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[H-Diplo would like to thank the editors of Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies for granting permission to re-publish Richard Mason’s introduction that first appeared in the journal.]
2008 marks the sixtieth anniversary of the beginning of left-wing insurgencies in Malaya, Burma, Indonesia and the Philippines. These insurgencies continue to leave their imprints on the region today. The essays in this volume discuss the significance of these insurgencies in the course of Southeast Asian history, with particular reference to the Cold War in the region. These essays are part of a larger collection that were presented at a Roundtable on the Sixtieth Anniversary of 1948: Reassessing the Origins of the Cold War in Southeast Asia, organized by the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, July 10-11 2008. The central concern of the Roundtable was to discuss the significance of 1948 in Southeast Asian history and to determine “in what way 1948 was – or perhaps was not – ‘the beginning of the Cold War’ in Southeast Asia.” Were the seemingly simultaneous Left-wings insurgencies that broke out in the region in 1948 Soviet-directed as part of the Cold war in Asia or did the insurgencies emerged from local circumstances affecting the strategies of the struggles of these left-wings movements in the respective counties concerned? How important were the insurgencies in affecting the course of Southeast Asian history? Did 1948 constitute a watershed in Southeast Asian history? The papers in this volume address these issues among many others.

Were the Left-wings insurgencies which broke out in Malaya, Burma, Indonesia and the Philippines in 1948 directed by the Soviet Union as part of the Cold War in Asia? Known as the ‘Soviet Conspiracy Theory,’ the starting point for this postulation is Andrei Zhdanov’s speech at the inaugural of the COMINFORM in September 1947 which argued that the world had been divided into two opposing camps: the Western capitalist countries led by the United States on the one hand, and the communist bloc led by the Soviet Union on the other. Zhdanov advocated that foreign communist parties should be in vanguard of spreading communism throughout the world. This line was repeated by E.M Zhukov in an article published in the December issue of Bol’shevik, which advocated propagation of revolutions to the colonial areas. According to proponents of this Soviet Conspiracy Theory, it was at the Communist Youth Conference at Calcutta, convened 19-24 February 1948 that the Soviets passed on the ‘instructions’ to representatives of Southeast Asian communist parties to seize the opportunity of the unstable conditions prevailing in Southeast Asia to rise against their colonial rulers. In March, left-winged insurgency broke out in Burma, followed by British Malaya in June, and Indonesia in September.

Consistent with the thesis of monolithic communism, the conventional orthodox interpretation of these uprisings has it that they were Soviet-directed as part of the Cold War in Asia. Soviet interest in Southeast Asia had been notably absent before the Pacific War but by 1947 there were discernable evidence of Soviet’s growing interest in the region. In 1947, the Soviet Union opened an embassy in Bangkok and this was shortly followed by the Communist Youth Conference at Calcutta in February 1948, and the subsequent the outbreak of the Southeast Asian insurgencies later that year. According to this school of thought, that these left-winged Southeast Asian insurgencies broke out almost simultaneously indeed suggest actions in response to instruction from Moscow.
Predictably, both the United States and Great Britain immediately assumed that these insurgencies were Soviet-directed and formulated their responses accordingly. After 1951, however, British officials changed their views and played down the suggestion of external influence in the outbreak of the Malayan insurgency.

In a study published ten years after the initial outbreak of the Southeast Asian insurgencies, Ruth T. McVey called into question whether these insurgencies were Soviet-directed, if indeed the Soviet Union had issued any such ‘instruction.’ According to McVey, the Calcutta Conference did provide encouragement for indigenous Southeast Asian Left-winged parties to take up arms, but it was local conditions affecting the struggles of the left-wing elements in the respective Southeast Asian states that determined the outbreak of these insurgencies. That these insurgencies broke out almost simultaneously were coincidental. Most of the more recent scholarly accounts on these Southeast Asian insurgencies endorsed the McVey thesis. Has declassification of new documentary sources revised the conventional interpretations of the outbreak of the insurgencies?

In the first essay, C.C. Chin reexamines the outbreak of the Malayan Communist Party in Malaya (MCP) in 1948. On the basis of various MCP contemporary documents and oral history accounts of several important senior MCP cadres at that time, Chin suggests that the MCP had their own plans for revolts rather than in response external forces. Chin argues that while the Zhdanov doctrine did influence the MCP, it is most unlikely that the MCP would simply act in accordance with Soviet instructions. The MCP was greatly under the influence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and followed the CCP tactics in its political struggle. The CCP taught that each individual party had to observe closely its own situation and decide its own course of action.

According to Chin, the outbreak of the Malayan Communist insurgency in June 1948 was essentially in reaction to repressive measures by the British in Malaya. In the effort to corner and stave off the MCP from the various fronts of open and constitutional struggle, the British escalated their repression by means of arrests, banishment and implementing a new Society Ordinance aimed at eliminating and controlling trade unions and other left-

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wing organizations. These measures were aimed at driving the MCP toward a more radical reaction. Chin suggests that these intensified hostile repressions were in fact a well-planned tactic by the British to provoke the MCP to resort to armed struggle.

