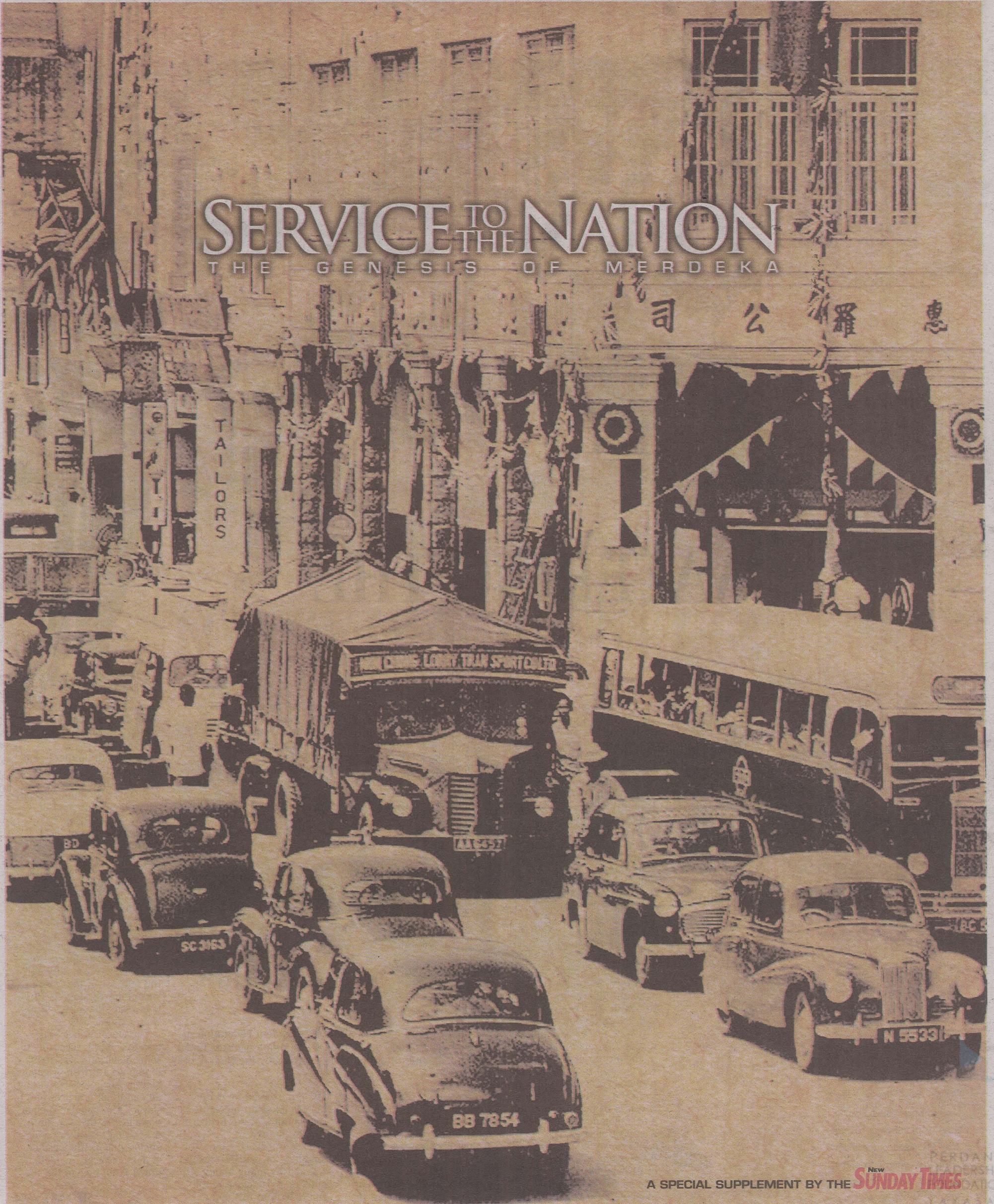
