

HOW GERMANY MADE MALAYA BRITISH

K. G. TREGONNING

BETWEEN 1874 AND 1910 BRITAIN CONQUERED THE MALAY PENINSULA. Although the mailed fist was decently covered and rarely used, and the whole episode now is described as "intervention," nevertheless by 1910 the British were masters over a Malaya that previously they had regarded, for nearly a century, with indifference if not with distaste. Why this change? Why this intervention and occupation from 1874 onwards? The object of this article is to draw attention to the role of Germany, which can be seen as a major factor affecting British policy throughout this entire period, from 1874 to 1910. It is almost possible to say that Germany made Malaya British.

In 1874, when our story begins, Britain had three settlements on or off the coast of the Malay Peninsula: Penang, Malacca and Singapore. These settlements had been there for quite some time, but they had very little to do with that peninsula, and their presence is better explained by associating them with the British trade with China.

Penang was acquired by the East India Company in 1786 to assist it in its China trade. This trade was a regrettably one-way affair; large quantities of tea went from China to England, but the Chinese could not be tempted to take any of England's eighteenth century wares in exchange. It either had them already, or could do without them, and the Company was forced to scour the world for silver, almost the only commodity China lacked but desired.¹ This placed the trade, the profits of which were becoming vital to maintain the Company in India, on a very precarious footing, and it was to supplement the silver, by the procurement of pepper and tin, which China also desired, that Penang was founded.

Singapore's foundation, in 1819, was also part of the China trade story, protection playing a greater part by then than encouragement. For by the second decade of the nineteenth century, opium from India had replaced silver, pepper, tin and everything else as a trade commodity; the Chinese were happily selling all their tea, and trading back all their previously acquired silver, for the chance of smoking themselves into

¹ This is well brought out by M. Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China* (Cambridge, 1951), and C. N. Parkinson, *Trade in the Eastern Seas* (Cambridge, 1937).

M
454.503
TRF

307545
Microfilm

316 MAR 1984
FEB 1974
Perpustakaan Neg
Malaysia

insensibility. The Napoleonic Wars, however, had shown up the inadequacies of Penang as a protector of the trade route through the Indonesian archipelago. It was partly to safeguard the entry into the South China Sea and to block the Dutch that explain Singapore.

The Dutch, against whom Raffles had acted when he secured Singapore, gave the British its third settlement—Malacca—in 1824, when by the Anglo-Dutch Treaty, the European map of South-East Asia was tidied up somewhat. Britain relinquished Bencoolen, an ancient, crumbling post on West Sumatra, and secured in return an even more ancient, if slightly less crumbling post in West Malaya. No Malayan reason influenced the exchange; it was merely incidental to the main purpose of the treaty: the restoration of Holland as a friendly buffer in Europe.

These three settlements—Penang, Singapore and Malacca—survived, indeed flourished down to 1874, little influenced by, and almost separately from, any developments among the jungled wilderness of the Malay States behind them. They were the *Straits Settlements*, and their life came from the teeming waters of Malaysia; Malaya was officially ignored.

Up to 1874 the Governors of these settlements were told, whenever it was suggested to London that a little dabbling in these States might be advisable, that Britain's policy was one of non-intervention. "Keep clear of alliances, treaties, engagements of any sort," said the instructions in effect, "we do not wish to do more than trade; we do not want to become involved in anything else. Our policy is one of non-intervention." Britain in the Far East still looked to China, and any governor who did meddle received a severe reprimand; the peninsula was left well alone.

However, by the 1870's various new factors had appeared and by 1874, it was time for a policy change. The first of the new factors was the American Civil War (1861-1865). The relevance of this to Malayan affairs has rarely been noticed, yet it was a war with a great effect on Malaya. The Civil War was the first modern war, where millions of men went into uniform and stayed away from their homes and their fields for four years. These millions had to be fed, and this necessity led to swift technological and scientific developments. War has always been a very powerful stimulus to technological development and the U.S. Civil War was no exception. The necessity of feeding millions of men led to the mass production of tin cans and to meat packaging in tins. The U.S. armies were the first forces to be fed on meat from tins which enabled them to operate all the year round. Most of the tin used came from Malaya.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
DEPARTMENT OF THE HISTORY OF ARTS
AND ARCHITECTURE
MUSEUM OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE
54 EAST EAST
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60607
TEL: 773-936-3700
WWW.MUSEUMOFARTANDARCHITECTURE.ORG

From 1861 onwards, the U.S. demand for tin increased tremendously, not merely for meat and other food packaging, but also to contain oil. There was a rapid growth of the U.S. oil industry from 1860 or so (also part of the War), the oil barrels also being made of tin.