In response to the growing repression by the British, the MCP came to see armed revolt as the inevitable solution. At the Enlarged Central Committee Meeting held in March 1946, the MCP issued a statement declaring that the people’s war was now inevitable. But it was to be the local MCP units that initiated the provocation which triggered the outbreak of war. Instead of full-scale armed revolts, the MCP military units engaged in acts of intimidation against British planters. The British capitalized on the opportunity to immediately carry out a major offensive against the MCP, implementing well-planned mass arrests and declaring the Emergency. Chin suggests that the British had in fact cultivated the situation and had been expecting an armed revolt. The MCP, on the other hand, had over-estimated their own strength vis-a-vis the British.

In the second essay, Leon Comber provides the perspective of the Malayan Police Special Branch on the outbreak of the Malayan Communist Party insurgency. Comber had served as a Special Branch officer in the Malayan Police during the Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960. When the Malayan insurgency broke out in June 1948, he was then a junior Special Branch officer heading the Chinese section of the Federal Special Branch and had participated in the discussions in Kuala Lumpur in early 1949 concerning the origins of the MCP uprising against the government of British Malaya in June 1948. Some five decades after the initial outbreak of the MCP insurrection, Comber interviewed Chin Peng, Secretary-General of the outlawed MCP, at the ‘Chin Peng Workshop’ held at the Australian National University, Canberra, in February 1999.

According to Comber, the Malayan Special Branch was initially inclined to downplay the MCP uprising unless it found evidence that the MCP was receiving external assistance; and in this connection, the Special Branch found that the MCP was in contact with the Chinese Communist Party rather than the Soviets. Indeed, Soviet influence was negligible in Malaya and although the Soviets gave verbal support to the Malayan uprising, trade came before revolution. Soon after the end of the Pacific War, the Soviet Union became interested in developing trade with Malaya, especially in purchasing rubber to build up their stocks that had been depleted during the Second World War. As such there seem to be little purpose in the Soviet Union fostering revolutions for Malaya.

Instead of an external involvement in the MCP’s decision to take up arms in June 1948 the Malaysian Special Branch, according to Comber, had expected that Chin Peng, who was personally in favour of an armed revolt against the British colonial government, would implement his own policy after he became Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Malaya in April 1947. The Special Branch also surmised that the MCP, thwarted in its attempt to infiltrate the trade union movements and bring about a Democratic People’s Republic of Malaya by peaceful means, decided to resort to rebellion in an effort to overthrow the government. As such, the Calcutta Conference played no relevance whatsoever in the outbreak of the Malayan insurgency. Indeed, as Comber intimated of his interview with Chin Peng in Canberra in February 1999, the Secretary-General of the MCP
did not receive an invitation to attend the Calcutta Conference. That was rather strange if it was indeed the intention of the Soviet to issue instruction to the Southeast Asian communist parties to take up arms against their respective colonial masters. Pointing to findings of researchers working on Soviet archives, Comber seems well-pleased that Soviet archives corroborates the view of the Malayan Police Special Branch taken in 1949, long before the Soviet archives became accessible to researchers.

In the next essay, Ang Cheng Guan examines the situation in Vietnam in 1948. By the time of the Calcutta Conference in February 1948, the French and the communist-led Vietminh had already been at war since 1946, a war that would eventuate in the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and the consequent French withdrawal from Vietnam in 1955. Unlike the MCP, the Vietminh was invited to the Calcutta Conference where the Vietnamese delegation was in fact given the honour of delivering the keynote message. Given that the Vietminh were then engaged in a war against the French, it was not surprising that the Vietnamese report focused on their military experiences in their war of liberation.

Ang Cheng Guan notes that although the military focus of the Vietnamese message seemed to fit well with the general tenor of the conference, the Vietnamese position in fact ran contrary to the general consensus at Calcutta. The conference had reiterated Zhdanov’s interpretation of the Two Camp Doctrine and had called for a united front of all revolutionaries to launch armed struggle against the colonialist forces. This however had been rejected by the Vietnamese. Indeed, upon returning from the conference the Vietnamese expressed irritation at the attempts to impose the international line on them. Instead, they steadfastly maintained that the struggle for national liberation and democracy takes on a different character according to the actual condition prevailing in each country. This, Cheng Guan emphasized, did not mean that the Vietnamese leadership did not subscribe to the two-camp thesis. Indeed, the Indochinese Communist Party had anticipated the two camps as early as the Eight Plenum in May 1941. To be sure some quarters within the Vietminh leadership were inclined to support the full implications of Zhdanov’s Two Camp Doctrine but the general consensus was inclined toward the belief that the bourgeoisie could still be harnessed against the anti-imperialist movement as part of their national liberation front led by the communist. Chen Guan suggests that the Vietnamese struggle shifted from nationalist/anti-colonial sentiment to include communist/anti-capitalist sentiment as well after the United States, China and the Soviet Union became mired in the Vietnamese struggle for independence. Cheng Guan suggested the point of the shift to be between late 1949 and early 1950.

