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Published online: 15 Feb 2017.

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MI5 and the Cold War in South-East Asia: examining the performance of Security Intelligence Far East (SIFE), 1946–1963

Alexander Nicholas Shaw (iD)

ABSTRACT

From 1946–1963, MI5 operated a South-East Asian regional headquarters in Singapore: Security Intelligence Far East (SIFE). This article responds to growing interest in theatre-level intelligence organisation and the importance of intelligence to Britain's Cold War and decolonisation by examining the performance of SIFE. On the organisational level, SIFE was strongest when it remained wedded to its charter functions and closely adhered to the priorities of its principal consumer: the Commissioner-General for South-East Asia. Its assessments were influential in shaping decision-makers' understandings of key regional developments, although this did not always translate into public policy. Lastly, SIFE enjoyed success in developing lasting liaison relationships to cement British influence, but failed to utilise these to improve its intake of raw intelligence.

In 1946, the British Security Service (MI5) created a regional outpost in Singapore: Security Intelligence Far East (SIFE). The purpose of SIFE was to provide intelligence collation and assessment for the whole 'Far East' region from Ceylon to Japan, but primarily centred on South-East Asia. It was concerned only with local developments in individual territories insofar as they gave insight into broader regional trends.

In addition to responsibilities to MI5 Head Office, SIFE's primary consumers were the various arms of the British regional administration in Singapore. This vast organisation, referred to by *The Times* as a 'tropical duplication of Whitehall' mirrored the theatre-level remit of SIFE.[1] Initially, it was headed by a separate Foreign Office Special Commissioner and a Colonial Office Governor-General. SIFE was responsible for advising both office holders, as well as the regional Commanders-in-Chief via a new British Defence Coordination Committee, Far East (BDCC/FE). From May 1948, the complex hierarchy was simplified through amalgamation of the Special Commissioner and Governor-General into a single post entitled the Commissioner-General for South-East Asia. This was retained by former Governor-General Malcolm MacDonald until 1955.

In serving the Singapore regional administration, SIFE worked alongside the Far East Controller of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) and the Joint Intelligence Committee, Far East (JIC/FE). The latter was the principal forum for all-source intelligence assessment. In formal terms, SIFE's responsibility to the Commissioner-General was primarily through the JIC/FE, although more direct advising was common.

SIFE did not collect raw intelligence. Instead, it collated information from individual British and foreign territories to produce processed reports relevant to the theatre-level responsibilities of its consumers. As an assessments body, it was inferior to the JIC/FE, and its somewhat nebulous position left it vulnerable to economising pressures from London. By 1963, British decolonisation in the principal

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SIFE area was complete. SIFE itself was wound up alongside the office of the Commissioner-General. This should not be viewed as a failure to ensure its longevity. Rather, as this article demonstrates, SIFE had fulfilled its principal objective in providing security intelligence assessment for the Commissioner-General, and also laid the foundations for continuing MI5 liaison with local powers.

Evaluating SIFE performance

Despite growing interest in the role of intelligence during decolonisation, SIFE remains conspicuously under-studied. In 2010, Christopher Andrew and Calder Walton criticised the prevalent focus on local 'political' intelligence agencies.[2] However, the dominant historiographical trend has since reversed, concentrating upon metropolitan agencies.[3] Until recently, little attention had been devoted to theatre-level organisations beyond sparse references in Walton's *Empire of Secrets* and Philip Murphy's research into the analogous Federal Intelligence and Security Bureau in central Africa. Even Michael Goodman's official history of the JIC gives little attention to its regional offspring, besides noting the paucity of sources.[4]

SIFE's sister organisation Security Intelligence Middle East (SIME) has received more archival attention by both Roger Arditti and Chikara Hashimoto. Arditti contrasts the efficient wartime incarnation of SIME, an inter-agency operation, with its post-war transformation as MI5's proxy. This undermined SIME's effectiveness, producing bureaucratic rivalries and problems in defining a coherent target.[5] Meanwhile, Philip Davies has provided a similarly interesting analysis of the organisation and functions of the Far East Controller, which relies more on oral testimonies.[6]

Therefore, this article compliments a slowly emerging focus on regional intelligence during the period of Cold War and decolonisation. It evaluates the performance of SIFE in discharging its responsibilities to MI5 Head Office, the Commissioner-General, and the broader dictates of British policy. Judging intelligence performance is fraught with pitfalls, including the allure of high profile failures or successes. Therefore, taking its cue from criteria outlined by Blight and Welch, this article takes a longer-term view across the entirety of SIFE's existence. This makes it easier to reflect that 'the crucial judgement … is how well intelligence serves policy, not how well intelligence performs in purely intellectual exercises such as forecasting'.[7]

The performance of SIFE can be distilled to three key areas. Firstly, its relationships within the intelligence hierarchy indicate how effectively SIFE created a position of influence within its immediate fraternity. This analysis can be extended to the broader policy-making community by considering SIFE's record in influencing its consumers through providing intelligence assessment. Lastly, forging liaison was crucial to SIFE's ability to both gather material and provide for post-colonial MI5 influence. Overall, SIFE's performance was generally praiseworthy, although its greatest detraction was its failure to improve the intake of raw intelligence.

It is important to be mindful of the significance of such organisations beyond their interest as largely un-tapped areas of enquiry. As Rory Cormac reminds us, 'the *so what* question remains'.[8] In addition to the lack of study devoted to regional intelligence agencies, the broader area of British Cold War policy in South-East Asia has received comparatively little attention in contrast to other theatres. Although there is a vast trove of studies of the Malayan Emergency, few engage with regional policy as a whole, or its significance to an overall British approach to the Cold War.[9]

Studying SIFE and its relationship with the Commissioner-General provides much-needed insight into the links between local, regional and metropolitan concerns because of the specific organisation of SIFE as a regional MI5 offshoot dependent on local intelligence producers. It demonstrates the importance of intelligence in driving Britain's engagement with the Cold War. SIFE also serves as a case study of intelligence performance within the framework of the British post-war overseas structure. SIFE was not unique as a regional intelligence organisation, nor as an intelligence collation centre midway between raw production and all-source evaluation. Understanding the performance of SIFE sets a benchmark by which other organisations, including those described by previous historians as well as those currently overlooked, can be compared.

Nevertheless, investigating SIFE is not without problems. The most valuable sources are its official records within the KV 4 series at the National Archives. However, these are far from complete and contain numerous redactions, particularly in relation to the joint sub-division operated with MI6 from 1950. The available records concentrate on internal organisation, particularly during SIFE's first four years. Other sources such as the Guy Liddell diaries help ameliorate this situation by illustrating inter-departmental relations. In addition, the official SIFE records terminate at 1956, leaving its later history somewhat murky. Indeed, two recent historians erroneously concluded that SIFE was wound up at this point.[10] However, SIFE survived until 1963, and the creative use of sources within the 'Migrated Archives' and Colonial Office Intelligence and Security Department facilitate insight into their later activities. Together, this forms a sufficient body of sources to facilitate conclusions about SIFE performance, albeit with the caveat that the picture available remains selective.

SIFE organisation and intelligence hierarchies

One of the key attributes to judging SIFE's performance is the extent to which it cemented a firm place within the British intelligence hierarchy. Overall, SIFE was at its strongest when it was closest to the Commissioner-General. By becoming indispensable and ensuring its own priorities were closely aligned with its principal consumer, SIFE survived multiple challenges to its position.

In August 1946, the newly appointed MI5 Director-General, former Glasgow Chief Constable Sir Percy Sillitoe, extended a formal charter to SIFE. This described the new agency as 'an inter-services organisation responsible for the collection, collation and dissemination to interested and appropriate Service and Civil departments of all Security Intelligence affecting British territories in the Far East'. It would coordinate individual MI5 Defence Security Officers (DSOs) attached to British territories.[11] This charter already contained potential pitfalls. Although incorporating a few military intelligence officers, in its direction, SIFE was a regional outpost of MI5, lacking the true inter-service character of the JIC/FE. The presence of both an ill-defined collection and collation function further undermined bureaucratic clarity, building antagonism with local intelligence producers.