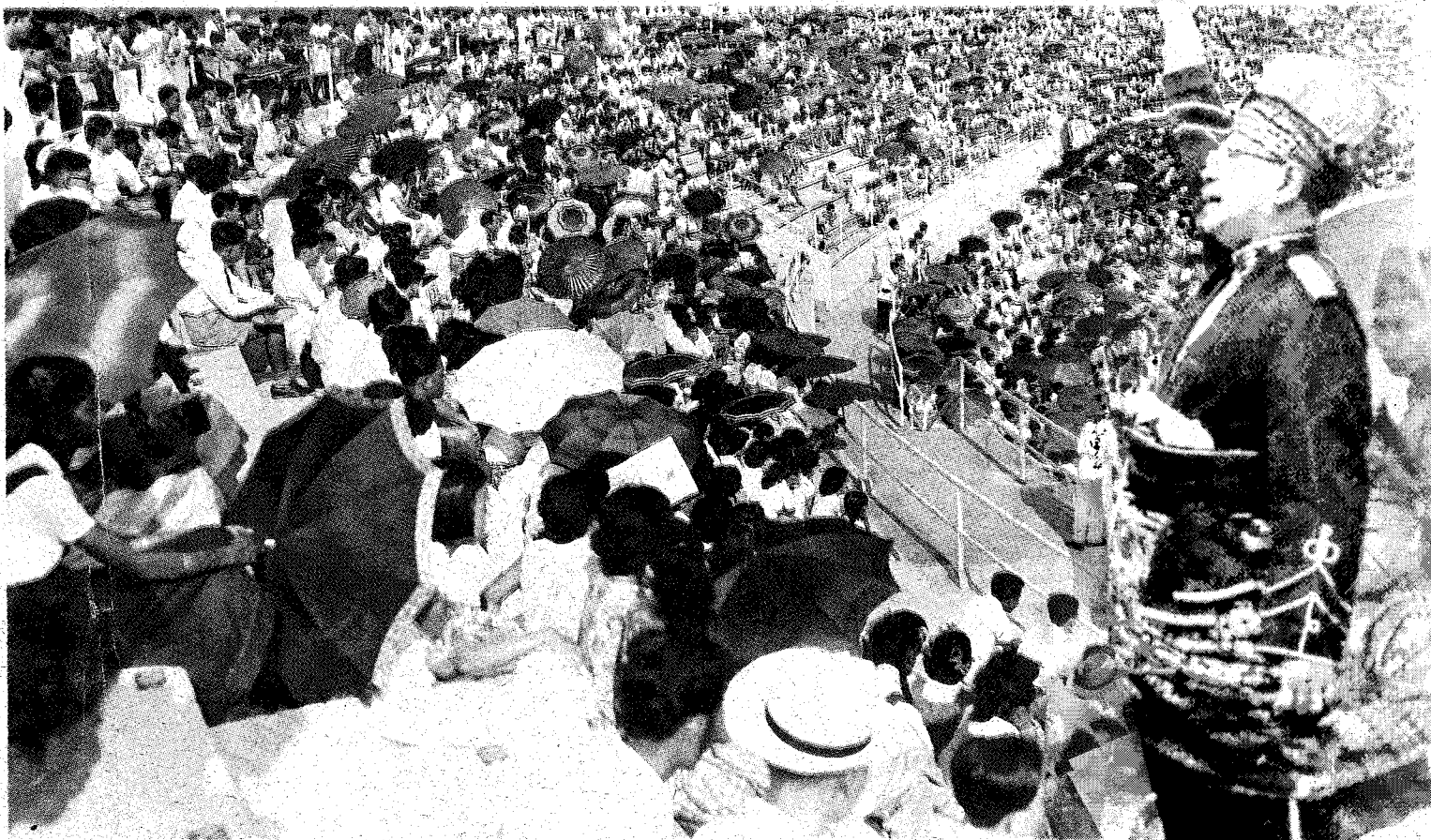