Katharine McGregor’s paper is a reassessment of the significance of the Partai Komunist Indonesia (PKI) revolt in Madiun in 1948 to the Cold War in Indonesia. In the first part of her paper, McGregor provides a review of the scholarly literature of the Madiun affair, highlighting the continuing debate about the roles of the internal and external players and interpretation of this period in Indonesian history. The paper also provided an overview of the on-going significance of the Madiun uprising to the image of the Indonesian Communist Party and to continuing hostility toward the party.
McGregor argues that that while 1948 was not a significant turning point, it was an important ‘flash point’ in the domestic Cold War for Indonesia. Indeed, Madiun became a key reference point in the competition between the PKI and Masyumi in the 1950s. For the PKI, Madiun was odious as well as a significant scar and for many the party had been vigilant in guarding against any provocation. As McGregor explains, the suspicions and antagonism between the PKI on the hand and the anti-communist groups on the other had never gone far beyond the surface after 1948. Indeed that amber flared up again during the violence of 1965-66 when anti-communist factions in alliance with the Indonesian military slaughtered hundreds of thousand people who were suspected to be communist or else sympathetic to the communist. It was during this violence that communism was ultimately banished from Indonesia.

Still on the Indonesian experience, Richard Mason discusses the impact of Parti Komunist Indonesia(PKI)-Front Demokrasi Rakyat(FDR) uprising in 1948\(^3\) on the United States’ policy toward the Dutch-Indonesian war which had raged since December 1946. American policy maker at that time believed that the PKI-FDR uprising, like the risings in Burma, Malaya and the Philippines were Soviet-directed and had reacted accordingly. Their belief was manifested in the consequent shifts in their policies toward the region. Before 1948, for instance, American policy towards Southeast Asia was almost exclusively dictated by the imperatives of the policies towards Europe. All other considerations, including the objectives of U.S diplomacy in newly emerged areas, were subordinated to this European policy. But as Indonesian left-winged parties began to organize themselves into a front opposed to further negotiation with the Dutch and the scepter of communism began to loom, Washington began to appreciate that if communism in Indonesia was to be eliminated, the demands of Indonesian nationalism would have to be satisfied.

The outbreak of the PKI-FDR uprising in 1948 certainly underscored the belief that that Indonesian nationalism had to be settled in a just and practical way as precondition to fight communism. But as Mason emphatically argued, important as the as the insurgencies were in marking a turning point in the Cold war thinking of the United States toward Indonesia, it was still subordinated to the importance of European considerations. It was the threats to Americas European policies posed by Dutch policies in Indonesia that ultimately led the U.S. to threaten sanction against the Netherland in 1949. It was this threat that caused Dutch to resume negotiation with the Indonesians on the terms of the independence of Indonesia.

The last essay, by Abdul Rahman Hj Ismail, is an interim report of an on-going research on the reactions of the Malays in Malaya to the coming of the Cold War to the region. As Abdul Rahman emphasized, 1948 was indeed a momentous year in course of Malayan history. It marked the official formation of the federation of Malaya in February, annulling the immensely unpopular Malayan Union experiment amongst the Malays. 1948 also marked

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\(^3\) The PKI-FDR revolt is otherwise known as the Madiun uprising as referred to by Katharine McGregor in her essay in this volume
the declaration of the Emergency, which lasted until 1960, three years after the Federation of Malaya obtained independence from Britain.

According to Abdul Rahman, the vast majority of Malays in Malaya were not interested in, if indeed they had been aware of, the on-going Cold War between the Western bloc led by the United States on the side the Eastern bloc led by the Soviet Union on the other. The preoccupations of the Malays during the immediate post-Pacific War period was nationalism and the concomitant effort to gain independence for Malaya from Britain. In particular, they had been rather anxious that the Malays, who were the native of the land, were not robbed of the custodianship over Malaya and political privileges of the Malays in independent Malaya. Consumed with these issues, the Malays had little interests in external affairs.

For the majority of the Malays, the Cold War was most popularly associated with the Emergency, which British authorities had declared in the effort to quell the armed uprising mounted by the MCP. Except for a few isolated cases, Malays in Malaya were generally not attracted to communism which they perceived as foreign, and particularly Chinese. As such, and particularly at a time when the Malays were jealously guarding custodianship over their homeland, communism certainly had no appeal amongst the Malays. It perhaps largely because of the lack of Malay support that the cause of the MCP in Malaya was foredoomed.