It became highly profitable to dig for tin, and because people could earn a living from it, the Chinese began pouring down to Malaya to make their fortunes. They came by the thousands into the Malay States such as Perak, Selangor and the little States behind Malacca, where there were big tin deposits and they began having violent clashes with one another and with the Malay authorities there. So, partly as a result of the U.S. Civil War, tin became a very important new commodity, and the Malay States acquired a very important new community.

The second major development was the cutting of the Suez Canal in 1869. Before, the broad British trade route to and from China and Japan went round South Africa and across the Indian Ocean through the Sunda Straits and up the South China Sea. It came nowhere near Malaya. From 1870, however, the new route was through the Suez Canal, across to India, and down the Straits of Malacca. This brought the ignored Malay States hard onto the flank of a major British trade artery, and they assumed a far greater strategic importance.

For most of the way from London, this new route was very effectively guarded: Gibraltar, Malta, Aden, India, Ceylon, Singapore and Hong Kong. The bases were there and the treaties of friendship or occupation signed. The straits of Malacca, however, were unguarded. So a treaty was signed with the Netherlands in 1871 whereby the Dutch gained full control of Sumatra. By this treaty, one side of the Straits was given to a European power that the British did not fear. It also made sure that "piracy" would not emanate from there, and that no great European rival would acquire the land. There remained the Malayan side. Was there anything to fear here?

The third factor we have to consider was the rise to European dominance of the German Empire. The great work of Bismark received dramatic attention, in particular, when the 1870-1871 War with France showed how decisively this powerful State figured in European affairs. From then on, Germany was regarded, not with apprehension (that did not come until nearly thirty years later), but with a somewhat thoughtful gaze; that is, as a new factor that has to be carefully considered. No other European power with traditional interests in South-East Asia—France, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal—received this consideration after 1871. None of them were worth worrying about: there was only Germany.



In July 1873, the British Colonial Minister was still writing in terms that were identical to fifty years before. He said in response to a request from a British firm in Singapore which asked for official protection of their interests in Selangor: "British subjects who engage in any undertaking in Selangor must clearly understand that H.M.G. cannot be responsible for the protection of their property or persons, and that in settling there they will act entirely at their own risk."² That was written on 5 July, 1873. Yet on the 22nd, just over two weeks later, the dramatic switch occurred. On that date, the Minister wrote: "It would be impossible for us to consent to any European power assuming the protectorate of any state in the Malay Peninsula."³ Between those two dates, there arrived in London from Singapore, not merely a despatch warning that the Sultan of Selangor—unable to control the Chinese factional fights—was considering an appeal to the English or to any other European government to help him restore order, but also a letter from the governor who passed on information from a powerful merchant who had been told that other Malay States were considering the same step: in particular, of appealing to Germany.

A new governor was about to sail from London to take up his duties. The Colonial Minister sent him his instructions. The Governor, Sir Andrew Clarke, was told: "I would wish you to consider whether it would be advisable to appoint a British officer to reside in any of the States. Such an appointment could, of course, only be made with the full consent of the Native Government." Here was intervention proposed. The Minister added—and here was the *reason* for intervention—"we could not see with indifference the interference of foreign powers in the affairs of the peninsula; on the other hand, it is difficult to see how we should be justified in objecting to the native states seeking aid elsewhere if we refuse to take any steps to remedy the evils complained of."⁴ There you have the reason for intervention in a nutshell: Germany.

Soon after, the new governor was in Singapore, and by early 1874 had rushed into agreements whereby British officers were appointed to Perak, Selangor and Negri Sembilan. All the way down the west coast—the coast that came close to the China trade route—British officers were pushed ashore and established, theoretically as Advisors, but in reality as Rulers. Thus did Germany make West Malaya British.

² Colonial Office to Lambert & Co., 5 July, 1873; in C. D. Cowan, *Nineteenth Century Malaya. The Origins of British Political Control* (London, 1961), pp. 166-167.