Sillitoe's personal instructions to the first Head of SIFE (H/SIFE), Colonel Dixon (see Table 1), provided much clearer focus. Sillitoe directed Dixon to fulfil five specific requirements:

(1) Collation of intelligence relating to foreign intelligence services whose activities were inimical to British interests.
(2) Collation of intelligence relating to any political or subversive movement, indigenous or foreign, which was a potential danger to British security.
(3) Detection of clandestine means of communication.
(4) Coordination of protective security policy.
(5) Supply of information to assist DSOs or local officials in background checks of doubtful aliens, residents or visitors.[12]

This directive highlights that SIFE's primary activity would be the collation of information derived from other sources. In so doing H/SIFE had no executive powers, but existed to advise Head Office and the Singapore regional authorities, in addition to liaising with individual colonial governments through

Table 1. Heads of SIFE, 1946–1963.

C. E. Dixon	1946
Malcolm Johnson	1946–1947
Hugh Winterborn	1947–1948
Alex Kellar	1948–1949
Jack Morton	1949–1952
Courtenay Young	1952–1955
Richard Thistlethwaite	1955–1959
Michael F. Serpell	1960–1962
Christopher Albert Herbert	1962–1963

DSOs. It also implies a definition of security intelligence consisting of counter-espionage, counter-sub-version and protective security.

Counter-subversion quickly became SIFE's principal focus. From its inception SIFE was justifying its position with reference to an anti-communist security agenda. MI5 officer Courtenay Young equivocally asserted that the majority of subversion was communist-inspired. Because communist movements operated across territorial boundaries, the intelligence response needed to be similarly international, as embodied by SIFE.[13] Before the Second World War, security intelligence was studied in watertight local compartments: an approach which proved a complete failure. The creation of SIFE was in direct response to this lesson.[14]

In December 1947, SIFE hosted an intelligence conference with other British agencies to set three priority targets:

(1) Communism, and its use by the Soviet Union.
(2) Russian espionage.
(3) Chinese activities (taking account of the ongoing Civil War and potential for communist infection of the large diaspora in Malaya and Singapore).[15]

In this regard, SIFE differed from its sister organisation. As Arditti explains, SIME struggled in the post-war world to define clear targets, caught between the Zionist insurgency in Palestine, rising pan-Arabism and Cold War influences.[16] SIFE encountered no such troubles. By effectively reducing most subversion to manifestations of communist activity, directed from Moscow or China, SIFE was able to clearly, if arbitrarily, direct its efforts. As such, SIFE became increasingly self-assured as a collation and assessments centre.

The first challenge to SIFE's position in the intelligence hierarchy was its rivalry with the Malayan Security Service (MSS). Also founded in 1946, this was headed by wartime guerrilla leader Colonel John Dalley. In a recent article, Davies and Arditti argue that MSS was dissolved in 1948 because the MI5 Director-General orchestrated a campaign to undermine it. Sillitoe was motivated by a desire to remove a perceived challenge to SIFE's regional hegemony.[17] But although Sillitoe's campaigning played some role, more fundamentally, MSS reporting was hardly satisfactory. Just two days before the outbreak of violence in Malaya, Dalley recorded that 'there is no immediate threat to internal security'. Indeed, Dalley's Political Intelligence Journals were dense and waffling, containing little strong evidence that a confrontation was imminent.[18]

Underlying bureaucratic rivalries assumed personal implications when Sillitoe forced Dalley to apologise for referring to him (Sillitoe) as 'only a policeman from Glasgow, without any security experience'.[19] Admittedly this was a fair appraisal of the Director-General, appointed by a Prime Minister who distrusted professional intelligence agencies for their 'Gestapo' tendencies. Nevertheless, this typifies the pettiness to which their bureaucratic rivalry had descended.

In this meeting of March 1948, H/SIFE 'Hugh' Winterborn attacked the inaccuracies in MSS reports which SIFE could have corrected if only they were consulted. Dalley's defence rested on the importance of getting something to his consumers within a tight time-frame, although the MI5 contingent preferred to think that 'it was better that the Government should have no information than inaccurate information'. This reveals a fundamental difference in the intelligence process, reflecting Dalley's lesser intelligence experience. The MI5 Deputy Director-General, Guy Liddell, was depressed by the outcome, writing that 'I am afraid that nothing can result from all this except a general stink'. It was suggested that SIFE report in a monthly meeting alongside Dalley to the local Governors, but this would be a severe down-grading, as their proper reporting level was the Commissioner-General's regional bureaucracy.[20]

Winterborn was not immune from Head Office criticism. Liddell berated the incumbent H/SIFE for not paying more frequent courtesy visits to the Governors, which would have strengthened SIFE's bureaucratic position. Nevertheless, Liddell understood Winterborn's difficulties, as without adequate intelligence coming in from local producers such as MSS, SIFE struggled to provide added value. Although not producing adequate intelligence, Dalley was simply more visible to their mutual consumers.[21]

This situation deteriorated following the outbreak of the Malayan Emergency in June 1948. Due to the prevailing dissatisfaction with Winterborn, the flamboyant Alex Kellar was appointed as interim H/SIFE. Kellar was the Director-General's favourite overseas trouble-shooter, being sent on short secondments to SIME, SIFE and later Kenya during the Mau Mau revolt.[22] At a conference held by MacDonald in July 1948, Kellar was joined by the Malayan government in attacking MSS for not producing adequate intelligence. Contrastingly, MacDonald remained impressed by Dalley's output, instead blaming Malayan High Commissioner Edward Gent for not acting upon their supposed warnings.[23]

However, despite retaining the support of both MacDonald and Singapore Governor Franklin Gimson, Dalley was unsuccessful and MSS was replaced by separate police Special Branches. Contrary to Davies and Arditti's arguments, this was only partially because MI5 out-manoeuvred them, particularly through garnering Colonial Office sympathies.[24] More importantly, there was already growing pressure to have MSS split up and brought under police authority before the Emergency began.[25]

During the most heated phase of disputes, Kellar succinctly described the prevailing MI5 perspective:

> [Dalley] is an Empire builder and not content with his proper function of producing security information regarding [Malaya] and Singapore, is attempting to cover a wider area … He is thus falling between two stools, as he is not producing a satisfactory flow of information as regards Malaya which is his job, nor is he in a position to cover the wider field, which is of course entirely a SIFE responsibility.[26]

Whilst the description of 'empire builder' equally covers Sillitoe, Kellar's comment is indicative of the reasons for the dissolution of MSS. Both organisations had tenuous local foundations, but only SIFE benefited from metropolitan links. The constitution of MSS was at odds with the existence of Malaya and Singapore as separate states, in addition to the imperial norm for political intelligence to be housed within the police. Although MI5 pressure was a factor, the primary reasons for the removal of MSS were its questionable performance, lack of customer satisfaction (especially back in London) and anachronistic structure. Conversely, SIFE's parentage by an entrenched intelligence authority and success in integrating its reports with the developing Cold War regional consensus helped ensure its long-term survival.

Yet the removal of MSS in August 1948 did not foreshadow SIFE hegemony over security intelligence. MacDonald continued to maintain that 'we are in trouble today largely because Dalley's information and advice about the Communist menace in the Federation was not accepted by the police, who in turn apparently persuaded the late High Commissioner to reject Dalley's information'. The Commissioner-General pressed for SIFE to offer Dalley a position, unwilling to sacrifice his (questionable) regional expertise.[27] This irritated Sillitoe, who saw MacDonald as hypocritical for trying to foist Dalley upon SIFE rather than find a position himself.[28]

But this misinterprets MacDonald's intentions. Despite agreeing with SIFE's Cold War outlook, MacDonald did not appreciate the purpose of SIFE within the Singapore intelligence machinery. He believed that Dalley could make them more useful by refocusing SIFE onto local intelligence reporting. To pacify MacDonald, Sillitoe suggested that, providing Dalley didn't make any more trouble, MI5 would consider his name for the next H/SIFE. Really they had no intention of doing so, and were simply bolstering their own position to deflect MacDonald's criticisms.[29]

MacDonald's failed attempt to implant Dalley escalated into a revolt of SIFE's principal consumers. Kellar tried to explain that SIFE was not a local intelligence collector, invalidating MacDonald's critique that they were not providing effective assessment on Malaya.[30] More immediately effective, Kellar also garnered the understanding of the metropolitan Colonial Office that 'because SIFE did not pretend to know everything that went on in the Federation and did not act as Mr MacDonald's personal intelligence staff the latter felt that the organisation was not doing its job properly'.[31] The personal clash thus became quite heated, perhaps reflecting the differing personalities of the sharkskin-suited Kellar and MacDonald, the informal 'shirt-sleeve diplomat'.[32]

