

Malaya

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The process of dividing the world between the Great Powers appealed greatly to the public imagination in the nineteenth century, and inspired the Imperialist dream of “painting the map red” that captured British enthusiasm and reached its climax when Mafeking added a new word to the language. Perhaps part of the impregnability of that illusion was the fact that nobody was compelled to do anything tangible in order to justify their proud imperialist claims, other than the pride-conscripts who officered the army and the hunger-conscripts who served in it. And they were doubtless fortified in their practical contributions to Empire-building by “the lordliest life on earth” in far off countries where they became a special privileged caste, providing each rank understood its place in the then appointed scheme of things.

The traditional British Army and the British Empire were irrevocably joined together. The British Army was always there to defend the interests of imperialism; it took the flag to follow trade wherever it went. No matter where British traders and settlers had established themselves, by means of commercial penetration which invariably began with self-humiliation before the dignitaries established there and finished with the self-complacent superiority indelibly associated today with “Poonah”, the Army finally stepped in to assert the rights or claims of the commercial penetrators and eventually annex the territory.

The Malaya Story

The news that the Guards are going to Malaya must be a whiff of nostalgia in the nostrils of the retired colonels at Bath and Cheltenham. All the build-up of a nineteenth century campaign is there. British planters and settlers have been murdered by Chinese terrorists. The Russians are blamed for causing the trouble (they always were and only the use of the term “Communist” by the Press seems a trifle anachronistic). We must step in to defend the peaceful Malays and restore outraged British interests. The Cabinet has been urged not to delay, and they are now sending the Guards. The Press rushes in with happy little stories of last-minute military marriages. The Singapore gentlemen for whose benefit the troops are going out, have hastily prepared the ground for the Army by decorating their clubs with banners saying, “For officers and civilians only”. We await the beleaguered garrison story to make the atmosphere perfect.

Empire No Longer

But, unfortunately, behind all this window-dressing is the glaring truth that the nineteenth-century British Empire does not now exist. The spirit of public enthusiasm died in the First World War, when the clash between imperialisms brought home the fact that a heavy price was to be paid for world sovereignty, and the first public reaction against militarism took place in the revulsion from the senseless waste of lives in trench warfare until to-day the Army is insufficient to police the world. Moreover, a glaring truth has been brought home to the imperialists, which is that the only way to colonise is to exterminate the native population to the point where it becomes negligible, as in America and Australia. Although the comic columnists may extract that sentence from its context to horrify their sentimental readers, it is unfortunately true that colonisation and humanitarianism can never mix, and the only way the coloniser has ever established himself is by quickfire and ruthless wiping out, such as Andrew Jackson undertook. Hitler learned the lesson and used it in Europe. Britain’s Empire in Canada and Australia and its lost

Empire in the United States, were firmly established on that principle. It was unable to do so in India, where it was faced with an old and complex civilisation, and that explains why it is on its way out in India. The followers of Malan would like to use these methods in South Africa, but are late on the scene, and will eventually find, as outlined in these columns before, that the Africans are awakening to consciousness and will not tolerate such methods used on them and will be provoked to a defence that will shatter white hegemony.

The eventual outcome of imperialism is the awakening of the oppressed peoples to a sense of independence, often expressed in nationalism, and no matter what sacrifices are poured out by the metropolitan power, in the finish all they will have to show for it are the neat white cemeteries in bizarre surroundings in the most distant corners of the world. The experience of the long occupation of India, and the late desperate struggle to hang on in Palestine, would prove this without doubt, and the fact is that the British Empire does not now come under the control of men determined to hang on at all costs until thrown out. This romantic Churchillian policy which not even the Conservatives now uphold, has been superseded by a realisation of the facts of power politics to-day and the struggle between America and Russia: and all the “Four Feathers” atmosphere that may surround the Malaya adventure is only there to please the gallery.

No More Isolated Struggles

There is a tense situation in Malaya which is accentuated by many factors. Undoubtedly the major factor is the Japanese occupation which exploded the legend of white superiority, and yet was succeeded by the Singapore Old Gang. The internal politics of revolutionary movements have something to do with it — the Communists are strong because, as in Burma, they collaborated with the Japanese and received military training during the years of the Russo-Japanese pact, and only towards the finish, with a change in policy from Moscow, did they switch from being pro-Japanese to anti-Japanese, when their superior military training enabled them to dominate the resistance movements. Coupled with this is the factor that Chinese Communists are the nearest highly-organised movement able to give them support since the Indian Congress trailed off into national diplomacy and away from anti-imperialism. But the Communists are not so powerful as to be able to dominate Malaya in the fashion depicted by the Press, except that the publicity given to them naturally tends in their favour. Surprisingly enough, the Malaysians are not receptive to the clarion calls for “defence of Christian civilisation” or (for the benefit of the overwhelming mass of non-Christians in the world) “defence of democracy” — far less “our Western standard of values”. They know exactly what that means, and it means something much more different in the Far East from what it does to the after-dinner speakers in the Guildhall. The mass of them are bound to be apathetic in any struggle involving the sovereignty of the West, and more inclined to side with the East if this is represented by anybody with the faintest regard for their interests. It has been fortunate for the American State Department that the “East” has so far been represented by totalitarian powers with no regard for anybody but themselves.

To-day, there is no isolated struggle, but every outbreak is caught up in the vortex leading to the Third World War. Nineteenth century Imperialism is dead and damned, and this latest military adventure, coming so soon on the heels of the Palestine episode as to enable the now superfluous Palestine Police to be rushed to Malaya, is a test of strength between America and Russia who will both be interested to see “their side” win. The aim of the more utilitarian Imperialists is to

re-create an Empire in Africa; they have little hope of remaining in Malaya for ever, and well appreciate that when it eventually is necessary they will have to evacuate Malaya just as they did in Palestine, in spite of all the “reasons” now advanced for going there. But, in the phrase which will be Mankind’s Famous Last Words. “We have to honour our commitments.”

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['Internationalist' is a known pen name used by Albert Meltzer. -M.Gouldhawke]

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