SERVICE TO THE NATION

THE GENESIS OF MERDEKA





WATERING THE SEEDS OF FREEDOM

In the first part of our multi-series on the birth of Merdeka, WAN HAMIDI HAMID goes back a century to explain the history, drama and saga that led to Aug 31, 1957

IT is always Tunku Abdul Rahman's image that reminds us of Malaysia's independence. His clenched fist in the air with the shout of "Merdeka", followed by loud cheering at Stadium Merdeka on Aug 31, 1957 is immortalised in print and visual images.

That is what Merdeka means to most Malaysians. Many who were at the stadium on that day are still alive to relive the great moment this year, Malaysia's 50th anniversary of independence.

For many of us, too, it is time to look back at the struggle to achieve self-rule after centuries of being colonised. Merdeka marks ordinary Malaysians' desire to obtain sovereignty and self-determination.

It was never easy, and it was a miracle that not a single drop of blood was needed to achieve a peaceful transition of power from the British to Malaya. It was a blend of negotiation and diplomacy that Malaya was born peacefully.

But to say no sacrifices were made would be a lie, or at best, too simplistic. The seeds of Malaysian independence began almost

a century ago, and in the beginning it was all about the spirit of nationalism, not just Malay nationalism but also those who had initially no intention of fighting for Malaya. The problem, though, is that the temptation to link events in

develop only after World War Two.

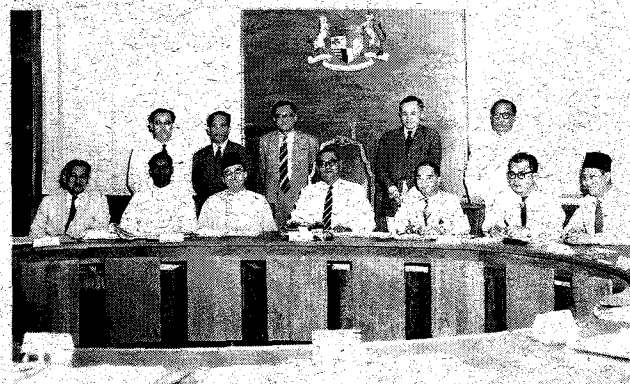
However, there are recent views that the roots of nationalism and seeds of independence began as early as the late 19th century, especially after the Pangkor Treaty of

issues of nationalism and independence have a strong reference to Malay nationalism.

One of the unintentional effects of the Pangkor Treaty was the 1875 Pasir Salak incident, now immortalised as an important root of Malay nationalism.

It was a case of local warlord Datuk Maharajalela, who hired an Orang Asli to murder Perak British Resident J.W.W Birch for imposing a British-style of taxation and collection of local produce on traditional customs. The incident is portrayed as Malays fighting against British oppression and intervention, although the manner of the murder was embarrassing, as Birch was assassinated when he was taking a bath.

The more serious issue was that Birch, according to some historians, was trying to impose a British-originated Slavery Abolition Act, putting an end to all practices of slavery. The popular version nowadays is that the Birch was trying to outlaw "adat hamba utang" (the custom of debt slavery), a common practice not only in the



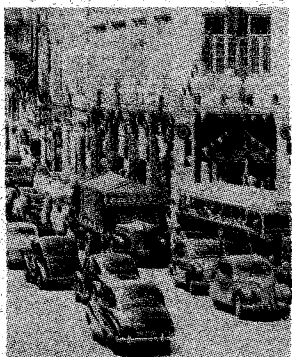
The first Cabinet meeting of the independent Federation of Malaya was held in Kuala Lumpur with prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman in the chair once occupied by the High Commissioner.

the past to current events may lead to a distortion of the truth. Yet, there is room for debate.

Most historians agree that conscious efforts to gain independence began in the 1930s although more serious struggles began to

1874, perceived by many historians as an official intervention of the British in this country.