MacDonald's campaign culminated at a Governors' conference in November 1948. The Commissioner-General reported that:

> We are far from satisfied with the service which we have received from SIFE … If we were free to do so, we would recommend a very different set-up … for there are grounds for thinking that the division of duties between SIFE and [MI6] which may be desirable in some other parts of the world is extremely unsuitable in South-East Asia.[33]

MacDonald believed the Cold War rendered a distinction between internal and external threats irrelevant, so intelligence should follow the unified model of his own dual appointment. Moreover, he repeated his dissatisfaction with SIFE direction, arguing that 'no amount of knowledge of security intelligence affairs in other parts of the world can qualify a man to appreciate properly intelligence in South-East Asia'.[34]

Ultimately, MacDonald was forced to back down. The regional Commanders-in-Chief were antagonised by his criticism of SIFE, which also reported to them via the BDCC/FE. The military threw their weight behind MI5, with only the Singapore Governor siding with MacDonald. Lacking the support of the metropolitan Colonial Office, their challenge was doomed.[35]

Consequently, during Kellar's secondment, SIFE became firmly embedded within the Commissioner-General's bureaucracy. MacDonald quickly shifted his criticism to the local Special Branches, finally appreciating that the utility of SIFE depended on improving the intake of raw intelligence. Kellar's patient explanations had paid off.

MacDonald's growing faith in SIFE reflected wider tensions between his regional organisation and local sovereignty. In 1949, a new complex was built for the Commissioner-General and his 450 civil servants at Phoenix Park, a former golf club renamed in honour of the wartime South-East Asia Command emblem. SIFE headquarters moved from the old Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank building to this new establishment. Conversely, by integrating with Phoenix Park, Kellar faced strained relations with local governors who resented the centralisation of power under MacDonald.[36] To help ameliorate this resentment, Kellar re-emphasised the benefits to local governments of the advisory role of DSOs, renamed Security Liaison Officers (SLOs) in May 1949.[37]

Perhaps the most important development in Kellar's attempts to entrench his position within the intelligence hierarchy was the inclusion of H/SIFE as a permanent member on the JIC/FE. SIFE was previously represented more informally, but a revised charter of September 1949 included H/SIFE, the MI6 Controller and the Joint Intelligence Bureau representative as permanent members.[38] H/SIFE also chaired a new standing Security Sub-Committee, reviewing and coordinating protective security measures such as document classification grading, ciphers and vetting.[39]

On 1 May 1949, Kellar was succeeded by Jack Morton. Morton already had much experience in the Indian police and had served as the Baghdad DSO for the previous 18 months.[40] This presumably made Morton more acceptable to MacDonald, given his previous complaints about Head Office appointees. Morton found the situation much improved as a result of Kellar's efforts. The Commissioner-General was converted to appreciating the purpose of SIFE, courting Morton's support to overhaul the inadequate local intelligence situation in Hong Kong where the Governor consistently resisted efforts to conform to the standardised regional system.[41] Kellar was unequivocally successful in ensuring maximal integration within the regional superstructure at Phoenix Park (see Figure 1).

In 1950, Morton oversaw a landmark change to SIFE's structure with major implications for its position in the intelligence hierarchy. In a development also common to SIME, SIFE 'B' section merged with the counter-intelligence section of the MI6 Far East Controller to form a Joint Intelligence Division (JID). This remained part of SIFE but was headed by successive MI6 officers, including Maurice Oldfield (possibly the model for John le Carré's Smiley) in 1952. The JID assumed responsibility for directing requirements for MI6 field posts, security intelligence collation and training local security services.[42]

This regional change was part of broader shifting patterns of British intelligence organisation. MI5 Head Office was also in transition, with a new Overseas (OS) Division created under stewardship of the well-travelled 'flying pencil' Sir John Shaw, to which SIFE was now responsible.[43] More fundamentally, from 1948, MI5 and MI6 were locked in discussions about overseas representation and jurisdictional boundaries. MI5 wished to secure representation in foreign territories such as Thailand to help syphon more information towards SIFE.[44] This was paired with discussions on who should conduct relations with overseas security services, which threatened to drag on interminably throughout 1949.[45]
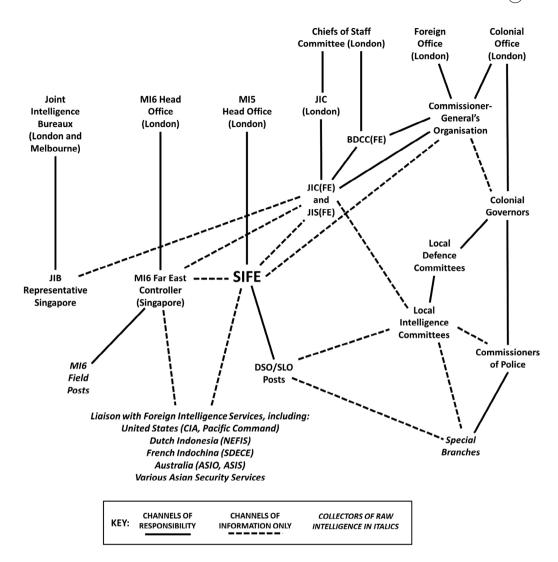
Figure 1. British intelligence organisation in South-East Asia, 1949 (CO 537/2654, Appendix 2 to JIC/FE 93rd Minutes, 9 December 1948).

In the end, progress was made on the ground because Morton and the MI6 regional Controller, Dick Ellis, agreed in favour of dual representation in neighbouring countries. But to appease MI6 in London, MI5 also had to agree to integrate SIFE and SIME with the R.5 counterintelligence sections of the MI6 regional controllers.[46] By this point, relations were becoming more acrimonious. One MI6 officer told Liddell that 'C' was always sniping at MI5, accusing them of 'trying to extend our tentacles too far'.[47] In return, Liddell noted that MI6 'had manifestly failed to give us any information of any value about communist activities in China, or in the Far East'. Moreover, there was a basic misconception over the function of SIFE. Jack Easton of MI6 wanted them to produce papers on general trends, derided by Liddell as something like the special articles which appeared in *The Times*, whereas their proper purpose was to provide detailed analysis on security intelligence specifically.[48] Nevertheless, Easton brokered agreement with MI5's Dick White in 1950 which provided for the creation of JIDs in both SIFE and SIME, based upon a functional rather than strictly territorial division of labour.[49]

By 1951, SIFE had a much stronger position. Liddell noted that 'there seems little doubt that SIFE is now very firmly established, and even something of a Power in the Land'.[50] The creation of the JID was

a success from a hierarchical perspective. It secured a stable, more equal relationship with MI6, and ensured more automatic access to intelligence from foreign territories. The size of the newly integrated SIFE headquarters peaked at 65 members of staff.[51]

Morton departed in spring 1952 to serve as Director of Intelligence in Malaya. This created opportunities for MI5 to exert greater influence in improving raw intelligence production. Collection inside the Malayan Special Branch was still extremely poor. Whilst its Singapore counterpart repeatedly penetrated the communist party, Malaya was more reliant on lower-grade intelligence sources. Dick White argued that SIFE should put its best people inside Special Branches to improve the flow of intelligence, because at the moment they were getting very little, rendering SIFE collation a waste of time.[52] Morton's transfer helped to achieve this end. Shortly after his arrival in Malaya, he worked at reforming the intelligence structure to facilitate greater coordination between the Malayan and Singaporean Special Branches. Morton also proposed a joint plan for penetration of the communist party, but this was deemed inappropriate due to the differing operational environments.[53] In SIFE, Morton was replaced by Courtenay Young, a Cambridge Chinese graduate and long-standing MI5 officer who had served as the first SLO with one of SIFE's key intelligence partners, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO).[54]