The essays in this volume tend to lean toward the McVey thesis which had argued that the seemingly spontaneous left-winged revolts that broke out in Burma, Malaya and Indonesia in 1948 had arisen from local circumstances rather than any instructions from the Kremlin. To be sure, Zhdanov’s two-camps thesis probably did provide some encouragement to the local communist movements but it was the local conditions prevalent in the respective Southeast Asian states that had triggered off the insurrections. American policy-makers however, as Mason emphasized in his article, assumed that that the revolts were Soviet-direct and had reacted accordingly. The conclusions offered in these essays are suggestive of course, pending alternative interpretations that might be borne out by further research in the relevant archives.

Participants:

Richard Mason is a research fellow at the Institute of Occidental Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. His research interests include American foreign relations in Southeast Asia during the Cold War era, with a particular reference to U.S.-Indonesian relations. He is currently working on a book, Containment and the Challenge of Non-Alignment: The United States and Indonesia, 1950-1959.

Anthony L. Smith is a Fellow at the Centre for Strategic Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand and also a member of the New Zealand civil service. He holds a PhD in political studies from Auckland University. Smith is the editor of, and contributor to, "Southeast Asia and New Zealand: A History of Regional and Bilateral Relations" (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and Victoria University Press).
Nicholas Tarling is a Fellow at the New Zealand Asia Institute, The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand. He was Professor of History at that University from 1968 till retirement early in 1997. Tarling was editor of the Cambridge History of Southeast Asia and has been the author or editor of about 40 books on the subject.
All politics is local”, as Tip O’Neill, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives (1977-1987), once famously said. This set of historical articles looks at the emerging Cold War in Asia, with particular attention to 1948, and a set of communist insurgencies that arose around that time. Interpreting these events has led, to paraphrase Richard Mason, the issue’s guest editor, to a divergence between the “Soviet Conspiracy Theory” and the Ruth McVey thesis. The journal articles fall on the side of McVey, which is to stress the importance of local actors and local dynamics in the region’s communist rebellions.

It has become a mantra to argue that the Cold War era was a relatively straight forward one and that when it crumbled it gave way to a far more complex world of multipolarity and “non-traditional” security concerns (most of which have actually been around since time immemorial, and are therefore pretty “traditional”). Unfortunately the dominant interpretation of the Cold War, with its binary division, may have frustrated good policy making then, and may confound observation now. To observers looking at Asia, communist rebellions in the aftermath of WWII in much of Southeast Asia, the Chinese revolution in 1949, the onset of the Korean War in 1950, the defeat of the French in Vietnam in 1954, it must have “suggested – at the very least – that a worldwide conspiracy was taking shape”, to quote Clive Christie’s rendering of the Western viewpoint.1 The essays presented here show a more complex picture of Southeast Asia’s communist rebellions of the 1940s – or at least some of them (Burma and the Philippines are not included here). Reading these contributions one recalls the hindsight observation of Robert S McNamara, Secretary of Defense in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and the so-called ‘architect of the Vietnam War’, that he and other policy makers thought they were going to war against global communism, but instead they went to war against Vietnamese nationalism.2 McNamara’s observation is a simplified soundbite, but the reconstructed McNamara was far closer to the mark than his policy making circle during the 1960s.

The articles presented in this volume were part of a wider set of papers presented to a conference on the same subject organised by the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore, 10-11 July 2008. Mason introduces the discussion by beginning with a speech by Andrei Zhdanov, chairman of the Supreme Soviet, to the COMINFORM in September 1947, which divided the world into two opposing camps, Western capitalist countries and the communist bloc. Mason then notes that, according to the Soviet


Conspiracy Theory, the Communist Youth conference in Calcutta, in February 1948, was the venue that allowed the Soviets to pass instructions to the communist parties of Southeast Asia to take advantage of unstable conditions. The results were left wing rebellions in Burma, Malaya and Indonesia later that same year. At least this was the position taken by the U.S. and the UK which, Mason states, “immediately assumed that these insurgencies were Soviet-directed and formulated their responses accordingly” (2). Mason also notes that after 1951 the British changed their views about external influence, particularly around the nature of the Malayan insurgency.

If indeed the Soviet Union was able to issue instructions to supposed proxy communist movements across Southeast Asia, one might ask the question as to why insurgency did not occur everywhere. Thailand, for example, did not rise up in rebellion in 1948, and when a communist insurgency did arise it was primarily in Thailand’s impoverished northeast and did not pose a serious threat to the state despite its proximity to substantive communist movements in Indochina. The Philippines by contrast experienced a communist insurgency which continues to this day, with the New People’s Army exercising control over a sizeable amount of territory without external state sponsorship. A common and parallel explanation given for the rise of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), overwhelmingly but not exclusively an ethnic Chinese movement, posits the influence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which took ultimate power in mainland China in 1949, one year after the start of the Malayan Emergency. This does not explain why ethnic Chinese did not rise up in rebellion everywhere in Southeast Asia. A ‘control experiment’ exists in the under-utilised case of Sarawak, later incorporated as east Malaysia, where communist forces were weak, even amongst the Chinese community, and only went into full-scale rebellion much later in concert with Indonesian forces during the Confrontation (1962-1966). As Vernon Porritt notes in his important study on the subject, communist appeal was weak in Sarawak because of low rates of dissatisfaction and alienation, particularly amongst rural (Chinese) communities.3 On the Peninsula the ranks of the MCP were swollen largely by alienated ethnic Chinese, who felt they had little stake in a society that guaranteed Malay privilege.