³ Quoted in Cowan, p. 166.

⁴ Quoted in D. MacIntyre, *Intervention in Malaya, Journal, South-East Asian History*, Vol. 2, no. 3. October, 1961. See also Cowan, p. 172.

No documentary evidence of any kind has ever come to light to indicate that Germany had any interests whatever in the Malay Peninsula in 1873. In that year, colonies did not appeal to Bismarck, although by 1873 he was the man who mattered. It was a British fear of what might happen, rather than any knowledge of what was planned to happen, that led to intervention on the west coast. When we move forward twenty to thirty years, however, to look at the British acquisition of the northern and eastern states of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu, then it is a different story. Here again it was the fear of Germany that prompted intervention, but it was not a fear of what might happen in theory, but a fear of what was happening; for by 1900 Germany was playing an increasingly important role in Siam and in the Malay Peninsula.

Prior to this, there had been a second wave of British control, generally associated with the names of Francis Weld and Frank Swettenham, whereby between 1885 and 1896 Pahang received a Resident, and an Agreement was signed with Johore, culminating in 1896 in the Federation of the four Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang. Not until this period was over (one of consolidation rather than expansion or new acquisition), does Germany again appear on the scene.

By 1898, Germany had become, by far, the most important nation in Europe, associated—by the statesmanship of Bismarck—with the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary. The other great kingdom of Russia, had moved rather distastefully (for it was aristocratic to its finger tips) towards an alliance with Republican France. Both camps regarded Britain as perfidious Albion, and it was as isolated from any ally on the continent of Europe as was the U.S.A., thirty years later; and as indifferent.

At the turn of the century, however, it realized the dangers of its isolation very clearly. In 1898 in Germany, the First Naval Bill was passed. Its author, von Tirpitz, with the German Emperor, was out to rival Britain on the seas. Britain immediately began to feel the need for an ally. For some time, while Von Bulow was saying "we do not want to put anyone in the shade, but we demand for ourselves a place in the sun," Britain searched in vain.

With France, in particular, there were too many issues in dispute—in Africa and elsewhere—to be solved before any alliance could be agreed upon. The South African War added to Britain's isolation. All Europe cheered for the little Transvaal and the Kaiser sent Kruger a most encouraging telegram. It was while Britain was in this isolated, ally-less state, that Germany—already the dominant land power in Europe—began building a first class navy, obviously to rival that of Britain.

A navy is primarily needed to defend trade routes. By 1900, German trade with the Far East was very considerable indeed. For example, by 1900, \$6 million worth of German goods were imported into Malaya, and \$9 million worth of Malayan goods exported to Germany. This was not nearly as much as Britain's corresponding \$30-\$50 million's. What alarmed the British was not the size so much as the rapid growth of this German trade. Britain had built its trade to \$30 million during a hundred years, whereas Germany, as late as 1881, had been selling under a \$1 million. A very rapid trade growth from less than \$1 million to \$6 million within twenty years perturbed the British. In shipping, the German participation in this British area had been even more marked, and this was most alarming. German shipping in Malayan waters equalled 100,000 tons in 1881. By 1900, it stood at 1 million tons. The British were not far ahead: 4½ million tons.

This was only part of a general German penetration of the Far East and South-East Asian and Pacific areas. By 1900, Germany had acquired a Far Eastern territorial Empire, and was a serious trading competitor. To the British way of thinking, it was obvious that this German territorial and trade growth in East Asia and South-East Asia and its naval growth in Europe, were two parts of one whole, which collectively could damage, if not endanger, the British in East Asia.

By 1900, Germany had secured a good trade and diplomatic footing in Siam. It was here, particularly among its southern, Malay-speaking peninsula states, that Britain began to see dangers and weakness. The German shipping firm of German Lloyd had eliminated the British Holt's Shipping Co. from the Bangkok-Singapore trade. It had eliminated the old established Butterfield and Swire from the Hong Kong and Swatow-Bangkok trade, and had taken complete control of the Singapore-Borneo trade. The German Lloyd, by 1902, had captured nearly all of the rice carrying trade of Siam out of Bangkok. In addition, the German government had agreed to train the Siamese army, and now, thick and fast, came accounts of Germany seeking a naval base among the Malay States vaguely controlled from Bangkok. These German approaches provided the decisive stimulus to British occupation.