Nevertheless, metropolitan changes foreshadowed greater pressures for SIFE to economise. This became the final significant challenge to SIFE's position within the intelligence hierarchy. At Head Office, the short-lived OS Division collapsed when Sir Dick White succeeded Sillitoe as Director-General in August 1953. White was an experienced internal candidate welcomed by a Service fed up with Sillitoe's 'policeman' approach.[55] Concurrently, MacDonald's new Foreign Office deputy began asking why SIFE's collation functions could not be done in London. Young justified SIFE's position by explaining that as long as there was a Commissioner-General they would require in-theatre security intelligence advice. However, since the longevity of Phoenix Park was far from guaranteed, this was a distinctly tenuous position.[56]

More importantly, Young became convinced that SIFE had strayed from its charter responsibilities. The drive to improve raw intelligence production from local Special Branches and MI6 posts had turned SIFE away from its constitutional regional outlook towards an overly territorial, localised one.[57] In response, H/SIFE proposed two major reforms. Firstly, as previously envisaged by Dick White, he replaced the Malaya and Singapore SLOs with more officers posted within Special Branches to improve the collection problem on a decentralised basis. Secondly, Young advocated revising the JID structure to a more functional model. This would include separate desks dealing with nationalism, Chinese communism, and setting requirements for MI6 collection, rather than individual officers specialising in specific countries.[58]

However, little progress was made and Young deduced that the principal problem was the combined nature of the JID. The different outlooks between MI5 and MI6 officers (the former focused on collation, the latter collection) undermined efficiency. Young now proposed splitting the JID into two sub-sections: 'steerage', containing the MI6 establishment, and 'collation', comprising the old SIFE 'B' contingent.[59]

Deputy Director-General Roger Hollis (later famous for false allegations of being a Soviet double agent) was concerned that JID activities overly resembled MI6 foreign intelligence collection. Since February 1955, the JID was jointly subordinate to H/SIFE and the Far East Controller, explaining this deterioration in focus. These distractions had only indirect relevance to SIFE's primary security intelligence function.[60]

Back in London, the Director-General argued that, because of the equal split of South-East Asia into British and foreign territories, integration remained a necessity. However, this could best be achieved through decentralisation, ceasing to micromanage MI6 field posts and allowing the JID to focus on producing collated intelligence reports. The crux of the problem was that the JID had almost become an entity in its own right, rather than a means of allowing greater MI6 input into SIFE regional assessments. It was engaging in activities linked with the MI6 Cold War agenda of espionage and covert action against communist China, not related to the SIFE security remit.[61] However, a lack of progress shifted this reform debate to the wider policy-making community.

Within the context of decolonisation, the Foreign Office was increasingly opposed to inflated overseas intelligence organisations. At this time, SIFE employed a total of 51 officers and registry staff, none of whom were locally recruited. This was not an appreciable reduction from the 65 employed by Morton despite attempts at rationalisation.[62] Permanent Under-Secretary Ivone Kirkpatrick 'seemed to think Singapore also was full of intelligence officers … a slough of despond in South-East Asia'. This was directly linked to the future of the entire regional administration, as Kirkpatrick attributed the value of the Commissioner-General entirely to MacDonald's personality. He therefore doubted that Phoenix Park would continue following MacDonald's withdrawal in 1955.[63]

Yet despite even less enthusiasm from the Colonial Office, the post of Commissioner-General survived. The fortuitous creation of the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) required a British representative of sufficient standing to ensure the retention of post-colonial influence.[64] The new appointee was Sir Robert Heatlie Scott, an experienced Foreign Office Asia hand hailing from Aberdeenshire. Scott was Killearn's deputy in 1946–1948, acting as chairman of the JIC/FE, before heading the Foreign Office South-East Asia Department. Shortly before Scott's arrival in September 1955, SIFE also gained a new director in the person of Richard Thistlethwaite, a former DSO Palestine and SLO Washington.

This dual change in leadership facilitated a rejuvenation of SIFE. Scott observed that too much effort was spent on intelligence assessment, which could be done from London, and not enough on improving the local security machine, which could not. On this basis, he foresaw the future of SIFE in helping to improve police forces ready for Malayan and Singaporean independence and ensuring continued British guidance after transfers of power. Thistlethwaite entirely agreed. SIFE was also redirected back towards its original function of providing security advice to the Commissioner-General albeit in shifting circumstances. From March 1955, it took over the responsibilities of the Foreign Office Regional Security Officer, who had provided overlapping guidance on protective security. This guaranteed SIFE's hegemony in this particular area, implying that its political capital was stronger in Singapore than some metropolitan officials assumed.[65] In response to Scott's new agenda, Thistlethwaite suggested a two phase reorganisation. Firstly, he would curb SIFE headquarters to the minimal operating requirements. Secondly, as soon as plans for the transfer of power in Malaya and Singapore were complete, SIFE would reinstate SLOs to provide for lasting liaison.[66]

Meanwhile, Cabinet Secretary Norman Brook and JIC/London Chairman Patrick Dean felt that SIME and SIFE were outdated.[67] In October 1955, Dean returned from Cyprus having concluded that SIME's JID should be abolished. This was in line with bigger changes to the intelligence structure under Prime Minister Anthony Eden. A directive by Eden emphasised the need for more covert operations in the Middle East and South-East Asia, which would be directed solely by MI6 and the Foreign Office. By 1958, SIME was wound up entirely.[68] MI5 Head Office were concerned that SIFE might share the fate of its sister organisation, given the equal applicability of the Eden Directive to its area.

Because of its adaptability and continued utility to the changing priorities of the Commissioner-General, SIFE avoided SIME's fate. The latter was simply less relevant due to deteriorating British influence in its region. Thistlethwaite implemented the long-debated reorganisation of the JID at the end of January 1956. The new organisation closely resembled the original SIFE 'B' section, with desks for 'international communism', counter-espionage, and communist China as well as a separate officer dealing with training. This reoriented SIFE's focus away from intelligence production in favour of training and liaison, as well as re-emphasising counter-intelligence assessment.[69] Consequently, when Patrick Dean visited Singapore in early 1956, he found the situation entirely satisfactory.[70]

Thistlethwaite achieved considerable success in safeguarding SIFE's position within the intelligence hierarchy. Most importantly, he regained SIFE's integral position to Phoenix Park by working closely with Scott. The Commissioner-General and Joint Intelligence Staff, Far East were more than ever reliant on SIFE for basic papers on communism. Due to the creation of SEATO, H/SIFE played an enlarged role as an acknowledged regional expert on counter-subversion, mindful of the continuing insurgency in Malaya and the communist state in North Vietnam. Thus by adapting to the changing environment of decolonisation, SIFE remained on the front line of the Cold War throughout the later 1950s.[71]

In May 1962, the metropole decided to abolish the title of H/SIFE as preparations were made for the creation of unified, independent Malaysia. The future of MI5 in South-East Asia remained unclear, but the changing constitutional circumstances made it inevitable that their role would be greatly reduced. However, it was agreed to retain the position under one final appointee, Christopher Albert Herbert, until Malaysian unification became a reality. The final H/SIFE had enjoyed a varied career in MI5, serving as SLO Trinidad, Security Intelligence Advisor to the Colonial Office and most recently seconded to Singapore Special Branch.[72] Herbert shed SIFE's wider responsibilities, focusing on the transfers of power in the British Malay territories. His main contribution was in ensuring continued intelligence liaison after independence.[73] In this regard, SIFE proved its success in establishing its place in the intelligence hierarchy, ensuring that H/SIFE played a fundamental role in the fulfilment of Britain's long-standing plans for the future of the region.

Intelligence product and impact

As implied in its organisational remit, SIFE's intelligence product was highly focused upon Cold War security concerns. This was particularly noteworthy during its early years, for which more complete runs of SIFE reports are retained in the archives. During Kellar's tenure of 1948–1949, its main counter-intelligence section had three desks devoted to Cold War issues, and only one to rising nationalism (see Figure 2). Previously 'B' section followed territorial lines, but Kellar's transition to a functional organisation highlighted the primary concerns represented in their reports.

