

RED



TERROUR

THE FORGOTTEN STORY OF CPM VIOLENCE AND SUBVERSION IN NEWLY INDEPENDENT SINGAPORE

The 1970s are often remembered as a time of rapid economic transformation and progress for Singapore, but this period also saw communist bombings, assassination plots and covert information wars.

By Choo Ruizhi

Strange, red flags fluttered in the mid-day breeze. At a playground near 10½ Mile Changi Road, that was the only sign that something was amiss that Thursday afternoon on 23 April 1970. Intrigued by the unfamiliar sight, a 9-year-old boy and a 7-year-old girl wandered over to investigate. In doing so, the children unwittingly triggered a booby-trap bomb planted near the red flags, setting off an explosion that was heard by residents almost a kilometre away. The children were rushed to the nearby Changi Hospital. Hours later, the little girl died.¹

That same evening, two homemade bombs, packed into red cylinders, were discovered on Haji Lane. Five days later, another explosive was discovered on an overhead bridge near Chinese High School. The Bomb Disposal Unit later detonated the explosive at a vacant site near National Junior College.² More red flags – bearing the hammer-and-sickle emblems – were recovered by the police along with the bombs. These were the banners and symbols of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM, also known as the Malayan Communist Party).

In Singapore's history, communists often feature as dangerous antagonists of the 1950s and 1960s. However, what many have forgotten is that acts of violence continued into the 1970s. In fact, April 1970 marked the start of renewed communist violence on the island.³ Newspaper articles, photographs, and government press releases from the 1970s tell of foiled assassinations, terrorist attacks and clandestine information wars.

A Broader Picture: Communists in Context

This resurgence of communist activity was not spontaneous. The April 1970 bombing in Changi was linked to the CPM's revival of its armed struggle in Malaysia in June 1968. This revival can be traced to broader regional and international situations at the time, such as the ongoing Vietnam War and Chinese support for the CPM.

The Malayan Emergency, a struggle between the CPM and Malayan, Brit-

Choo Ruizhi is a Senior Analyst with the National Security Studies Programme at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. His other research interests include the environmental histories of Southeast Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries.



(Above) One of the flags of the Communist Party of Malaya attached to the bomb that exploded in Changi on 23 April 1970. Courtesy of Ministry of Home Affairs.

(Facing page) The communist peaked cap belonging to a member of the Communist Party of Malaya, 1950s. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

ish and British Commonwealth forces, officially ended in July 1960. By then, the CPM had been using non-violent, "united front" tactics for some six years (from 1954 onwards).⁴ Its main combat units had withdrawn to the Thai-Malayan border, where most were subsequently demobilised.⁵ In Singapore, the Special Branch had successfully uprooted the CPM's "underground network throughout the island" by the early 1960s.⁶ Although party cadres had fled to the Riau Islands prior to these security operations, the CPM's diminished presence did not mean that it had been eradicated.⁷

Key leaders like Chin Peng, CPM's secretary-general, fled to Beijing where they were given support and sanctuary by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Chinese leaders urged CPM leaders to renew their armed struggle as the CCP predicted that a wave of violent revolutions would soon sweep across South-east Asia.⁸ Lending further credence to this view was the ongoing Vietnam War between communist and anti-communist (largely American) forces, which only ended in 1975. When Cambodia, South Vietnam and Laos fell to the communists in 1975, Chin Peng asserted that "the tide was turning inexorably in the communist world's favour, particularly as far as South East Asia was concerned".⁹

With moral and material support from the CCP, the CPM revived its uprising in Malaysia. In June 1968, the CPM