C.C. Chin argues here that British repression of the left wing in Malaya caused the MCP to conclude that armed revolt was the only possible option. Chin puts the onus on the British for using the pretext of low level violence by the MCP, designed to intimidate the authorities, to generally react against left wing forces through mass arrests and the declaration of the Emergency. Other commentators note that the MCP had set itself up for an armed struggle even before the end of WWII, by caching weapons in the jungle, had executed those they accused of assisting Japan in the aftermath of WWII in territory that it held, and that Chin Peng, who emerged as MCP Secretary General in 1948, was more determined than his more moderate predecessor to begin an armed struggle – but there is some agreement that the Malayan left more broadly felt excluded from the political

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Another factor was the influence of the Chinese language education system in Malaya, which included a lot of teachers from China itself – some of whom brought Marxist/Maoist influences to bear on their pupils. These other factors aside, Chin’s article, however, points us to the real problem of exclusion from the political system, which generally paves the way for radicalisation.

Given the MCP’s lack of appeal to ethnic Malays, who regarded the movement as “foreign” and probably beholden to China, the MCP’s insurgency may have been a losing proposition from the outset. Abdul Rahman Haji Ismail in this journal argues that, despite the temporary post-war alliance of anti-colonial Marxists and Malay nationalists within the left wing front organisation Partai Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (Malay Nationalist Party of Malaysia), “[i]t was perhaps the lack of Malay support that foredoomed the fate of communism in Malaya” (155). A common cause against the Japanese invaders and subsequently the British could not, for very long, paper over the ethnic divisions. (Cheah Boon Kheng elsewhere makes the apposite point that the MCP cannot simply be known as a Chinese uprising, as many of the victims were ethnic Chinese whom the MCP regarded as British collaborators.5)

An article by Leon Comber, a former member of the Malayan Special Branch, looks at the Special Branch’s contemporaneous understanding of external influence. Special Branch found that CCP influence was far more substantial than was Soviet influence. The Soviets, while giving verbal support for the insurgency, wanted to pursue trading interests with Malaya to obtain rubber which they were seriously short of after the war devastation. Comber lays the blame for the MCP revolt squarely onto Chin Peng’s worldview. In addition, Comber’s own interview material from Chin Peng – the two former adversaries met up in 1999 – shows that Chin Peng gives no credence to the idea that he had been directed by the Soviet Union.

Ang Cheng Guan’s excellent article on Vietnam recalls that by 1948 the Vietminh were already in open rebellion against the French and needed no encouragement from the Soviet Union to begin their anti-colonial struggle. This article highlights the independent nature of Ho Chi Minh’s movement, albeit one inspired by and allied to the Soviet Union and China – support that allowed the Vietminh to endure. As Ang Cheng Guan notes, however, “Stalin had doubts as to whether Ho was a genuine Marxist-Leninist” (75). This fits the pattern whereby Stalin distrusted any communist movement that the Soviet empire did not have total control over. Furthermore, the Vietminh, while endorsing Zhdanov’s two camp


5 Cheah Boon Kheng, Malaysia: The Making of a Nation (Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), 23.
division on an ideological level, showed a level of pragmatism that saw them the object of criticism from “true” Marxist-Leninists. The Vietminh argued that each country’s circumstances were different, lauded the more evolutionary means that some other Asian countries had taken to independence, and clearly felt it counterproductive to be too ideologically pure about international relationships. The Vietminh undertook actions to avoid antagonising the United States, and did not engage in anti-American propaganda. Additionally the Vietminh made overtures to the KMT rump government in Nanking. Ho even resisted recognising the People’s Republic of China, only doing so under pressure from Beijing. (It is probably a little known fact that U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) operatives saved Ho Chi Minh’s life during a bout of malaria in WWII, and a number to these operatives subsequently reported to historians that the Vietminh appeared to take some inspiration from the American War of Independence and perceived the United States as an anti-colonial power. There were those in the OSS who felt let down by unfolding attitudes in Washington.6) The Cold War saw Washington focus on the danger of communist expansion and documentary evidence assembled in this journal’s special issue demonstrates that Ho Chi Minh’s movement came to be seen in that light by the late 1940s.