By collating information from across South-East Asia, SIFE drew conclusions about trends in communist policy. Their reports were influential in guiding the developing perceptions of Singapore decision-makers. Initially, they applied a Cold War paradigm emphasising Soviet and Chinese direction of local communism, sometimes insensitive to local distinctions. This was an issue across the British intelligence community. As Rory Cormac notes of the JIC/London, 'intelligence viewed the [Malayan] conflict predominantly through a Cold War prism and simplistically conflated imperial developments with Cold War developments'.[74] SIFE concluded that the Soviets preferred to work through local communists because it was easier and cheaper than direct destabilising action against the European
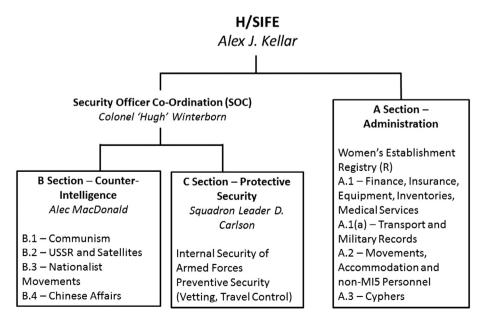
H/SIFE
Alex J. Kellar

Security Officer Co-Ordination (SOC)
Colonel 'Hugh' Winterborn

A Section – Administration

Women's Establishment Registry (R)
A.1 – Finance, Insurance, Equipment, Inventories, Medical Services
A.1(a) – Transport and Military Records
A.2 – Movements, Accommodation and non-MI5 Personnel
A.3 – Cyphers

B Section – Counter-Intelligence
Alec MacDonald

B.1 – Communism
B.2 – USSR and Satellites
B.3 – Nationalist Movements
B.4 – Chinese Affairs

C Section – Protective Security
Squadron Leader D. Carlson

Internal Security of Armed Forces
Preventive Security (Vetting, Travel Control)

Figure 2. Organisation of SIFE in September 1948 (KV 4/422, Circular from Kellar to DSOs, 14 September 1948).

empires.[75] However, they soon began to make more nuanced distinctions of the relationship between local communists and Moscow.

From spring 1947, SIFE produced a monthly round-up of communist activities. One of the earliest reports keenly influenced the developing anti-communist perceptions of the Foreign Office Special Commissioner, Miles Lampson (Lord Killearn). Although his Singapore appointment was primarily focused on endemic rice shortages, Killearn first touched upon Cold War regional tensions in December 1946. Killearn then agreed with Frank Roberts in Moscow that, although South-East Asia was outside the scope of Soviet expansionism, it offered excellent opportunities for disruptive activities against the West. Britain's best defence was to promote healthy political and economic conditions which would stifle communist growth.[76]

In July 1947, Killearn voiced agreement with recent SIFE conclusions that:

(1) Communist communications had not yet been fully re-established following wartime disruption.
(2) Communist parties were growing in strength, aided by economic difficulties and labour unrest.
(3) Communists were fomenting nationalism as the first step towards their ultimate goal.
(4) They presently lacked overall direction.
(5) Communist parties presented a direct menace to security in the Far East. They were bound to be directly or indirectly controlled by Moscow, albeit temporarily out of touch.[77]

The Special Commissioner further predicted that the new Soviet legation in Thailand could provide the direction which was currently absent. Therefore, inspired by SIFE's warning, Killearn renewed his call for measures to promote regional stability, adding that the second best antidote may well be 'the speedy development of self-government on truly democratic lines'.[78] SIFE entirely shared his concerns regarding Soviet proposals to establish a legation at Bangkok housing 200 'diplomatic' officials. A Thailand riddled with KGB officers to the north, and anti-colonial revolutionary Indonesia to the south would squeeze the British territories between a rock and a hard place.[79]

Shortly before leaving Singapore in spring 1948, Killearn expressed gratitude to H/SIFE, to whom he was indebted for most of his information on communism. The Special Commissioner commented that the Soviet legation in Bangkok was not yet fully established, so there remained little sign of distinct Soviet activity. Moscow was giving little active stimulation to local parties beyond daily radio broadcasts. Killearn advised that on the basis of SIFE information it was unlikely that reports of the founding of a Far Eastern Cominform were true. SIFE thus had some success in weeding out the reliability of incoming reports, in this case found to be emanating from the Nationalist Chinese propaganda machine.[80] This proves the value of their collation function to decision-makers and also shows the beginning of a more nuanced view of Soviet inspiration.

Having internalised such reporting, the head of the Foreign Office South-East Asia department issued a stark assessment of the Cold War situation:

Reports from a variety of sources make it clear that an important change in Communist policy in South East Asia has taken place during the past few months The new line … is for Communist parties in South East Asia to adopt the same general tactics as they have been employing sine 1946 in Western Europe of doing everything possible to undermine and hamper the reconstruction and economic development of the whole area.[81]

This message is significant not only for noting the shift in communist policy towards greater confrontation, but also for adapting the lessons of the Cold War in Europe to South-East Asia.

Concurrently, Governor-General Malcolm MacDonald reacted more proactively to warnings emanating from SIFE's new monthly reports. On 26 June 1947, MacDonald convened a special conference with Winterborn, Dalley and local colonial officials. Summarising increasing concern resulting from growing communist labour influence in Malaya and Singapore, MacDonald:

Said he was of the opinion that Communism was Enemy No. 1 in these territories and in South-East Asia. It was already a very serious one and was capable of becoming quite a formidable one, and without falling into the error of exaggeration or excitement it had to be realised that Communism would have to be dealt with in a pretty big and effective way.[82]

Following the special conference, Winterborn prepared a paper examining methods for countering communist underground activities. The SIFE chief agreed with Killearn that communism could not be countered merely through suppression. Britain needed to offer an alternative positive model, demonstrating that nineteenth-century imperialism was dead.[83] SIFE was united with its principal consumers in holding up colonial reform as less an end in itself than a solution to Cold War security dilemmas. Throughout SIFE's operation, the contexts of the Cold War and decolonisation were largely inseparable.

Throughout 1947–1948, SIFE assessments continued to demonstrate a progressively hardening Cold War attitude. They were particularly concerned by the activities of communist cultural organisations such as the World Federation of Democratic Youth and International Union of Students. These threatened to export ideas from Eastern Europe to local youth movements. Their growth in activity was simultaneous with increasing communist-inspired violence in Burma.[84] In February 1948, these fears culminated in the Calcutta Youth Conference. Although ultimately a damp squib, the communist-inspired conference heightened SIFE's fears of a stronger anti-colonial thrust.[85]

Following logically from these perceptions of so-called 'international communism', SIFE assessed the outbreak of violence in Malaya in June 1948 within the context of international inspiration. SIFE reports concluded that 'the present outbreak of industrial unrest, intimidation, assassination and arson in Malaya is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a coordinated communist offensive which is spreading eastward from India'.[86] This assessment explicitly referenced the Calcutta Youth Conference as the beginning of a new phase of revolutionary violence. SIFE cited Zhdanov and the Cominform as providing the key influence in a reorientation of Asian communist parties from constitutional to revolutionary struggle. This was directly linked to European developments: 'the communist campaign in South-East Asia continues to grow in intensity as the gulf between Russia and the Western Powers widens'.[87]

The Emergency posed two linked questions to British intelligence. Firstly, whether this was a deliberate planned revolt by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), and if so, whether it was driven by local policies or international direction. Although failing to foretell the violence, immediately after the event, MSS was confident that it was a planned revolt. They postulated a four-phase communist scheme for industrial unrest (Singapore in April 1948) and rural terrorism (Malaya in June) followed by attacks on government officials and the seizure of strategic areas (only materialising *after* the government declared a State of Emergency).[88] SIFE could not respond with any authority because MSS denied them access to original documents. Therefore, the local DSO provided a contradictory summary that 'so far as I have been able to ascertain, there is no positive evidence, as apart from logical deductions and reasonable conclusions from events, of the formulation of any detailed plan of offensive by the MCP'.[89]

There was even less evidence of explicit Soviet direction, although the ideological influence of Zhdanov's 'two camp' theory on MCP policy reorientation was deemed considerable. This was appreciated by the DSO for Malaya and Singapore, who wrote that:

> These facts do not give an impression of a powerful, well-prepared Party poised for an all-out attack to seize power and establish a Communist State and I personally doubt whether this is the objective. To my mind a more reasonable explanation is that MCP leaders have been reminded pointedly of their mild and lagging programme by comparison with those of other Communist Parties in South-East Asia … the plan is basically international rather than national.[90]

This interpretation by the local MI5 representative, although not one which was publicly adopted by the government authorities, is interesting. The DSO implies that the MCP made a deliberate decision to escalate the ongoing confrontation of their own volition. They were not explicitly instructed by the forces of international communism but definitely influenced by the regional and global context, prompting them to act precipitately.

