

**Chin Peng**  
**The Telegraph**  
**16 September 2013**  
**By BST**

Chin Peng, who has died aged about 88, was decorated for his bravery fighting alongside British forces in the Second World War then afterwards took up arms against them in the Malayan Emergency.

His fight continued even after Malaya achieved independence in 1957, and it was only in 1989 that he signed a peace treaty with the government of what was by then Malaysia. Even so, he continued to be prevented from returning from exile to the land of his birth, where he remained a divisive figure.

Ong Boon Hua is thought to have been born on October 21 1924 in Sitiawan, a small town in the state of Perak in the Malayan peninsular that bordered southern Thailand. He was the son of a bicycle dealer who had emigrated from Fujian province in south-east China: it would be Malaya's ethnic-Chinese population which took up arms most willingly against the Japanese during the war; feeling themselves to be a disenfranchised minority, however, it was also they who formed the spine of the postwar communist insurgency against Britain.

Chin Peng, as he would be known on the battlefield, was a studious youth, learning English at the Methodist School in Perak. At 15 he joined the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) and began work in the design department of Perak's Humanity News.

He was close to the CPM's leader Lai Teck, and his political rise was swift. But war would interrupt his ascent. After the Japanese invasion in December 1941 the CPM formed the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA). From February 1942 to the end of the war the MPAJA took on Japanese forces, often with Britain providing weapons and training.

Chin Peng was an MPAJA liaison with British officers (many from Force 136, a south-east Asian variant of the Special Operations Executive). In an interview in 2009, Chin Peng recalled cycling from his home to the coastal town of Lumut to meet British operatives who had arrived by submarine: "I used the trunk roads and then the estate roads to avoid being spotted. I cycled everywhere."

For his contribution to the Allied war effort, Chin Peng was decorated with the Burma Star and appointed OBE. The latter would soon be rescinded as Peng segued from wartime hero to colonial villain.

After the Japanese surrender in August 1945 the MPAJA took control before British authority was restored that autumn. In the brief interregnum, reprisals were severe. The ethnic-Chinese MPAJA accused many ethnic-Malays of collaborating with the Japanese. Ethnic-Malays, meanwhile, would accuse the MPAJA of indiscriminate violence.

With the return of British rule, the CPM campaigned for independence. When it became clear that this would not be forthcoming, the party went underground. Leader Lai Teck was accused of being a spy and fled leaving Chin Peng, aged 24, to take control.

He immediately abandoned Lai Teck's moderate stance, advocating instead violent struggle on top of strike action as the best means to establish a communist state in Malaya and Singapore. On June 16 1948 this new aggression was announced when CPM fighters attacked two rubber plantations in northern Malaya and murdered three British planters. Though he always denied personally ordering the killings, Chin remained unrepentant about them. "We considered the European planters as a symbol of colonial rule," he said. "They were hated by the workers.

"I make no apologies for seeking to replace such an odious system with a form of Marxist socialism. Colonial exploitation, irrespective of who were the masters, Japanese or British, was morally wrong. If you saw how the returning British functioned the way I did, you would know why I chose arms."

Days later British authorities declared an Emergency, beginning a 12-year conflict that amounted to a war in all but name. The communists could count on up to 10,000 insurgents; Britain dispatched tens of thousands of Commonwealth troops. Chin Peng's tactics were clear: rely on the support of ethnic-Chinese smallholders on the fringes of the jungle, then retreat into that jungle when British troops moved in.

To counter this, in 1950 Sir Harold Briggs organised the resettlement of half a million largely ethnic-Chinese in hundreds of "New Villages" away from the jungle redoubts of the CPM. Cut off from the sources of food and support, Chin's forces became besieged.

This did not prevent the assassination of the British High Commissioner, Sir Henry Gurney, in October 1951, but the tide of conflict was turning. Having isolated Chin's forces, British troops began aggressive patrols of the jungle. Slowly but surely Chin's men were hunted down. CPM attacks fell dramatically.

By 1955 the Malayan government offered communist insurgents an amnesty before, at the end of the year, the two sides met for talks. Chin Peng was not in emollient mood. He

demanded recognition of the CPM and acceptance of its role in political life. "If you demand our surrender," he noted, "we would prefer to fight to the last man."

The talks collapsed and the amnesty was withdrawn. Despite half-hearted efforts to relaunch negotiations, it quickly became apparent that Britain was preparing to grant Malaya independence, stripping the insurgency of its raison d'être. Yet Chin considered the government of the newly-independent country colonial stooges, and some of his fighters continued to launch attacks into 1958. Most fled across the border into southern Thailand, however, and by 1960 Malaya declared the Emergency over. Chin Peng left Thailand for Beijing.

There he spent much of the next decades. Assured that south-east Asia was ripe for revolution, the CPM continued to maintain a base in southern Thailand. But revolution never materialised, and in the course of the 1970s the CPM was riven by bloody infighting. Finally, on December 2 1989, a peace agreement was signed by the Malaysian and Thai governments and the CPM.

Chin, unrepentant for his role in a 40-year conflict which cost many thousands of lives, appealed – unsuccessfully – to be allowed to return to Malaysia.

He is reported to have married Lee Kwan Wa, with whom he had two sons.

**Chin Peng, born October 21 1924, died September 16 2013**

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Source: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/10313556/Chin-Peng.html>