Throughout the nineteenth century, these northern Malay States—Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu—had been accepted by Britain as lying within the Siamese sphere of influence. This was recognized by the Burney Treaty of 1826, and little attempt was ever made by the British to interfere, even though the Siamese control—except in Kedah—was nominal. These States did not constitute any threat to the British foreign policy not to weaken Siam. Siam was useful as a buffer between the

British in India-Burma, and the French in Indo-China.⁵ France was the rival, in South-East Asia, Africa and Europe, and buffer states helped lessen the tension. So Siam (as with Belgium and Holland in Europe) was to be preserved. Again, it was Germany who caused the abandonment of a traditional policy.

In 1900 Sir Frank Swettenham—the High Commissioner of the Federated Malay States, and Governor of the Straits Settlements—reported to London that Behn Meyer, the powerful German Company in Singapore, had applied to the Sultanate of Kedah for a fifty-year lease of the island of Langkawi (north of Kedah) for which it would pay \$60,000 per annum. Britain was thoroughly alarmed. A German Island in the Bay of Bengal! A naval base in the Indian Ocean; a British lake for 100 years! Such were the possibilities. Immediate pressure on Siam was exerted; the application was refused. The German minister in Bangkok protested. Behn Meyer applied again, this time for a twenty-year lease. Again Britain exerted pressure, and again Siam refused.

So far, Siam and Britain had agreed on this policy. But as German interests in Siam increased, Britain feared that this might not continue. Swettenham, in particular, was determined that the Siamese-Malay States should be brought into the British field of interest. He, therefore, seized on every opportunity to fan the flames of fear, and to warn Britain of German activities in this ill-defined border area. He drew particular reference to Langkawi on the west, and Redang Island on the east, in the South China Sea, as possible naval bases.

As a result, Britain entered into discussions with Siam. In 1902, the two countries signed a treaty, which provided that Siam continue to control the foreign relations of its Malay States but the Advisors it would appoint to administer them would be of British nationality. In this way, Britain hoped to keep out all non-Britons, particularly Germans, while preserving Siam.

This treaty was most unsatisfactory. It settled nothing. Least of all did it check German activity, for the treaty had not included Kedah—the State in which most German activity and interest had been expressed through Huttenbatch of Penang, Behn Meyer of Singapore and other concerns.

In Europe, France and Great Britain were drawing together; in 1904, an Anglo-French Alliance was signed, with King Edward visiting Paris. In Africa, disagreements and disputes were settled; in South-East Asia, Britain decided that, after all, French expansion up the Mekong was no

⁵ For a study of this, see L. A. Mills, *British Malaya, 1824-1867*.



threat to British interests, and withdraw all its opposition. Without doubt, this alliance, as with the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902, was Britain's reaction to the naval building program of Germany, and it was also the continued German activity in Siam which led to Britain's final step forward in Malaya.

Early in 1906, Britain learned that Siam planned to connect Kedah to Bangkok by a railway, which was to be built by German engineers in the service of Siam. The British Foreign Office saw that not only would Kedah be taken out of the Penang (i.e., British) trading area, but that there would be a considerable increase of German influence, both political and commercial. Britain telegraphed its opposition to Siam, but was further alarmed when the Siamese Government appointed a German—Herr Collman—as High Commissioner of Patani, in control of all the Kra Peninsula area. With a German-built railway running through an area controlled by a German (and possibly a nearby German-built naval base), all ideas of preserving Siam as a buffer were abandoned. This German railway was the factor which initiated the final step. Heavy pressure was applied: no opposition was made to French requests for some eastern provinces of Siam; an attractive loan was offered to Siam; and by the 1907 agreement, Siam agreed to give up all her powers in Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu. This agreement became a Treaty signed in early 1909. The Siamese completely withdrew from northern Malaya. British officers moved in and the whole area came under firm British control by degrees. It might never have happened but for Germany. Trengganu and Kelantan, in particular, would still have been Siamese. But, without doubt, Germany made north Malaya British.⁶

⁶ This is dealt with by F. Swettenham: *British Malaya* (London, 1906).

3 - MAR 1984

16 FEB 1974