Back at headquarters, SIFE reflected this nuanced understanding. They explicitly linked Malaya to an international chain of events beginning with the foundation of the Cominform in September 1947. SIFE provided decision-makers with a succinct timeline showing how local communist parties internalised and acted on Zhdanov's 'two camp' line at different rates, adapting the international angle to local environments. This was based on 'evidence' drawn from their DSOs, MSS, Malayan interrogation reports, and local allies such as Rangoon CID and Indian Security Control. These raw intelligence producers were predominantly reliant on open sources including public speeches and articles by communist

leaders. These were hardly reliable for evaluating true communist intentions, and the fact that they all conformed to a shared ideological awakening was perhaps not as incisive as was felt at the time.[91]

Reflecting this poor quality of sources, JIC/FE Chairman Patrick Scrivener revealed that there was little direct evidence for the inferences made:

> No single document has come to light disclosing any coordinated plans for communist uprisings in the South-East Asia area. There is however no doubt of the source of inspiration for the reorientation of communist policy in South-East Asia: it is manifestly the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, acting through Zhdanov and the Cominform.[92]

This statement corroborates SIFE analysis that Soviet leadership inspired local uprisings, but did not specifically instruct them. This is in accord with the most recent historiographical arguments on the Malayan Emergency. At the time, Cold War decision-makers portrayed the Emergency as the product of direct and explicit orders from Moscow. More recently, Karl Hack and other historians have synthesised a post-revisionist argument emphasising the dynamic interaction between local and international factors which retrospectively supports SIFE and JIC/FE analysis.[93]

However, SIFE's consumers publicly favoured the conspiracy interpretation. Shortly before the outbreak of violence, MacDonald warned listeners to Radio Malaya that 'if the restless, impatient directors of international communism are checked in Europe … they may plan a political offensive in the East. There is evidence that they have resolved on that policy already'.[94]

Within the corridors of power, SIFE enjoyed much greater impact in shaping official perceptions. At a meeting of the Foreign Office Russia Committee in October 1948, MacDonald explained that the MCP embarked upon revolution 'due in the first place to the fact that the Communists generally felt that the "old reformist policy" was losing them ground and secondly, to the South-East Asia Youth Conference in Calcutta'. This implies that, despite bureaucratic tensions, MacDonald was guided by SIFE's interpretation, balancing both local and international factors in understanding the decision to revolt. He agreed with the DSO and JIC/FE that the decision for revolution was inspired by international trends but ultimately made by the local communist leadership after receiving ideological guidance from the likes of Australian communist Lawrence Sharkey.[95] This nuanced interpretation was not transmitted publicly because denouncing the MCP as an externally-directed force rallied public support for the government.

After the difficulties arising from the Dalley problem were resolved, the Commissioner-General proactively helped SIFE head of counter-intelligence Alec MacDonald (no relation) to disseminate their interpretation to local intelligence agencies by sponsoring a regional intelligence conference in April 1949.[96] This indicates some success for SIFE in helping MacDonald see past more parochial concerns relating to intelligence production in Malaya, instead appreciating the value of having SIFE guidance on the Cold War bigger picture.

Nevertheless, SIFE struggled to improve the poor quality of raw intelligence produced by local Special Branches and MI6 field posts. This was a fundamental obstacle to providing useful assessments. One SIFE officer, Bill Oughton, explained to Guy Liddell that getting information off the ground was SIFE's main difficulty. For example, although internal security intelligence in Hong Kong was very good, they were producing little of relevance to regional policy because of the parochial intransigence of local agencies. Oughton explained that 'it is, therefore, rather like trying to make bricks without straw'. A lot of time was wasted trying to sort out the reliability of material without any basic source to verify it against.[97]

Morton and Young made rigorous efforts to improve the channelling of intelligence from Special Branches through seconding MI5 officers. The Hong Kong Special Branch was encouraged to assist MI6 in penetrating targets in mainland China, due to the Far East Controller's lack of significant success.[98] However, this was neither the primary purpose of Special Branch nor of SIFE, illustrating the capacity of the JID to undermine a clear focus on charter responsibilities.

Nevertheless, the JID was not a complete takeover of SIFE by MI6 priorities. Although weakening SIFE's focus on counter-subversion, it simultaneously strengthened the procurement of intelligence relating to the counter-espionage aspect of security intelligence. In 1953, the China desk produced a directory of Chinese communist officials in South-East Asia whilst also directing the interrogation of two Chinese defectors, 'Good Gamble' and 'Besom'. Meanwhile, JID officer Major Stevens focused on

studying the personnel at the Soviet legation in Bangkok to try to identify the unknown KGB Resident. Information provided by Stevens enabled four defector operations to be launched against Soviet personnel, although all proved abortive.[99] This provides useful insight into the developing work of the JID, contradicting some of the criticism it received from MI5 Head Office, and indicating that the organisational troubles of the mid-1950s were perhaps more a result of jurisdictional rivalries and economising than genuine concerns with intelligence production. The JID also helped SIFE integrate closer with Phoenix Park by providing intelligence to guide the output of the Regional Information Office, the Commissioner-General's propaganda arm.[100]

By the later-1950s, the actual reportage of SIFE and the SLOs reduced in importance. Instead, their ability to cultivate relationships in the changing environment became paramount. Nevertheless, during particular emergencies, SIFE's advice remained of paramount value to the Commissioner-General. During the Brunei Revolt of December 1962-May 1963, SIFE provided practical support by organising interrogation teams from independent Malaya to debrief captured insurgents, before processing the resulting material at SIFE headquarters for presentation to the JIC/FE. These circumstances prompted a brief halt on the planned winding down of SIFE in response to the slightly delayed timetable for the creation of Malaysia. In addition, H/SIFE helped supervise improvements to local intelligence production in the emerging confrontation with Indonesia.[101]

Consequently, SIFE performance in its collation function was of mixed effectiveness. The circulation of finished reports to its primary consumers was generally successful in instilling a broader Cold War awareness. By the end of his tenure as Commissioner-General in 1955, MacDonald was one of the strongest voices for SIFE's retention, arguing that its regionalist approach was vital to underpinning his activities, especially as the role of the Commissioner-General was expanded through membership of SEATO.[102] More fundamentally, they struggled to achieve similar success in the other side to collation: the channelling of information from raw intelligence producers. This was more a failing of the local agencies concerned, but provided SIFE with additional motive to establishing fruitful foreign contacts.

Cultivating relationships

Producing reports was the primary short-term responsibility of SIFE. Meanwhile, their crucial longer-term function for both Phoenix Park and MI5 was to develop relationships through training new intelligence services and sharing intelligence with Britain's allies. This would bring immediate benefits by improving the flow of raw intelligence into SIFE assessments, whilst ensuring lasting influence after Britain's withdrawal from Empire. Although this process was continuous throughout SIFE's life-span, it assumed greater significance from the mid-1950s in the context of SEATO and Malayan decolonisation.

Liaison relationships were not solely with foreign partners. SIFE also had to cultivate working relations with British local intelligence structures to guarantee the flow of intelligence. In early 1953, one SIFE officer, John Collard, helped the British Borneo territories improve their security machinery following a short-lived communist uprising in Sarawak during August 1952. Previously, Borneo was designated a low-risk area (even lacking an SLO), but by the mid-1950s was increasing in importance.[103]

In April 1952, Guy Liddell reflected that the only foreign station providing reasonably good intelligence to the JID was Rangoon. This was an unusual case in that despite being a non-Commonwealth territory since 1948, there were both MI5 and MI6 officers on the ground. The success of this model inspired MI5 to believe they would get a considerable dividend by having officers stationed alongside their MI6 counterparts in Thailand, Indochina and Indonesia. This would enable channelling of counter-intelligence as well as espionage information.[104]

Liaison and training activity received additional impetus as decolonisation gathered pace. The new Commissioner-General, Robert Scott, foresaw the future of SIFE in helping to improve police forces and providing for continued British guidance.[105] H/SIFE Dick Thistlethwaite was equally willing to adapt to decolonisation. Following the repeal of certain Emergency Regulations in Singapore, he commented that:

