Recent Books on Malayan Independence

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The British had their hands full managing political developments in Southeast Asia after World War II. Across Malaya and Singapore, the war let loose various sociopolitical forces, opposed to the return of the status quo ante bellum. Personalities in these lands—some more vehement than others—campaigned for change. A number resorted to armed conflict. Seeking to preserve their interests, British officials dealt with these challenges in diverse ways. They responded to violence with violence. They promulgated draconian legislation to repress those deemed hostile to British interests. They initiated constitutional reform and cultivated local allies to effect a peaceful transfer of power. In undertaking all of these measures, British policymakers sought to assert control over developments and create postcolonial outcomes they would accept.

What eventuated, though, did not always adhere to British aspirations. Southeast Asian politicians and revolutionaries had objectives they wanted to pursue, and were unrelenting in applying pressure on British officials to accede to their ambitions. They also turned on their local opponents. Communist insurgents applied brutal force against perceived informants and class enemies. Noncommunist Malayan and Singaporean politicians also employed the repressive political and security instruments they inherited from the British against their local adversaries. Although historians have examined these matters in some detail, much can still be gleaned from new approaches and new source materials about the postwar histories of Malaya and Singapore. The two books under review will enliven scholarly debates of those subjects.
Leon Comber employs a biographical approach to assess the impact of British policies toward postwar Malaya. His work focuses on Gerald Templer. Appointed High Commissioner and Director of Operations in 1952, Templer was commissioned to perform two key tasks: manage the political restiveness in Malaya and quell the communist insurgency that had broken out in 1948. Through Templer, the British government sought to further the cause of political change in Malaya. Britain's preference was for friendly, if not non-adversarial, Malayan leaders to eventually assume power and sustain the self-governing state’s association with the British Commonwealth. In Comber’s narrative, Templer achieved limited success in Malaya.

Comber challenges the views of scholars who contend that Templer saved Malaya from communism, and paved the way for the territory to achieve self-government and eventual independence. He attributes the defeat of the communists to the program Templer’s predecessor, Harold Briggs, orchestrated. Briggs had directed his forces to forcibly move hundreds of thousands of communist sympathizers and victims of communist harassment to well-defended hamlets. The effort isolated and starved the insurgents of local support. Templer arrived in Malaya as the Briggs plan was having its intended effect. If Templer played any part in subjugating the insurgents, it was in intensifying the implementation of the Briggs plan. Even so, as Comber observes, Templer’s ruthlessness alienated many. He imposed food restrictions against uncooperative Malayans in Tanjong Malim. He also had houses razed in Permatang Tinggi. Templer did not win a lot of hearts and minds for the British cause. When he left Malaya in 1954, the insurgency remained active for another six years before it was finally quelled.

While Templer’s anticommmunist operations achieved limited success, his foray into other areas of Malayan society also tended to be unenlightened. Comber highlights episodes to make his case. He notes that Templer did not do much to promote racial ties, championing instead discriminatory citizenship and education policies. Templer upheld a judicial system that favored Europeans over Malayans. He also had a jaundiced view of local politicians, resisting the swifter devolution of power to Malayans. His condescending attitude and gruff manners provoked Malayan politicians, turning them against British policies.

If the British government wanted to promote an orderly transfer of power and maintain cordial postcolonial Britain-Malaya relations, Templer did not seem to be the right person to advance that cause. The high commissioner’s shortcomings stemmed not from a lack of resolve or lethargy. Rather, Comber faults Templer for being out of touch with Malayan history and aspirations, championing policies that were ill-suited for the political and social context of