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*Malaya's Secret Police* tells the story of the organisation, the personnel, the troubles and the ultimate triumph of Malaya's intelligence services. Former Special Branch officer Leon Comber provides information inaccessible to most researchers, including comprehensive charts and a wealth of details, especially on personalities. Together these provide a unique insight into the world of intelligence. This book reminds us that generating good counterinsurgency intelligence took time—years not months—careful experimentation, and painstaking acquisition of knowledge of the country and its people, culture and languages.

—Karl Hack, History Lecturer, Open University, UK, Co-editor of *Dialogues with Chin Peng: new views on the Malayan Communist Party* (2004).

Leon Comber's admirable study of the vital role played by the Malayan Special Branch in the Malayan Emergency will undoubtedly become recommended reading for anyone interested in counterinsurgency intelligence. It could well provide, too, the framework for the use of intelligence in counterinsurgency operations in other parts of the world such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Dr Comber is well qualified to write it as aside from being a specialist in South East Asian affairs, he served as a Chinese-speaking Special Branch officer in the Emergency.

—Dr Leong Chee Woh, former Malayan Special Branch officer (1953–84), retired Deputy Director of Operations, Malaysian Special Branch, Royal Malaysian Police.

Other books by Leon Comber

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A Historical Survey of Sino-Malay Relations

Through a Bamboo Window:  
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**MALAYA'S SECRET POLICE**  
**1945-60**



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# MALAYA'S SECRET POLICE 1945–60

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the Malayan Emergency

Leon Comber



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Clayton



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To Jack Barlow, MBE, BEM, CPM (1919–2002)  
trusted colleague, wise counsellor, loyal friend

## **About the Author**

Dr Leon Comber is an Honorary Research Fellow at Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, Melbourne, specializing in Asian studies. He speaks Malay, Chinese (Cantonese and *putonghua*) and Hindi. His interest in Malay(si)an affairs extends over half a century and dates from the time he landed on the west coast of Malaya in September 1945, after the Japanese surrender, as a Major in the Indian Army. Thereafter, he served for several years as a Chinese-speaking officer in the Special Branch of the Malayan Police dealing with political and security intelligence. He subsequently had a distinguished career in book publishing.

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## Foreword

by **Anthony Short**

Author of *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya 1948–60*

Leon Comber knows how Special Branch works, knows what happened during the Emergency, what went right and what went wrong. He knows because he was there from the beginning and because he has studied, collected, collated and assessed his material for a large part of his life.

This is a profile of what has been the most successful intelligence agency in Southeast Asia for almost sixty years. For those used nowadays in Britain and America to the subordination of intelligence to political purposes, it all seems rather old-fashioned; a view of intelligence as it was and as it was intended to be. Piece the evidence together. If you don't know, don't pretend that you do. Let the professionals get on with their job and don't tell them what to do or how to do it.

Conventional wisdom now on the Malayan 'Emergency'—an equally conventional expression for a largely communist insurrection that lasted for twelve years—is that intelligence was the key that locked counterinsurgency in place. Or, more precisely, intelligence was what eventually turned a largely unknown and alien force into numbers, names, locations and capabilities of a recognisable and credible enemy order-of-battle. Before and without that, the army would struggle and sweat all over the country in the hope of generating their own intelligence, the police would offer themselves in their unarmed vehicles as targets in a shooting gallery, and civilians, mostly Chinese, would suffer by far the heaviest casualties.

To begin with, in 1948, post-war intelligence in the shape of the Malayan Security Service was undoubtedly looking the wrong way and had little idea of an impending Malayan–Chinese insurrection. Hardly surprising, suggests Dr Comber, when they were fifty per cent under strength, and only a dozen or so British police officers were able to carry on a simple conversation in Chinese. For the next year or so it was an open question whether the police or the army were in charge of counterinsurgency. Intelligence, which was not always shared, quite often just disappeared and was seldom of immediate operational use. Not until 1950 did the late, great General Briggs produce his master plan in which army, police and civil affairs were totally integrated and in which intelligence began to be recognised as being of supreme importance.

So much, in general terms, is fairly well known. Leon Comber's outstanding contribution is to embed intelligence in what is, in effect, an additional history of the Emergency, and to show us how Special Branch achieved its pre-eminent position. Changing shape from time-to-time and with one or two unsuccessful initiatives—such as an independent Police Intelligence Bureau—there are some surprising additions to what is, in any case, far more than an administrative history. Arthur Young, as Commissioner of Police, took the major step of separating Special Branch from the CID, but more than one view from below suggests that he didn't really understand the Malayan situation. Templar, as High Commissioner and Director of Operations, at least toyed with the idea of putting Special Branch and the entire police force under army control. A Director of Intelligence suggested a joint plan to penetrate the Malayan Communist Party leadership in Malaya and Singapore. Surprising, really, considering how different they were, but perhaps a mark of the desperation felt that Chin Peng and the Central Committee were impermeable almost to the end of the Emergency.

In the meantime, from hundreds and thousands of pieces, the jigsaw puzzle of intelligence was taking shape. Techniques were refined, procedures standardised, MI5 and MI6 officers, including a future director, flit in and out, and the army provided Special Branch with military intelligence officers. But for the most part, once they have got their bearings, Special Branch were doing it themselves. Scores of Chinese inspectors were examining documents and defectors. One in five Malayan Police officers was working for the Special Branch.

Putting together this formidable organisation was a remarkable achievement. Putting together this notable account is equally remarkable. In their anxiety to broadcast their surmises and speculations on the latest intelligence failure or success, it is astonishing nowadays how many purported experts just don't know what they are talking about. This alone makes this book such a shining exception.

This is how the Special Branch and a Special Branch officer should work. By contrast, in another part of Johore, early on in the Emergency, an army raid on the huts of some luckless peasant farmers revealed a framed portrait. The flashlight was rather dim, but the conclusion immediate. 'Mao Zedong. Definitely. Communists. Round them up.' Actually, it was Sun Yat Sen. Sorry about that. And a pity Special Branch hadn't been there.

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# Map of Malaya 1948



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## **The Malayan Emergency: a war that lasted 12 years**

The Malayan Emergency was a name given by the British colonial government to the uprising of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) which lasted from 1948 to 1960. The objective of the CPM was to establish a Communist People's Democratic Republic of Malaya. In all but name, it was a War remarkable for the fiercely-fought counterinsurgency operations fought in the Malayan jungle between the government security forces and the CPM's guerrilla army, the Malayan National Liberation Army. The jungle fighting was waged concurrently with the political struggle for the hearts and minds of the Malayan people. Coming so soon after the end of the Second World War, the Emergency had wide-reaching effects and shook the country to its very foundations. Throughout the campaign, the Malayan Police played a vital part and, indeed, paid heavily for it as the police suffered more casualties (killed and wounded) than any of the other security forces.

The intelligence branch of the Malayan Police, the Special Branch, was recognised by the government as its supreme intelligence organisation. It was tasked with providing the government with political and security intelligence and made responsible, too, for providing the army with operational intelligence on which counterinsurgency operations could be mounted.

This is the story of the critical part played by the Special Branch in waging the intelligence war against the Communist Party of Malaya, which led to its defeat in July 1960 and the withdrawal of the remnants of its greatly-shattered forces into southern Thailand.