Resentment over the meddling of British officials was felt by many Malay elite, or those close to the rulers. Within this context,



COVER PICTURE

A street scene of Mountbatten Road, one of the oldest roads in Kuala Lumpur. It has gone through three name changes from 'Java Street' to 'Mountbatten Road' and is currently known as 'Jalan Tun Perak'. The street was named Mountbatten Road in the 1950s in honour of Lord Louis Mountbatten, the British supreme commander of the Far East towards the end of World War Two.

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May 1946: Some of the banners displayed at a rally to protest against the Malayan Union.

FROM PAGE 2

peninsula but also many parts of Indonesia, where people who failed to settle their debt on time had to serve their money lenders by being servants of the house.

The problem is that the other form of slavery, Western-style slavery, was also commonplace in Perak, and it was the buying and selling of Orang Asli as slaves. Until today, the indigenous people are unhappy when someone calls them "sakai", as the word originally meant slaves.

Such a practice, not uncommon with those of African slaves in America in the 18th and 19th centuries, did not bode well with Malay nationalists or freedom fighters who dabbled in slavery. As mentioned earlier, it is a debatable issue.

Other attempts to relate the fight for freedom during the 19th century to the actual struggle for independence in the 1940s were also vague in the sense that the Malay world more than a 100 years ago was segregated and isolated, and were mostly focused on the Rulers or their representatives' squabbles with British officials. Inputs from ordinary folks were mostly neglected, except as foot soldiers. Perhaps the idea was

SLAVING AWAY TO LINK PAST TO PRESENT



Jan 21, 1948: The Sultan of Pahang during the signing ceremony of the Federation of Malaya Agreement at King's House in Kuala Lumpur.

to connect the past to the present as a symbol of struggle for freedom. Yet, factually, it was due to the import of ideas from overseas, for example, Indonesian freedom fighters who received knowledge and training from Dutch people



Feb 8, 1958: British soldiers on an operation against the communists during the Emergency.

who opposed their own government's colonial policy.

In 1919, the entire peninsula was under British rule, but Malay rulers had powers in religion and local customs.

The feudalistic structure of Malay society meant that only the elites were schooled by the British, and although the administrators provided schools for ordinary folks of all races, including the children of Chinese and Indian migrant labour, it was Malay elites who were to be prepared for jobs in the colonial administration.

While not all the children of the elites were happy

with the arrangement, it was secular Malay-educated students who showed inclination towards nationalism. While the home ground may be Tanah Melayu, the influence was from overseas, Dutch East Indies, or as people know it now, Indonesia. The Dutch-trained Indonesians with the pondok-schooled students made an uneasy alliance to continue the struggle to oust the Dutch colonial masters.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, some of the fighters and propagandists had been coming in and out of British



Feb 20, 1956: Crowds welcoming Tunku Abdul Rahman at Bandar Hilir, Malacca following his return from pre-independence talks with the British government in London.

RISE OF ASIAN NATIONALISM

□ FROM PAGE 3

Malaya, and some of them made friends with Malays in the Sultan Idris Teachers' College and other similar-minded idealists. The seeds were slowly being sown.

To put the situation in context, however, of those migrant labours, not all were in British Malaya to become labourers during the 19th century.

Some were political fugitives in their own country, especially the Chinese. They brought with them political groups opposed to the Manchu rulers, in the form of secret societies, and were involved in businesses, quarrels and even battles among themselves. That led to the intervention, and at times, collaboration with Malay warlords.

By the early 19th century, Malaya had become one of the transit points of Chinese political recruiters and exiles. Kuomintang, with close relations with the British, made their way to Malaya to organise a campaign to free China from foreign domination especially that of Japan, which by then had begun to stretch its imperialist arms over China.

Many Chinese were political back then, but it had nothing to do with

In short, no one was interested in fighting for Malayan independence, and Malays were beginning to assert more powers to strengthen the ethnic power base.



May 1, 1957: Tam Thiam Cheong showing his new pupils how to read Chinese characters. Adult education was a programme introduced to the Federation in 1951 whereby adults were taught reading and writing skills to make them literate and productive.

more powers to strengthen the ethnic power base.

