

## Chapter One

# BURMA IN WORLD WAR II

## THE PARADOXES OF STATE- AND ARMY-BUILDING

According to a brief section titled ‘Dai Tōa Kaigi to Ajia Shokoku’ (The Greater East Asia Conference and the Countries of Asia) in the controversial *Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho* [*New History Textbook*] approved by Japan’s Ministry of Education in 2001:

Among Japan’s leaders, there were many who thought it necessary to strengthen military control of the occupied areas in order to carry out the war effort. However, in order to satisfy the expectations of people in these territories, Japan granted independence to Burma and the Philippines in 1943 (Shōwa 18), and extended formal recognition to the Provisional Government of Free India.

Moreover, Japan, in order to gain their greater cooperation in the war, convened a Greater East Asia Conference in November 1943 in Tokyo with representatives from each of the territories. Major themes of the Conference were the sovereignty, independence, and cooperatively beneficial economic development of each nation, and the abolition of racial discrimination, as expressed in the Greater East Asia Proclamation. This embodied the ideals of Japan’s war effort and was meant as a response to the Atlantic Charter promulgated by the Allied Nations [in 1941].<sup>1</sup>

The section concludes by mentioning the role of the Japanese-sponsored Indian National Army in that country’s struggle for independence from Britain, achieved in 1947, and Burma’s success in breaking free of British rule the following year. ‘In these areas

[i.e., South and Southeast Asia], movements for independence intensified, compared to the pre-war period, and so it can be said that the Japanese military's advance into the southern regions (*Nippon gun no Nampō shinshutsu*) speeded up the independence of Asian countries [from colonial domination].<sup>2</sup>

The language of the *New History Textbook* is concise and muted. But academic Hasegawa Michiko asserts an unequivocal 'affirmation' of Japan's war and its accomplishments in a 1983 *Chūō Kōron* article:

Did our Greater East Asia War really result in total defeat? The former colonies that all became battlegrounds all gained their independence during or after the war, and they have not fallen into white hands again. What are we to make of this fact? In the postwar years we were taught that this was an incidental byproduct of that detestable war. Yet as Japan's official statements on war objectives make clear, the goal was to free Asia from British and American domination and establish the area's self-defense and independence. Again, if one asks Japanese war veterans why they fought, the reply comes that they believed they were fighting to liberate Asia. And indeed, Asia was liberated. It is a curious logic that denies any connection between this purpose and the war's outcome. Is history so difficult that it can only be understood through such a strange logic?<sup>3</sup>

Drawing on the earlier work of Hayashi Fusao (*Dai Tōa Sensō Kōteiron* [*Affirmation of the Greater East Asia War*]), Hasegawa defines what other writers have called the Fifteen Years' War (1931–1945) as the culmination of a '100 years' war' which began when the western powers invaded East Asia in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the 'Greater East Asia War' was not fought in Japan's national interest but to defend Asia's cultural integrity (its 'cultural sphere') and very existence, which was being 'choked' by the aggressive westerners. That Japanese soldiers wound up fighting Asians was regrettable, even tragic, Hasegawa admits (one is reminded of what the American military used to say in Vietnam, that 'we had to destroy that village in order to save it'). But it was a war with a higher purpose than mere empire-building.<sup>5</sup>

These two passages present us with two rather different propositions: first, that the Japanese ‘advance’ into Southeast Asia speeded up the process of decolonization, though it is not argued in the *New History Textbook* that if the ‘Greater East Asia War’ had not occurred, the European colonies of Southeast Asia would *never* have achieved independence; secondly, and far more ambitiously (here I refer to Hasegawa’s passage), that the essence of the war was a survival struggle of Asian peoples against the West, and that this war was *successful* (thus, worthy of affirmation) since it resulted in the fall of the European colonial empires. Hasegawa compares the war-as-decolonization with Lincoln’s emancipation of the slaves during the Civil War. Cynically, it seems, for she comments that Lincoln is given credit for freeing the slaves because he won his war, while the Japanese accomplishment (‘an incidental byproduct of that detestable war’) is belittled because Japan lost.<sup>6</sup>