> It is clear to everybody, I should think, from the Secretary-of-State who has just been out here, to the meanest shop-keeper that a new era has begun in Singapore and the Federation. There are the beginnings of self-government in both and there will be a snowball demand for complete autonomy which it may be possible to guide, but not to resist.[106]

SIFE could contribute to a smooth transfer of power which would guarantee British influence by improving local Special Branches ready for 'Malayanisation'. Neither Scott nor Thistlethwaite tolerated members of the Singapore administration who advocated more recalcitrant colonial rule. Thistlethwaite lamented that 'they do not seem to realise – though Palestine should have taught them – that a police state is no solution and does not create a secure military base'. Evidently his own prior experience in one of Britain's decolonisation failures had left a positive mark.[107]

The Singapore SLO was reinstated in May 1956 in the midst of the ongoing first round of independence talks. The new appointee argued that even if these talks failed (as indeed they did), the 'Malayanisation' of the police was inevitable. Sooner or later it would become untenable for SIFE to station officers within Special Branch. It was advantageous to cement the position of the new SLOs well before independence, reformulating liaison so less post-colonial objection could be raised.[108]

This corresponds with Christopher Andrew's depiction of the SLO as a means of maintaining British influence to keep former colonies out of the Soviet orbit.[109] This is distinct from the earlier function of the DSO/SLOs in providing colonial governments access to MI5's global intelligence pool, demonstrating how intelligence liaison could play a quasi-diplomatic function in the post-colonial world. MI5 understood the precariousness of their position following transfers of power. Bill Magan, head of 'E' Branch (overseas collation), warned Thistlethwaite of the need for SLOs to duplicate Special Branch records to guard against a future rupture in liaison if independence was not so smooth a transition as hoped.[110]

These relationships became one of the most crucial tenets of SIFE activity by the mid-1950s. Nevertheless, they were not a new departure. Rather, MI5 Head Office commenced training courses for British colonial Special Branches in 1950. SIFE expanded this legacy by extending advice and training to non-British security services, particularly those in Thailand and Indonesia.[111] This was not isolated but part of a metropolitan initiative to improve colonial intelligence provision, beginning in 1954 with the appointment of former SIFE counter-intelligence expert Alec MacDonald as MI5 Security Intelligence Advisor to the Colonial Office (perhaps indicating the cultural capital of SIFE expertise within MI5). MacDonald's chief goal was to prepare local intelligence services for independence, not only a valuable legacy for the new country, but also the best guarantee of maintaining Britain's intelligence interests through lasting Commonwealth liaison.[112]

Before being wound down in September 1963, SIFE continued to play a significant role by advising on the future intelligence organisation to be created in Malaysia. Shortly before merger, H/SIFE Christopher Herbert cooperated with the independent Malayan Commissioner of Police to divide the various security responsibilities of the new federal and individual governments. This collaboration guaranteed the position of a British military intelligence officer inside the Special Branch for at least two years: a key success for SIFE intelligence diplomacy because of the increasing threat to shared Anglo-Malaysian interests from Indonesia. Even following the dissolution of SIFE, MI5 continued to station SLOs in Malaya, Singapore and Borneo to promote Commonwealth intelligence cooperation.[113]

SIFE was less successful in establishing profitable foreign intelligence liaison. Although good at establishing networks for consultation, SIFE struggled to derive practical benefit in the form of shared intelligence. This was particularly evident with regards to Britain's closest Cold War partner, the United States. Throughout the 1950s, SIFE demonstrated concern at the lack of useful intelligence coming from American sources despite Kellar establishing regular liaison with CIA Station Chief Bob Jantzen in 1949. Morton tried to rectify this through an agreement to coordinate the passing of intelligence to mutual allies whilst adopting a common plan of research on Chinese targets to avoid duplication of effort.[114]

But the more fundamental issue was the reluctance of United States agencies to share intelligence, which was attributed to Anglo-American policy differences over China. The majority of intelligence traffic travelled one-way from SIFE to the Americans. Consequently, SIFE were forced to station their own representative in Tokyo from 1952 to channel intelligence on Japan and Korea back to the JID.[115]

This was not solely the fault of the Americans, as SIFE officers were equally uneasy about handing over intelligence given the propensity of the CIA for 'wild reporting' and unfortunate 'indiscretions'.[116]

Sharing intelligence proved more fruitful with other European colonial powers. The Dutch colonial intelligence agency NEFIS appointed as liaison officer one Van Hulst, an experienced police intelligence officer utilising Vice-Consular cover. During one meeting, Kellar passed Van Hulst a complete list of Guomindang headquarters staff in Batavia and Dutch Borneo. Such actions fostered more mutually beneficial liaison than SIFE enjoyed with the Americans. Following Dutch withdrawal, SIFE's closest partner in the immediate area became newly independent Indonesia. Sukarno's government maintained the services of former Dutch liaison officers, enabling productive intelligence relations despite political differences.[117]

Despite close relations with NEFIS, the British were not always appreciative of the quality of Dutch intelligence products. Reacting to a Dutch publication about Indonesian communism which relied heavily on NEFIS material, British Consul-General Sir Francis Shepherd scathingly attacked it:

> This is however, an even more blatant than usual case of the Dutch habit of producing a certain number of facts in circumstances of their own choosing in order to 'make their point'. Even Dutch intelligence circles who should have no axes to grind and should only keep to fact, continually jump to conclusions that they would like to think were fact … I make my usual criticism as on all NEFIS material that it is too apt to jump to conclusions, the conclusions they may wish to draw.[118]

This critique raised the question as to what was so very different between this 'Dutch' approach and the way the British were forced to derive conclusions about communist trends despite the poor quality of information available.

Thistlethwaite's tenure marked the commencement of formal intelligence liaison through SEATO. H/SIFE served as British representative on the SEATO Committee of Security Experts until SIFE was wound down in 1963, after which his seat was filled by the MI6 Bangkok Head of Station.[119] But the Committee of Security Experts proved a problematic organisation hampered by reluctance for intelligence sharing on an equal basis. Britain and the United States had access to intelligence sources which, although far from perfect, gave a fuller picture than the Asian powers. Yet they were unwilling to share valuable intelligence because they did not trust the protective security capabilities of the three Asian members: Pakistan, the Philippines and Thailand.[120]

Britain was arguably the worst offender at intelligence sharing chauvinism. During the fourth security committee meeting in June 1956, the Americans tabled a proposal for sharing information obtained in the debriefing of nationals leaving communist areas. Thistlethwaite dismissed this as 'almost indiscriminate' distribution of valuable interrogation intelligence. Supported by the Australian delegate, ASIO Director-General Sir Charles Spry, he opposed the motion on grounds that informants would be deterred from full disclosure if they were worried about leakages brought about by over-zealous intelligence sharing with less security-conscious partners. Thistlethwaite and Spry persuaded the Americans to modify the proposal on a more selective basis.[121] This raises questions surrounding the commitment of SIFE to genuine intelligence partnerships.

As well as using SEATO as a mechanism for intelligence liaison, SIFE constructed partnerships with other Asian powers. In October 1958, Scott and Thistlethwaite took the lead in a security problem common to many states in the region: how to reintegrate surrendered communist insurgents without prejudicing national security. They hosted a small conference of SEATO (the Philippines, United States, Australia and New Zealand) and non-SEATO (Laos, South Vietnam, Malaya and Singapore) countries. This was doubly useful. As well as helping define solutions to the shared problem, the conference encouraged future regional collaborations with broader participation than SEATO.[122] To this end, SIFE encouraged its Asian partners to direct discussions. The newly independent Federation of Malaya led a session on interrogation techniques, whilst on the final two days, the Filipino delegation led discussion of resettlement problems using films showing the progress they had made.[123]

Conclusion

As an experiment in regional intelligence collation, SIFE was remarkably resilient. Created in 1946 as an MI5 regional outpost but partly merging with MI6 in 1950, SIFE was a nebulous organisation occupying a distinctly tenuous position in Singapore. Due to the strengthened MI6 influence within its own ranks, SIFE became diverted by foreign intelligence collection, including attempts to penetrate China. Much of the JID's activity was based around these long-term intelligence goals, rather than the short-term security intelligence collation which SIFE was mandated to perform.