Although there are views that the communists in Malaya were among the first to proclaim independence, they had a different kind of idea. Possibly the first political party to be formed in Malaya in 1930, although the setting up was sanctioned by its international body and Vietnamese communist leader Ho Chin Minh was here to see the launch, the Communist Party of Malaya was interested in ousting the British to replace it with a Soviet republic.

A Soviet republic — based on Lenin's Russia, and later Stalin's dictatorship — is a one-party system ruled by a committee of a dozen or so people who dictate the political, economic and social life of a country based on Lenin's and Stalin's interpretation of communism. Other form of ideologies were enemies of the state.

It was such an ideology that CPM was fighting for Malaya, before and after World War Two. And it was a struggle shared by other communists in Indo-China who were fighting to kick out the colonial masters.

It was an Asian form of nationalism that was

freeing Malaya from British administration. The Indians too were largely influenced with Indian nationalism. In short, no one was interested in fighting for Malayan independence, and Malays were beginning to assert

□ TURN TO PAGE 11



Dec 8, 1941: The Japanese forces first landed on Malayan shores at Pantai Sabak in Kota Baru.

TALK AND ACTION LEAD THE WAY

□ FROM PAGE 10

The Japanese invasion in 1941 halted their progress, with many nationalists fighting on different sides.

While some Malay nationalists collaborated with the Japanese, including that of the KMM, others fought with the British, including the communists, who hated the Japanese more than the British

flourishing in Malaya during the 1920s and 1930s, although separately, with the Indians too split between the ideologies of India's Congress Party and its opponents including the then popular movement of fascism and communism, and the Chinese's fragile alliance between the Kuomintang and the communists.

Malays too began to feel the infusion of nationalist fervour, although it was not about the independence of Malaya but rather the goal of Indonesia Raya or Melayu Raya, the Greater Indonesia.

Kesatuan Melayu Muda was recognised as the first homegrown political party formed by Malay nationalists, mostly school teachers, in 1937. The leaders, such as Ibrahim Yaakob, shared the same zeal of Indonesia's Sukarno and Hatta towards liberating Nusantara, or the Malay Archipelago.

The Japanese invasion in 1941 halted their progress, with many nationalists fighting on different sides. While some Malay nationalists collaborated with the Japanese, including that of the KMM, others fought with the British, including the communists, who hated the Japanese more than the British, a continuation of their war in



June 22, 1957: A roadblock check at the gate leading into Jabu Village, Segamat, Johor, during a 72-hour curfew. The curfew and restriction were imposed on the villagers for their 'crime of silence' following attacks by communists.



Sept 3, 1953: Notice boards, like the one pictured here, were put up at the boundaries to the Settlement of Malacca which was declared 'White', free from restrictions which had been imposed to combat communists by High Commissioner General Sir Gerald Templar.

China. No Chinese, either those with the Kuomintang or CPM, could ever forgive the Japanese for the 1937 Nanjing massacre.

In retrospect, the real move towards independence began after 1945, in particular when the war experience reflected the British inability to defend its empire, and its defeat to an Asian military might.

It was also part of European decolonisation that was taking place after

the war.

The Indonesian example, declaring independence on their own in August 1945 and the subsequent success in 1949, provided a strong impetus for Malay nationalists to push for independence.

Although Indonesian freedom fighters were defeated in many battles, it was the combination of military actions and negotiations that ended a small European country's

dream of continuous grip on Southeast Asia's land of a thousand islands.

In the peninsula, it can never be a cliché to repeat that the fight against Malayan Union in 1946 was the beginning of a truly modern Malay nationalism that within the next few years brought Malays towards a coalition with Chinese and Indians, who had made up their mind to be part of a new country waiting to be born.

Next issue:
The rise of Sukarno; and segregation of Malayan nationalist struggles against the backdrop of European fascism and Russia's Stalinism.

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An adult class in English literacy at Prince's Road School. The class instructor is Vasu Thevan, principal of the school. This picture was taken on Sept 28, 1953.

