of not betraying rebel movements to the enemy'.⁸ Mao Tse Tung has stated that 'because guerrilla warfare basically drives from the masses and is supported by them, it can neither exist nor flourish if it separates itself from their sympathies and cooperation'. He urges guerrilla fighters not to neglect 'the question of the immediate interests, the well-being of the broad masses' and notes that revolutionary war 'can be waged only by mobilizing the masses and relying on them'.⁹ In a similar vein, Luis Taruc, who led the Hukbalahap against the Government of the Philippines, said in 1948 that the Huk rebellion 'can only hold out as long as it is supported by the masses. No more, no less'.¹⁰ Che Guevara has emphasized that 'The guerrilla fighter needs full help from the people of the area. This is an indispensable condition.'¹¹ And Hoang Quoc Viet, one of the senior North Vietnamese leaders, has said that 'in order to conduct a successful revolution you have got to involve the entire people. It is no use trying to run a revolution with the Communist Party alone'.¹²

To this list of practitioners may be added the host of scholars who have also dissected and theorized about revolutions. While there are a number of schools of thoughts as to why revolutions occur, as Skocpol points out, they all envisage the underlying revolutionary process in much the same way.¹³ What is stressed is first, the social dislocation which gives rise to grievances, and second, the presence, or emergence, of an organizational framework which allows for the collective mobilization of those affected by the changes taking place in the social system. In other words, just as the originators of the hearts and minds approach

and the practitioners of guerrilla warfare acknowledge that the link between the population and the guerrillas is critical for the pursuit of an effective guerrilla campaign, so theorists of revolution emphasize the juncture of similar factors in singling out the necessary conditions for open revolt.

Yet among those interested primarily in counter-guerrilla warfare, the 'hearts and minds' approach has had a mixed reception. While some, especially British analysts who served in Malaya, have generally favoured this approach, others, particularly in the United States, have been sceptical. In part, this was because the approach became a casualty of the Vietnam War.¹⁴ The label 'hearts and minds' was associated with a number of policies which were far removed from the original Malayan strategy. For some, winning the 'hearts and minds' simply entailed a massive propaganda, or psychological warfare, assault on the general population. Faith in the approach was undermined when the policy proved ineffective. Even more damaging for the term's reputation was its association with the concept of 'pacification'. While they contained elements of the 'hearts and minds' approach, the pacification programmes generally failed to include a satisfactory role for the armed forces, who appeared to be off fighting a separate war. And at times, as the term suggests, pacification seemed to be aimed more at addressing symptoms than causes. For example, pacification policies in Vietnam made little attempt to change the fundamental relationship between the people and the central government.¹⁵

However, this failure to appreciate fully the nature and significance of the 'hearts and minds' approach used in Malaya is understandable. Sir Robert Thompson, who served in Malaya throughout the Emergency as an administrator, most notably as Deputy Secretary and then Secretary for Defence from 1957 to 1961, and who was later head of the British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam and an adviser to President Nixon, has pointed out that, while 'many Americans made studies of the British success during the Emergency in Malaya [they] were largely superficial and confined to particular aspects of the campaign. It was never comprehended as a whole'.¹⁶ Indeed, analysts tended to use aspects of the Emergency campaign to buttress their own arguments, without reference to the overall strategy of the Malayan Government.

Perhaps even more importantly, this general failure to understand the Emergency has been perpetuated by British analysts. While being