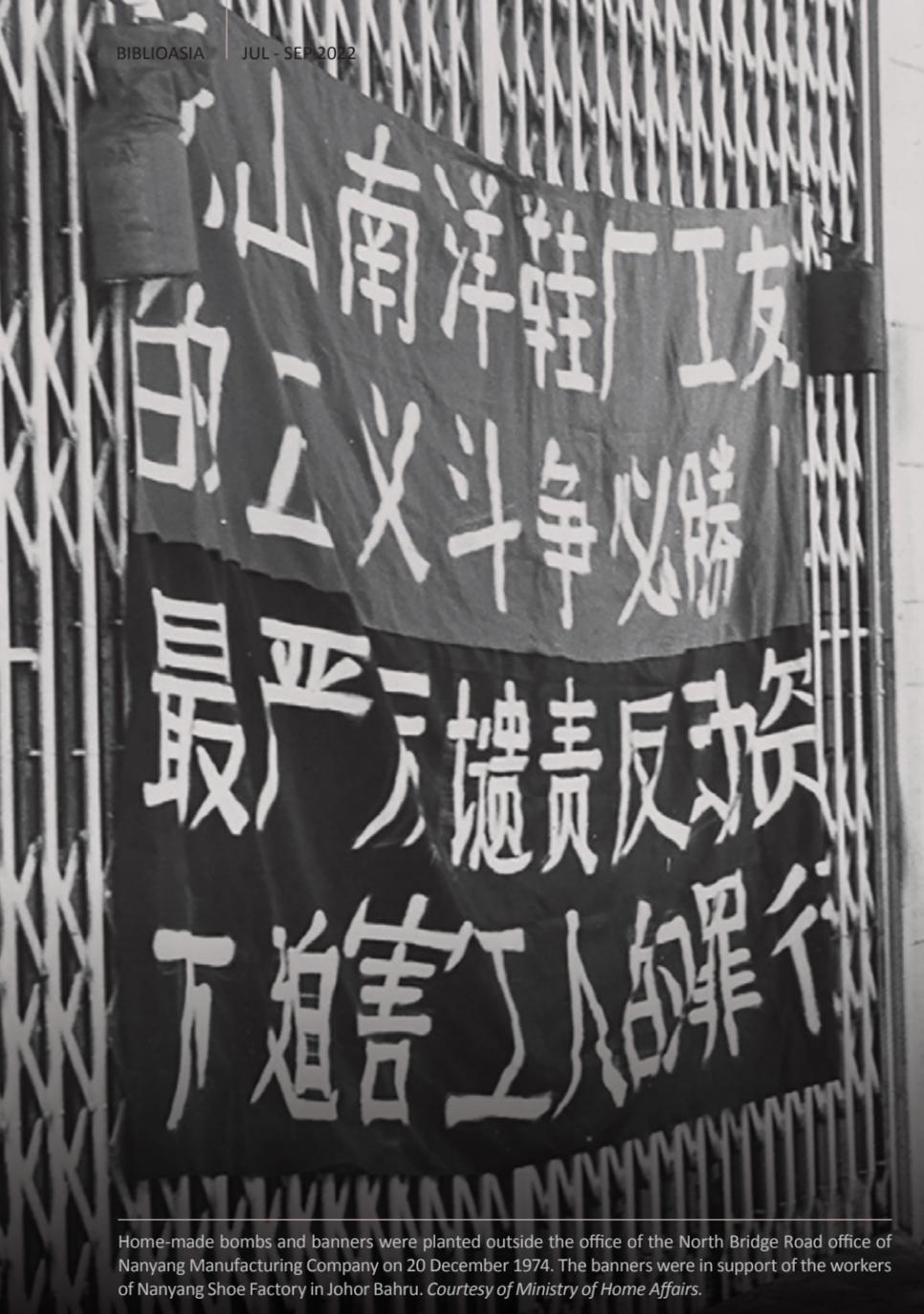
issued an official directive for cadres to "hold high the great red banner of armed struggle and valiantly march forward!" The document ordered CPM members to overthrow the Malaysia and Singapore governments "by taking up the gun and carrying out the people's war". Eight years after the end of the first Malayan Emergency, CPM forces launched an ambush near the town of Kroh in the northern state of Perak killing 17 Malaysian security personnel and injuring 18. Communist operatives began to infiltrate the states of Peninsular Malaysia from south Thailand (where they had fled to after the Malayan Emergency).¹⁰

Regarding Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore as one political entity, the CPM sought to establish Singapore as a base to support their insurgency in Malaysia, procuring equipment, funds and support from the city-state.¹¹ With these plans in mind, the renewed communist insurrection soon crossed into Singapore.

More Bombings and Banners

In addition to the fatal bombing in April 1970, 22 cases of arson and 11 bomb incidents were traced to the CPM between 1969 and 1983. In 1971, as a vivid reminder of its power and reach in Singapore, CPM operatives again planted communist banners, flags and dummy bombs across the island.¹²

In 1974, after a major split within the CPM itself, rival factions intensified



Home-made bombs and banners were planted outside the office of the North Bridge Road office of Nanyang Manufacturing Company on 20 December 1974. The banners were in support of the workers of Nanyang Shoe Factory in Johor Bahru. *Courtesy of Ministry of Home Affairs.*

their attacks in Singapore to prove their revolutionary zeal. In June, a homemade bomb attached to three communist flags exploded on an overhead bridge outside People's Park Complex. Throughout the year, Singaporeans were subjected to a succession of dummy bombs, banners, pamphlets and flags inscribed with communist symbols and slogans.¹³

Perhaps the most sensational incident of this period was the Still Road bombing, also known as the Katong bombing. Around mid-December 1974, Nanyang Shoe Factory managing director Soh Keng Chin received a letter wrapped around a live bullet. Written in Chinese, the threatening note condemned Soh's

exploitation of workers at his Johor Baru factory, which had been shut down in July 1973, and warned him to "be careful".¹⁴

In the early hours of 20 December 1974, three CPM operatives set out to kill Soh. They drove a blue Austin car carrying four bombs, intending to detonate them at Soh's bungalow in Katong.¹⁵ However, while waiting at a traffic junction near Still Road at 5.20 am, one of the volatile explosives in the car suddenly exploded.