It seems obvious in hindsight that a failure to understand the character of Vietnam’s anti-colonial movement contributed ultimately to a war that realist scholar John G. Stoessinger referred to as ”America’s Tragedy”: “The US involvement in Indochina had begun imperceptibly, almost like a mild toothache. At the end, it ran through Vietnam and the United States like a pestilence. Each President based his policies on exaggerated fears and later on exaggerated hopes. Thus, each President left the problem to his successor in worse shape than he found it.”7 Both Stoessinger and journalist and historian Stanley Karnow are amongst those who thought it likely that had the United States not set itself on a collision course with the Vietminh, allowing Vietnam to become a communist country, it would plausibly have developed along Titoist lines. The War legacy though continues to cast a long shadow. The normalisation of U.S.-Vietnam relations occurred as late as 1995, far later than for other Western countries, and despite considerable mutual interests, hurdles still remain in the bilateral relationship including “misgivings” from conservative elements of the ruling Vietnamese Communist Party about opening up too much to the United States.8


In Indonesia, the United States wanted to strengthen nationalist forces at the expense of a very numerous communist movement, and Richard Mason’s second article explains why. Unlike Vietnam, where Washington decided to back France to achieve this outcome, and solidify its interests in Europe, in Indonesia the United States came to the decision that the Dutch needed to withdraw to strengthen non-communist indigenous forces. The Netherlands left Indonesia by December 1949 in part because of a grinding guerrilla war that most Dutch soldiers – fresh from their own experiences of Nazi occupation – had little heart for. The Netherlands was also forced out, as noted by Mason, because of American threats to cut off Marshall Plan aid. Events in 1948, in the judgement of Robert Cribb, persuaded Washington that Soekarno’s (Sukarno’s) nationalist forces were committed anti-communists, while the British government, as revealed in the research of Nicholas Tarling, felt that a failure to reach settlement for self-rule might drive nationalist and communist forces together in the long run even though the Madiun Uprising had revealed considerable rivalry between the two; meanwhile the Dutch persisted in their vain and possibly disingenuous attempt to raise the “communist bogey” to maintain support from other Western countries.

Katharine McGregor in this special issue adjudges that the Madiun Uprising of 1948, while not a turning point of the Cold War in Indonesia, generated significant bad blood between the Communist Party (PKI) and the Islamic-orientated Masyumi Party, thus paving the way for the later killings of upwards of half a million suspected leftists during General Soeharto’s (Suharto’s) counter-coup in 1965.

There is still considerable mystery around the Madiun Uprising. George Kahin’s work on Indonesia’s independence struggle (which he personally witnessed), while regarded as the classic text, appears too accepting of the official Indonesian view that the Madiun Uprising

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9 In 1972 Indonesia’s language reform standardised spellings of Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian) with Bahasa Melayu (Malay). However, many older Indonesians preferred the original spellings of their names and kept them (Indonesia’s first two presidents, Soekarno and Soeharto, included). This research essay utilises these preferences.


was an act of PKI treachery towards the Republic. McGregor cites other research that indicates a far murkier picture.

In 1948 the Indonesian left had moved into opposition after the sacking of Prime Minister Amir Sjarifoeddin in favour of Vice President Muhammad Hatta. The left had coalesced around the Front Demokrasi Rakyat (FDR; People’s Democratic Front) in opposition to the Islamic-orientated Masyumi party and the Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI). This division between “left” and “right” contained within it a rivalry between FDR and Masyumi that appears to have roughly coincided with a divide between abangan (nominal or syncretist) and santri (purist) Muslims. It is also noteworthy that in May 1948 the nascent Republic faced another serious insurrection within an insurrection; namely the Darul Islam rebellion in West Java, led by Islamist figure S.M. Kartosoewirjo, which took advantage of the twin distractions of war against the Dutch and the Republican-communist dispute in East Java later that year. Kartosoewirjo’s insurgency incredibly lasted until 1962, the year he was executed, and his movement became the antecedent of modern day terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah. While Kartosoewirjo’s rebellion did not have Cold War overtones; the uprising in Madiun would be a different story.

On 11 August 1948, Musso (also Muso), a PKI cadre who had been living in the Soviet Union for many years, returned to Indonesia and took control of the communist movement. The Republican forces released from incarceration another PKI figure, Tan Malaka, around this time to try to undermine Musso’s more belligerent message. By September 1948, open clashes between left and right around Surakarta saw retreating left wing forces converge on Madiun where they were joined by pro-PKI military units. While commentators are divided on what lies behind the uprising, sources seem to agree that the PKI leadership was taken by surprise, with Musso and Amir on other engagements and subsequently having to


14 The definitional division between "abangan" and "santri" was coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in The Religion of Java (New York, Free Press, 1960) and has been subject to an endless debate ever since. For one thing Geertz misused the term santri as it was traditionally understood in Indonesia (namely anyone who has graduated from a pesantren or Islamic school). Nonetheless, the ‘cultural stream’ division he identified is in common use.