In organisational terms, SIFE was strongest when its functions were most closely aligned with the agenda of the Commissioner-General. This was apparent following Kellar's reforms in 1949, when SIFE became firmly embedded within Phoenix Park. From 1955, this equilibrium was again established under the partnership of Thistlethwaite and Scott. Their efforts ensured that SIFE remained relevant to the changing security picture. In this respect, SIFE performed admirably in negotiating the shifting sands of the intelligence hierarchy through ensuring its indispensability to its primary consumer.

SIFE intelligence reports had a significant impact on the Cold War perceptions of key policy-makers. This was particularly evident during the earliest years of the Cold War in South-East Asia, when SIFE collation of trends across the region provided a bigger picture to guide the interpretation of local events in Malaya. This function dwindled in importance by the later-1950s, although SLOs continued to guide Governors' appreciation of local security situations. But in producing these reports, SIFE never overcame its biggest problem: the poor flow of raw intelligence from which to base its assessments. This was difficult due to their lack of executive authority. It was also symptomatic of broader post-war intelligence production problems in adapting to new multidimensional security threats and dealing with rigidly security-conscious communist states. Therefore, SIFE's performance was relatively positive in terms of the dissemination of its reports, but less so in failing to ensure adequate input into those appreciations. It nevertheless demonstrates the importance of intelligence agencies in driving British policy towards South-East Asia through helping to foster a particular Cold War world-view alongside key decision-makers such as MacDonald. The fact that the poor quality of intelligence intake did not undermine SIFE's position in the intelligence hierarchy is perhaps testament to its importance in supporting the interlinked Cold War and decolonisation agenda of the Commissioner-General.

The performance of SIFE can also be judged in relation to its encouragement of intelligence liaison across the region. This was no altruistic goal but rather an attempt to shore up British influence after the inevitable decolonisation. In substantive terms, SIFE struggled to gain meaningful intelligence content from these liaison relationships. However, in more hierarchical terms, SIFE liaison was unequivocally successful. In cultivating liaison, SIFE was more successful as a conduit of intelligence diplomacy than a producer of intelligence assessments. Through offering training to Asian security services, taking the lead in SEATO discussions, and promoting multilateral security cooperation, SIFE placed itself at the forefront of regional intelligence cooperation. This was a significant success for overall MI5 policy in ensuring intelligence relationships continued relatively uninterrupted by the withdrawal from Empire.

Notes

1. "Troubles of S.-East Asian Region." *The Times*, 5 December 1952, 6.
2. Walton and Andrew, "Still the Missing Dimension," 81.
3. Andrew, *Defence of the Realm,* 442–82; Cormac, *Confronting the Colonies*; Walton, *Empire of Secrets*; and Goodman, *Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee*, 202–24, 326–47.
4. Walton, *Empire of Secrets*, 172–3; Murphy, "Intelligence and Decolonisation"; and Goodman, *Official History of the JIC*, 335.
5. Arditti, "Security Intelligence in the Middle East," 369–96; and Hashimoto, "Fighting the Cold War.".
6. Davies, "SIS Singapore Station.".
7. Blight and Welch, "The Cuban Missile Crisis," 199.
8. Cormac, "The Pinprick Approach," 12.
9. Notable exceptions are: Hack, *Defence and Decolonisation*; Wade, "The Beginnings of a Cold War"; and Tarling, *Britain, Southeast Asia and the Onset of the Cold War*.

10. Arditti and Davies, "Rise and Fall of the Malayan Security Service," 311.
11. KV 4/421, SIFE charter, 6 August 1946.
12. KV 4/421, Instructions from Sillitoe to Dixon, 6 August 1946.
13. KV 4/421, Report by Young, 30 August 1946.
14. KV 4/424, SIFE Report, "Assessment of the Value of SIFE and DSO Positions in the Far East", c. December 1947.
15. KV 4/422, Young to MI5, 20 December 1947.
16. Arditti, "Security Intelligence in the Middle East," 384.
17. Arditti and Davies, "Rise and Fall of the MSS," 304.
18. [TNA] CO 537/6006, Report by Dalley on internal security, 14 June 1948.
19. [TNA] FCO 141/15436, Notes of a meeting held at Government House, Singapore, 20 March 1948.
20. KV 4/470, Guy Liddell diary entry for 13 April 1948.
21. KV 4/470, Liddell diary, 23 April 1948.
22. Walton, *Empire of Secrets*, 172–3, 244.
23. CO 537/2647, Minutes of conference held by Malcolm MacDonald, 13 July 1948.
24. CO 537/2647, Minute by Paskin (Colonial Office), 31 December 1948.
25. FCO 141/16838, Notes of a meeting held at Government House, Singapore, 11 May 1948.
26. KV 4/422, Kellar to Sillitoe, 16 August 1948.
27. University of Durham, Palace Green Library, Malcolm MacDonald Papers [MMP] 16/2/19-21, MacDonald to Creech Jones, 7 September 1948.
28. KV 4/422, Sillitoe to Kellar, 2 September 1948.
29. KV 4/470, Liddell diary, 15 October 1948.
30. KV 4/423, Kellar to MacDonald, 19 December 1948.
31. CO 537/2647, Minute by Paskin, 31 December 1948.
32. CO 1030/193, "The Shirt-Sleeve Diplomat." *The Daily Mail*, 16 May 1955.
33. MMP 16/2/42-43, MacDonald to Lloyd, 30 November 1948.
34. Ibid.
35. KV 4/470, Liddell diary, 29 December 1948.
36. KV 4/423, Kellar to Sillitoe, 2 March 1948.
37. KV 4/423, Memorandum by Kellar, 20 December 1948.
38. FCO 141/1570, Appendix to JIC(49)59(Final), Charter for JIC/FE, September 1949.
39. FCO 141/14416, Terms of reference of the Security Sub-Committee, 20 January 1949.
40. KV 4/423, Sillitoe to Lloyd, 21 March 1949.
41. KV 4/424, Morton to Sillitoe, 9 May 1949.
42. KV 4/424, Revised SIFE internal review, 12 May 1952.
43. Andrew, *Defence of the Realm*, 447.
44. KV 4/470, Liddell diary, 29 December 1948.
45. KV 4/471, Liddell diary, 4 February 1949.
46. KV 4/471, Liddell diary, 23 February 1949.
47. KV 4/471, Liddell diary, 17 March 1949.
48. KV 4/471, Liddell diary, 12 October 1949.
49. Hashimoto, "Fighting the Cold War," 24–5.
50. KV 4/473, Liddell diary, 9 August 1951.
51. KV 4/424, Morton to Sillitoe, 3 November 1951.
52. KV 4/474, Liddell diary, 6 March 1952.
53. Comber, *Malaya's Secret Police*, 185–7.
54. KV 4/424, Liddell to Lloyd, 8 April 1952; Andrew, *Defence of the Realm*, 372.
55. Andrew, *Defence of the Realm*, 326.
56. KV 4/425, Young to Shaw, 25 July 1953.
57. KV 4/425, Memorandum by Young, 25 September 1953.
58. Ibid.
59. KV 4/426, Memorandum by Young, 11 November 1953.
60. KV 4/427, Hollis to Thistlethwaite, 25 October 1955.
61. KV 4/426, White to Sinclair, 29 March 1954.
62. KV 4/427, SIFE employment data prepared for JIC/London, 15 December 1955.
63. KV 4/426, Note of discussion between White and Kirkpatrick, 13 January 1955.
64. CO 1030/193, Note of a meeting held in Sir Norman Brook's room, 15 April 1955.
65. KV 4/427, Note by White on conversation with Scott, 11 July 1955; KV 4/427, Director-General's record of meeting with MacDonald, 9 July 1955.
66. KV 4/427, Memorandum by Thistlethwaite, 30 September 1955.
67. KV 4/427, White to Thistlethwaite, 31 August 1955.
68. Cormac, "The Pinprick Approach," 25–6.

69. KV 4/428, Undated SIFE memorandum, 'Functions of the JID', February 1956; KV 4/428, Office Instruction no. 135, 'JID organisation from 24 January 1956'.
70. KV 4/428, Thistlethwaite to White, 10 February 1956.
71. KV 4/428, Thistlethwaite to Hollis, 14 August 1956.
72. FCO 141/12907, Circular from Secretary of State for the Colonies, 24 May 1962; FCO 141/12907, Circular from Secretary of State for the Colonies, 6 July 1962.
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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

Notes on contributor

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