A closer look at the historical sources shows that the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia is difficult to define simply in terms of ‘affirmation’ or denial. In talking about ‘colonialism’ or ‘the colonies’, we often overlook the fact that each country in Southeast Asia, and each of the British, Dutch, French, and American colonial regimes that governed them, was different. The Japanese impact on each of them, and on different peoples inside each country, also varied remarkably, so that we can speak of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya enduring systematic atrocities during 1942–1945 – the Japanese-instigated *sook ching* extermination campaign, which claimed thousands of victims among Chinese males – while the indigenous Malays’ rural way of life was minimally affected, apart from Tokyo’s sporadic policy of promoting Emperor worship among devout Muslims.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, if any generalization can be made about the ‘Greater East Asia War’, it is that it *tore apart* societies – ethnically, religiously, and in terms of social class – that had already been weakened by the contradictions of colonial rule and economic globalization. Some nations have been able to overcome this fragmentation in the decades since the war (Malaysia and Singapore, for example).

Others have not (principally Burma), and arguably continue to suffer because of the legacies of the war.

Burma (known officially since 1989 as Myanmar) is the most interesting case study of the 'Greater East Asia War' and its impact. This is true for three reasons. First, Japanese revisionists often hold up Burma as the prime example of the liberating agenda of the war, since most of the country's post-independence leaders (Aung San, U Nu, Ne Win) came to prominence under Japanese auspices in 1941–1945. Secondly, the Japanese established what became independent Burma's most important political, economic and (with the possible exception of the Buddhist monkhood) social institution, the *Tatmadaw*, or armed forces. Burma has been governed as an 'Army-State' since March of 1962. Thirdly, Burma's 'Japanese interlude' represented a fundamental turning point in its development, more significant than achievement of formal independence in 1948 and arguably as significant as its colonization by the British in the nineteenth century. Different parts of Burma have been battle zones since the first Japanese forces crossed over from Thailand in the opening weeks of the war. The ongoing civil war has turned what was once a prosperous and cosmopolitan country into one of Asia's poorest and most isolated. Looking more closely at the Burmese case, we can see why the revisionist 'affirmation' of the war is problematic, to say the least.

#### BRITISH BURMA: DYNAMIC, BUT DIVIDED

What follows is a fairly detailed description of Burma under British rule just before the outbreak of the war, since I believe no assessment of the Japanese interlude is complete without considering what went before. If one assumes that the colonial regime was totally bad, and moreover incapable of reforming itself, then its overthrow in 1941–1942 must be a welcome thing, analogous to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978–1979, which got rid of the Pol Pot regime. But if one takes another position, that the colonial system, seriously flawed though it was, was capable of evolving into a

post-colonial situation on its own, *peacefully*, then the Japanese 'liberation' of Burma looks like something quite different.

In the years leading up to the Pacific War, Burma was Southeast Asia's most developed country. It was blessed with rich natural resources, including abundant land for the cultivation of rice (between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the war, Burma was the world's largest exporter of rice to world markets), teak (with forests protected by strict conservation measures), petroleum, rubber, tin, tungsten, lead, silver, jade (mostly exported to China, where it is still highly prized), and the world-famous 'pigeon blood' rubies. Except for poor Indian labourers and the more primitive upland ethnic groups, whom the British called 'hill tribes', standards of living for just about everyone were higher than in most other parts of Asia due to the abundance of food and other necessities, though the economic position of ordinary Burmese farmers had deteriorated by the late 1930s, for reasons to be discussed below. Rangoon (population in 1931: 400,000) rivalled Shanghai and Tokyo as one of Asia's most modern and cosmopolitan cities, though its prosperity was based on exports of raw materials rather than manufacturing.

Colonial Burma had a well developed civil society, centred on Rangoon, embracing diverse religious, occupational, ethnic and political associations, print media which were largely, though not completely, free to criticize the government, and a high quality University of Rangoon which nurtured a new generation of intellectual and political leaders. That the university and the élite secondary schools taught in English gave educated Burmese a facility in the language rivalled only in India.