travel unexpectedly to Madiun to offer their support – hardly a well organised conspiracy. Soekarno, as president of the Republican movement, and Musso, then engaged in a heated ‘either for or against me’ rhetorical exchange, via radio waves, during which, in the judgement of M.C. Ricklefs, Musso’s absence from Indonesia probably led him to underestimate Soekarno’s enormous following by this time.\(^\text{16}\) Notably Soekarno was able talk a number of left-leaning military units into stepping down. Furthermore, Ricklefs also notes that FDR chapters in Banten and Sumatra distanced themselves from those FDR elements involved in the Uprising. When Republican troops marched on Madiun the retreating leftist elements killed local Masyumi and PNI leaders. Soekarno and Hatta then used this event, against military leadership advice to only target the ringleaders, to teach the PKI a bloody lesson. On 31 October Musso was killed “ending his 80-day career as PKI leader” and perhaps as many as 8,000 leftist were executed, while more died in post-Uprising violence between rival factions out in the countryside.\(^\text{17}\)

The events of 1948 and 1965 have sunk into Indonesian national mythology (although more questioned in these democratic times) as examples of foreign interference and an alleged insidious communist conspiracy, but as McGregor notes, the research of Ruth McVey, Frederick Bunnell and Benedict Anderson of Cornell University concluded that these events were in fact the result of an intra-military struggle. Historians seem to agree that military units were involved on both sides of the Madiun Uprising, and there was certainly involvement from sections of the military in the leftist coup attempt in 1965.

If communist uprisings in Indonesia were the work of a vast global communist conspiracy, then it was all terribly ill-conceived. The violence of 1965-66 completely wiped out the Indonesian communist movement, said to be at one time the second most numerous in Asia (after China). The events of 1965, and of 1948, lead one to suspect that communist penetration of society and institutions was never as all pervasive in Indonesia as the subsequent Soeharto administration attempted to portray it. To complete the story, however, despite Soekarno proving himself to the West during 1948, he subsequently drew quite close to the PKI movement and, in particular, became infatuated by China; he even attempted to copy its state control of the economy to check the “forces” of “neo-colonialism” with disastrous results for ordinary Indonesians. Soekarno, the anti-communist nationalist of the 1940s would be later seen as pro-communist by the Indonesian military and regarded as part and parcel of the “left wing” problem to be expunged during the 1965 counter-coup of General Soeharto.

Christie has suggested that: “The primary division of the Cold War era was ideological, not ethnic”, although he also notes that the communist insurgencies of Southeast Asia all agreed on national unity in their respective countries (in contrast to secessionist


\(^\text{17}\) Ricklefs, 281.
movements).\(^\text{18}\) Ideological divisions cannot be easily set aside, but the identity drivers of each insurgency were a complex mixture. Considering Southeast Asia’s insurgencies one runs into the problem of labelling, variously described as ideological, ethno-nationalist or religious. Frequently insurgencies have been combinations of all three. Recalling McNamara’s observation about Vietnamese nationalism, insurgency in Vietnam was in fact both communist and nationalist in character. Communist uprisings in Southeast Asia had their own dynamics, structures and interests, and ultimately those states that established communist government, namely Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, came to serve the national interests of their respective states rather than the more ephemeral international brotherhood. Vietnam would later go to war to remove its erstwhile ally, the Khmer Rouge, in Cambodia (a quagmire dubbed “Vietnam’s Vietnam”), and was attacked on its northern border by China (“China’s Vietnam”). Ethno-nationalist or secessionist rebellions in Southeast Asia, particularly those from the immediate post-war period, used “progressive” names to reflect their left leaning ideological orientation – such as the Patani United Liberation Front in southern Thailand and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in the southern Philippines. Hasan di Tiro, leader of the Free Aceh Movement (or GAM) was heavily influenced by something that looked like a version of Dependency Theory when he explained to followers that the creation of Indonesia was a “neo-colonialist” construct like other multi-ethnic post-colonial states designed to perpetuate Western dominance of the third world. The MNLF would later spin off the more religiously named Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), although the MNLF-MILF split also coincided with an ethnic divide within the “Moro” – a Spanish term of derision that arbitrarily conflated all southern Muslims – that resulted from tension between the Tausug (dominating the MNLF), the Maguindinao (dominating the MILF), and the Maranao. Marx’s opiate of the masses, religion, proved not to be incompatible with Southeast Asia variants of communism. Few of the abangan supporters of Indonesia’s PKI, apart from some of the most atheistic diehard leadership, would have seen themselves as irreligious. They were, however, at loggerheads with other interpretations of Islam. Furthermore, to cite one example from the special issue at hand it is noted that leading female MCP activist, Eng Ming Ching, converted to Islam in order to marry C.D. Abdullah, the ethnic Malay commander of the MCP’s Tenth Regiment. Labels, in other words, are often convenient but tend to over-simplify proper readings.

