
TEMASEK PRESS

SINGAPORE NOT SEDAP: THE SEJARAH INQUISITION – TJC HISTORY TEAM TAKES FIRST PLACE!

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Sejarah, in the likely case that you don't speak our national language, translates to "history". As the Vice President of the National University of Singapore's History Society (known colloquially as NUS HISSOC) pointed out, history is often thought (and taught) of in a Euro-centric manner, and their purpose in titling the competition as they did (sensitives about the *Spanish* Inquisition aside), was an attempt to draw more attention to local history instead.



The Vice President giving a brief introduction about Operation Coldstore.

On the 3rd of March, five J2 History students (Tay Wee Teck 03/17, Chia Wen Ling 12/17, Janessa Zheng 01/17, Isaiah Scott Lee 01/17 and myself) were at NUS participating in the inaugural run of HISSOC's inter-JC History competition. The teams were given a set of 15

primary and secondary sources centered around Operation Coldstore and were tasked to come up with a historical narrative in two and a half hours, testing our analytical skills and ability to perform under pressure. At the end of the two and a half hours, the teams were assessed by a judging panel consisting of NUS History Professor Dr Seng Guo Quan and the President and Vice-President of NUS HISSOC.

For those of you who might not have paid closer attention during your Core Humanities or Social Studies lessons, Operation Coldstore was the code name for a covert security operation carried out in Singapore on 2 February 1963 which led to the arrest of over 100 people, who were detained without trial under the Preservation of Public Service Security Ordinance (PSSO). In official accounts, Operation Coldstore was a security operation "aimed at crippling the Communist open front organisation," which threatened Singapore's internal security. However, this account has been increasingly contested in recent years as revisionists suggest that Operation Coldstore was a tool used by the People's Action Party (PAP) to detain their political opponents.



The team working with our mentors.

Our team came up with various questions (divided under the broad headers of "Is Lim Chin Siong communist?" and "Was the Operation hence justified?") and explored them as best as we could in the short amount of time given to us. After much deliberation, we came up with the following stand with which to shape our narrative: while there was sufficient reason for the PAP to believe that the Communist threat was real in Singapore, the implementation of covert actions

to crush such a threat was influenced by political motivations, which compromised the impartiality of these actions.

It might have been easier to dismiss Operation Coldstore as being evidence of the PAP's draconian rule or blindly buy into official accounts. But if our time studying History had taught us anything, it was that no one singularly uncontested account of anything existed. Studying History entailed studying different historical perspectives, none of which were necessarily "more true" than the others. This understanding allowed us to judge the sources and the PAP's actions not based on what we knew in 2018, but in the context of the challenges they faced at the time; challenges only made more complex by the conditions created by the Cold War and the impending Merger.



The team with Dr Seng Guo Quan

The team was awarded First Place, with glowing commendations from the judging panel. On behalf of the team, we would like to thank Mr Alex Tan and Mr Bertrand Tan for their support, our HISSOC mentors (and were TJ alumni!) for guiding us throughout the competition, and NUS HISSOC for organizing the Sejarah Inquisition.