The explosion sent glass and metal shards over a 100-metre radius. Witnesses saw "tongues of flames flickering from the mess that was the Austin", while the morning air was "pungent with the smell of gunpowder".¹⁶

The vehicle's driver, Gay Beng Guan, 37, was hurled out of the car by the force of the blast. He was found "writhing and groaning in agony from the burns and injuries all over. Blood oozed from... the opening where his left arm had been torn off". He died about two weeks later in Outram Hospital. Lim Chin Huat, 23, the front-seat passenger, was "smeared with blood, his abdomen ripped open and his arms severed by the blast". He died at the scene. The third man, Tan Teck Meng, who had been seated at the rear of the car, escaped with severe burns, but he was later caught and detained by police.¹⁷

That same morning, police found three more bombs strung across the North Bridge Road office of Nanyang Manufacturing (an affiliate company of Nanyang Shoe Factory). The bombs were hung alongside banners that read "The Righteous Struggle of Johor Baru Nanyang Shoe Factory Workers Must Win" and for all to "Most rigorously condemn the persecution of workers by the reactionary management".

The horrific deaths of the communist agents – described, photographed and published in vivid detail in newspapers – were perhaps the most sobering demonstration of the bloodshed the CPM was prepared to inflict. Yet these explosions were only the most visible manifestations of the CPM's operations in Singapore.

Throughout the 1970s, the police and the Internal Security Department (ISD, which succeeded the Singapore Special Branch) uncovered numerous CPM plots to infiltrate local organisations, attack key installations and assassinate government leaders. Although such schemes were fortunately prevented, they illustrate the sheer scale of carnage communist forces were planning to wreak.

Arms, Ammunition and Assassination Plots

Security operations in 1974 uncovered communist banners, flags and simulated booby-traps, along with large troves of arms, ammunition and explosives, which included "42 bullets, one hand grenade, six grenade casings, 16 detonators, one compass, eight gelnite sticks, [and] three crude bombs".¹⁸ Plans to establish a local assassination squad were also discovered, along with electrical diagrams of the homes of key government officials and buildings, drawn up by a CPM member who was an electrical subcontractor.¹⁹

These chilling assassination plots mirrored the CPM's ongoing surgical strikes on key police leaders in Malaysia. On 4 June 1974, Malaysia's Inspector-General of Police, Tan Sri Abdul Rahman Hashim, was killed by a CPM assassination squad. About 16 months later, in November 1975, Tan Sri Koo Chong Kong, the Chief Police Officer of Perak, was shot and killed in broad daylight in Ipoh, Perak. These same assassins later plotted to kill Singapore Police Commissioner Tan Teck Kim in 1976, but were arrested before they could execute their plan.²⁰ Although Singapore's security forces were able to narrowly foil such plots, the danger of CPM-fomented terror persisted.

In July 1975, a captured CPM agent led Singapore police officers to a cache of "189 hand grenades, 210 detonators, a .38 revolver, a .25 Colt automatic pistol, 75 rounds of ammunition and several communist books and documents."²¹ Later that month, another 109 hand grenades were found in two earthen jars, buried in

the grounds of another operative's house.²² In numerous press releases, the Ministry of Home Affairs detailed the extensive involvement of captured agents with CPM cell leaders, which went as far back as the 1950s.²³

Another ISD sweep captured four more communist cells in 1977, which comprised local construction workers and even a reservist SAF officer. One of these CPM units was a construction company involved in the building of drains in Tuas Village and Newton Road. These projects had raised \$46,000 for the CPM.²⁴ That same year, a full-time national service police inspector was arrested for providing "confidential information", such as the car registration plate numbers and names of key ISD personnel.²⁵

Taken together, such discoveries indicate that the CPM had planned catastrophic terrorist attacks on the island, so as to "oppose the reactionary rule" of Singapore's government and to "unyieldingly take the road of armed struggle".²⁶

Yet CPM members alone could not "liberate... Malaya including Singapore".²⁷ To succeed, its agents needed to recruit people to their revolutionary cause. As communist banners and bombs mushroomed across the island, a parallel struggle for the hearts and minds of regular Singaporeans was also underway, one which played out in underground networks and across Singapore's airwaves.