The essays in this special issue are a reminder that the monolithic view of communism was misplaced, and this point remains one of the most enduring lessons for diplomatic and international historians, and for policy makers. False assumptions of ideological homogeneity have undermined good decision making in many contexts throughout history, not just the Cold War – we see, for example, some damaging examples of this in the post-9/11 world too. These sorts of simplistic overviews result in a failure to take seriously local conditions, wrongly perceive the erosion of national boundaries and other enduring divisions of human terrain, and a failure to identify openings and cracks that might result in fellow adversaries going their separate ways. These signals were missed during the Chinese Revolution delaying the bitter divorce between Moscow and Beijing by many years. They were also missed with regards to the Vietminh, contributing ultimately to a

\(^\text{18}\) Christie, 22-23.
debilitating war that not only failed to prevent communism rising to power but forced the Vietnamese communists into a greater dependency on the Soviet Union. There is a challenge here to understand fully internal circumstances.

The final comment that needs to be made is on the journal itself. This special issue brings together a fine collection of historical essays that highlight the key themes and debates of the emergent Cold War in Southeast Asia. It is therefore a pity that such a contribution to the field is undermined by the fact that a few of these articles needed a much firmer copy editing hand than was evidently provided by the journal. If Kajian Malaysia can address this problem it will further underscore its credibility.
This special issue, including contributions from scholars in Malaysia, Singapore and Australia, derives from a round-table meeting organised by the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore in 2008. It focused on the insurgencies in Southeast Asia sixty years earlier and their relationship with the developing Cold War of those years. What was the relationship? Did the insurgencies emerge from local circumstances or from a Soviet-directed initiative?

This, of course, is an old question, to which various answers have been offered, some stressing the Soviet ‘conspiracy’, others, more common, stressing local circumstances without altogether denying the impact of the Soviet Union or indeed the CCP. The papers offer a reappraisal which tends to reinforce the latter explanation.

Nothing is said about Burma or the Philippines. Three papers deal with Malaya, two with Indonesia, one with Vietnam.

The volume opens with a re-examination of the 1948 revolt by the Malayan Communist Party by C.C. Chin, an independent scholar. He argues persuasively that it received no ‘instruction’ either via the Calcutta Youth Conference or Lawrence Sharkey, the Australian Communist. Much less persuasive is his assertion that the British sought to provoke a revolt, so as to ‘create a confrontational situation in order to contain Southeast Asian communism’ (13). Decades ago, M.R. Stenson argued that the British determined to take a harder line towards the MCP and towards labour movements in 1947-8. But it would need a great deal more evidence than the author offers to persuade a reader that the British intended to add to their responsibilities in 1948.

Leon Comber offers both personal experience and historical analysis in his ‘Special Branch perspective’ on the MCP. At the time, he says, the British concluded that Soviet influence was negligible and that the USSR put trade before politics. The MCP had concluded that ‘open front’ politics had failed it and that the only way forward was to ‘resort to violence’ (48). Comber also draws on the conversations he had with Chin Peng in 1999.

A third paper – contributed by Abdul Rahman Haji Ismail – discusses the Malay reactions to the Cold War. Their focus, he argues, was on the future of Malaya, and in particular of the Malays in Malaya. He is particularly interested in the more radical Malay leaders like Dr Burhannudin Helmi and former members of the Kesatuan Malaya Merdeka. Was the radical Malay leadership more of a concern to the British than the MCP’s terrorism? So the author wonders (163). It had certainly been a major worry for them immediately after the war, as Tony Stockwell has shown, but by 1948 the MCP was surely the greater concern. The delay in banning the MCP had nothing to do with the question, as I was able to show in my book Britain, Southeast Asia and the Onset of the Cold War: it resulted from discussions in London on the impact such a step would have on the moderate Asian nationalist movements Britain wished to conciliate (p. 312).

A well-known authority on the Vietnamese war, Ang Cheng Guan, offers a lucid account of the situation in 1948. By then the French and the Viet Minh/DRVN were engaged in conflict, but Ho Chi Minh was unwilling altogether to abandon his insistence that it was a struggle for
independence in which his movement should seek bourgeois nationalist support. The author might have brought out the extent to which the French nevertheless sought to persuade the U.S. that theirs was a struggle with Communism in which they deserved support.

Something of the same line the Dutch pursued less consistently and less successfully. There are two papers on Indonesia, both focused on the Madiun uprising in 1948. Katharine McGregor offers a lengthy analysis not only of the episode but also of its subsequent positioning and repositioning in Indonesian politics and history. She sees 1948 as a ‘flashpoint’ in the Cold War for Indonesia, but not ‘a teleological turning point’ (100). Your reviewer finds the meaning of these metaphors rather obscure. If we turn to Richard Mason’s own paper – which discussed the PKI-FDR uprising and US policy – we surely find a case for seeing ‘Madiun’ as a ‘turning point’: the Americans became convinced that Hatta and the moderate nationalists were anti-Communist and likely to be a better guarantee against the success of the Communists than the Dutch.

The role of the Soviet Union is still debated, Mason suggests. He offers an important insight: whatever was in fact the case, American policy-makers believed that the uprisings were ‘Soviet-directed’ (150). A significant part of the story in Indonesia, as in Vietnam, was what was perceived to be the case, rather than what the case actually was.