During times of popular unrest or insurgency, such as the 1930–1931 Saya San rebellion, the heavily-armed British colonial government crushed its armed opponents with brute force. But the rule of law was firmly established, and the Burmese, who have their own sophisticated legal traditions, became such eager litigants under British rule that a retired executive of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company comments that his firm earned a large percentage of its profits from conveying people back and forth to the courts in Lower

Burma.<sup>8</sup> The political system was not genuinely democratic, since the British governor had authority independent of the legislature in the constitutional system established in 1935. Mostly British but with a handful of Burmese, the *élite* civil servants had powers comparable to Japan's present-day *kanryō* (*élite* bureaucrats). But Burmese who wished to make use of them had freedoms that people in French Indochina or the Netherlands East Indies could only dream about.<sup>9</sup>

Burmese high school and university students were a prominent and much admired group in colonial society, and their rather playful political activism during the late 1930s resembled that of American and European students in the 1960s rather than Burmese oppositionists today, who face jail, torture, possibly death. By the late 1930s, the two most important political groups were the Rangoon University Students' Union (RUSU), which became radicalised under the leadership of Aung San (the father of the present-day opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi) and Thakin Nu (later U Nu, Burma's first prime minister after independence), and the Thakin Party, or Dobama Asiayone ('We Burmans Association'), established in 1930 by young urban intellectuals.<sup>10</sup> The Thakins, who by the end of the decade included the student leaders Aung San and Nu, led the drive for independence and attacked mainstream politicians for being subservient to the colonial overlords.

Their worldview, hardly a coherent ideology, was a lively blend of diverse trends: politicised Buddhism, Indian nationalist ideas, Irish Sinn Féinism, fascism, non-revolutionary Fabian socialism, and Sun Yat-sen's *San Min Chu-i*. The principal influence, however, was Marxism–Leninism. Thakin Nu established the *Nagani* or 'Red Dragon' Book Club in 1937. Many of its publications were Marxist literature, translated into Burmese from western languages.<sup>11</sup> All the most important young nationalists, including Aung San and Thakin Nu, were leftists. In 1939, they established the Communist Party of Burma, though Aung San, the party secretary-general, seems never to have been a committed communist.

Outwardly prosperous, Burma's society under colonial rule suffered from serious contradictions. Most Burmese living in the

central part of the country – especially the Burmans, the ethnic majority who compose around 60–66 per cent of the population – did not regard British rule as legitimate. The older generation looked with nostalgia back on the Konbaung Dynasty, which the British abolished in 1885 at the end of the Third Anglo–Burmese War. They also feared that under alien rule the Buddhist religion, which had always been generously supported by the old kings, would perish amidst the flood of foreign influences, including missionary Christianity. The younger generation, informed by leftist ideology, sought a radical new synthesis of Buddhism, socialism and nationalism that would restore the country's independence and cure its social and economic ills.

Most ordinary Burmese found the elaborate 'self-government' apparatus established by the British on the local and national levels simply irrelevant, and declined to participate in elections and other aspects of public life. According to John S. Furnivall, a perceptive observer of the colonial regime, 'Self-government was impossible because there was no self to govern itself.'<sup>12</sup> By 'self', he meant a citizenry sharing common values, an appreciation of the public interest.

Furnivall called this phenomenon of public disengagement the 'plural society', symptomatic of colonial 'tropical economies'. What it meant was not simply that different cultural groups, with their own distinct values and customs, lived adjacent to each other (but not together) under a common authority, but that these groups, struggling to survive in an economically rational environment ('buy cheap, sell dear'), had nothing in common, lived in a state of mutual suspicion and anomie, and indeed were often at each others' throats. For example, there were race riots between Burmese and Indians in Rangoon in 1930 and 1938, in which hundreds of Indians were killed. As is true in today's globalised economy – indeed, the colonial plural society is a cautionary tale for twenty-first century globalisers – different groups were unequally prepared in terms of cultural values, levels of skill, political connections, and material wealth to compete in the modern economy, and there were clearly recognizable ethnic winners and losers. This competition

became politicised (thus, the radicalism of the young nationalists), especially as world economic conditions after 1929 made the suffering of the losers even worse.