Information War: Underground and Over the Airwaves

CPM operatives quietly sought out sympathisers through informal channels, cultivating disillusioned, well-meaning residents who wanted to build a more equal and just society. Under the guise of conducting Chinese tuition or discussing Chinese culture, CPM operatives slowly indoctrinated potential recruits with communist literature. These underground networks led by CPM elements enabled the party to not only gradually amass classified intelligence, funds and equip-



The wreckage of the car following the explosion near Still Road on 20 December 1974. *Courtesy of Ministry of Home Affairs.*

ment for their cause, but to also develop local satellite organisations, often led by indoctrinated “revolutionary youths”.²⁸

Concurrently, the CPM waged an information offensive over Singapore’s airwaves. In November 1969, using powerful broadcasting equipment supplied by the CCP, the Voice of Malayan Revolution (VMR) began radio broadcasts from a mountainous region in South China, seeking to disseminate the “the revolutionary truth and news of our army’s victories and of the people’s struggle” to all listeners within range.²⁹

Listeners in Singapore could tune in to VMR broadcasts twice daily on AM radio. On 29 July 1970, Singapore Telecoms began jamming these long-range transmissions, but with limited success.³⁰ VMR broadcasts continued until June 1981 when the station was shut down on the CCP’s orders. Despite the VMR’s closure, the CPM continued radio broadcasts from a new radio station called Suara Demokrasi (Voice of Democracy) from a new mobile transmitter on the Thai-Malaysian border until the signing of the 1989 Haadyai Peace Agreement.³¹

CPM Leader Chin Peng claimed that many communist sympathisers and cadres throughout Malaysia and Singapore “tuned in eagerly” to the radio broadcasts.³² However, Eu Chooi Yip, a senior CPM cadre and who was also director of VMR’s Chinese programming section, disagreed. In an oral history interview in 1992, Eu described many of VMR’s programmes as simply a rehash of existing news reports from local newspapers with the addition of communist rhetoric. Eu recounted how cadres on the ground were in fact “not really willing to listen” to the programme, likening the broadcasts to serving “leftover rice” (“他们说连他们自己也不大愿意听。打开电台听一下…就不听了…和炒冷饭一样”).³³

Adding to the challenge was that VMR had to compete for attention from the likes of the highly popular Rediffusion radio service. By 1975, Rediffusion boasted a Chinese adult listenership of about 229,000.³⁴ VMR’s austere, often repetitive, revolutionary pronouncements offered no substantive rejoinder to Rediffusion’s dazzling programming.³⁵

The growing access to television in Singapore further blunted VMR’s allure. A 1979 government survey revealed that nine out of 10 households owned a television and about one-fifth owned colour television sets, a statistic that

also reflected the growing prosperity of Singaporeans. VMR’s propaganda had to compete with programmes such as the first live, colour telecast of the World Cup football final in 1974 between the Netherlands and West Germany.³⁶

The CPM’s information offensive did succeed in enticing some Singaporeans, even people in authority. In 1979, two prison wardens at the Moon Crescent Detention Centre confessed to smuggling cassette recorders into the compound for inmates to tape VMR broadcasts and to passing VMR transcripts between detainees.³⁷

Another View of the 1970s

Today, whether in local textbooks, museum exhibitions or personal accounts, the 1970s are primarily remembered as a period of economic growth in Singapore’s history. On the surface, it appears as an uncomplicated, transitional decade: between the chaos of the 1960s and self-confidence of the 1980s.

However, newspaper articles, government reports, oral histories and scholarly studies reveal that the 1970s were far more volatile and uncertain than more

conventional historical accounts let on. The April 1970 Changi bombing heralded the start of renewed communist violence and subversion in Singapore. Although the police and ISD successfully foiled most of these plans, the regular discoveries of these assassination plots, arms caches and cell groups point to a sustained, systematic CPM presence in Singapore, even after the chaotic upheavals of the 1960s.³⁸

The vigilance of local security forces resulted in a significant drop in bombings and arson attacks in the 1980s. The government, however, remained alert to subversive efforts by CPM agents, aware that the “communists work with a long term view, gradually infiltrating political parties, unions, the armed forces and other major bodies”.³⁹

The communist threat, though diminished, persisted until 2 December 1989 when the CPM signed the Haadyai Peace Agreements at the Lee Gardens Hotel in the southern Thai city of Haadyai. Over 1,100 CPM guerrillas agreed to lay down their arms in an “honourable settlement” that brought the 41-year conflict to a formal close.⁴⁰



Chin Peng signs peace pacts with KL and Bangkok



(Above) The Communist Party of Malaya signed the Haadyai Peace Agreements on 2 December 1989. This brought an end to the 41-year communist conflict that had begun in 1948. Image reproduced from Tan Lian Choo, “Chin Peng Signs Peace Pacts with KL and Bangkok,” *Straits Times*, 3 December 1989, 1. (From NewspaperSG).

(Facing page) The communist khaki shirt belonging to a member of the Communist Party of Malaya, 1950s. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

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