Immigrants, mostly Hindu and Muslim Indians with smaller numbers of Chinese and Europeans, sought economic opportunities. The immigration of Indians was facilitated by the fact that, until the Government of Burma Act was implemented in 1937, Burma was a province of the British Indian Empire and restrictions on their movements could not be imposed. By 1931, over fifty per cent of Rangoon's residents were from the subcontinent (only 35 per cent were Burmese), and Indians (including people from what are now Pakistan and Bangladesh) formed seven per cent of the entire country's population, or more than one million people.<sup>13</sup> Most Indians were concentrated in urban areas, and in Lower (southern) Burma.

The colonial regime's economic policy was *laissez faire*, combining limited public investment in infrastructure (railroads, inland waterways) with a business-friendly legal regime. Foreigners, including not only British and other European owners of large corporations such as the Irrawaddy Flotilla and Burmah Oil but also Indian and Chinese entrepreneurs, dominated the modern, export-oriented economy, and local economies as well. Burmese farmers benefited from the boom in rice exports in the late nineteenth century, but by the early twentieth century were squeezed by low prices (often artificially low, due to collusion by buyers even when world prices were high), indebtedness, and forfeiture of their family farms to moneylenders, many of whom were members of the much-disliked South Indian Chettiar caste. The Chettiars became absentee landlords, whose large estates formed over a quarter of Lower Burma's agriculturally rich lands by 1937.<sup>14</sup> Dispossessed Burmese farmers became their tenants, or joined the growing ranks of the unemployed who drifted into the cities and competed with low paid Indians for scarce jobs.

Indians worked as urban and rural labourers, often under conditions of extreme poverty, but they also filled the lower ranks of the civil service (fifty per cent of all government employees were Indian), the professions (including most physicians), and

(along with Karens and other indigenous ethnic minorities) the police and colonial army. A majority of office workers in the big corporations were Indians, as were many merchants, shopkeepers, and craftsmen. Many members of the much smaller Chinese community excelled in business, like their counterparts in Malaya and Singapore, though the Burmese resented them less than they did the Indians because they assimilated more easily into Burmese society; indeed, many prominent members of Burmese society, including the late dictator Ne Win, were Sino-Burmese. Although there were some Burmese capitalists, a handful of moneylenders and rice millers, they were the exception rather than the rule.

A second major division in colonial Burma, one which had a still greater impact on the country's subsequent development than the plural society, was between the lowland, rice-cultivating peoples of central Burma (what the British called 'Burma Proper'), and the so-called 'hill tribes' who lived along the country's borders with China, Thailand, French Indochina and India. More than forty per cent of Burma's land area but a much smaller percentage of its population were included in the 'Frontier Areas', which were administratively separate from Burma Proper, and where local rulers enjoyed considerable autonomy. The Frontier Area contained a diverse array of groups including the Shans, a sophisticated people whose princes governed thirty-three semi-independent states in eastern Burma (present-day Shan State), the Karens, who also lived in large numbers in the Irrawaddy Delta south of Rangoon, the Karenni, Kachins, Chins, Nagas, and Wa (the latter with an unsavoury reputation as headhunters). Altogether, there are about forty to fifty major minority groups.

With the principal exception of the Shans, most of the Frontier Area peoples were originally not Buddhists but animists. In the nineteenth century, western missionaries converted many to Christianity, and graduates of mission schools became the new élites of the Karen, Kachin and Chin communities. Although Christians formed only a minority of Karens (most were, and are, animists and Buddhists), they were especially determined to assert the identity of their people, and with British encouragement

established the Karen National Association in 1881, one of Burma's earliest political associations. Karen and Burman/Burmese nationalism were quite separate developments, often at odds with each other during the twentieth century.

Bonds between the 'hill tribes' and the British were strong. The British trusted the upland ethnic groups more than the Burmans, and encouraged their enlistment in the colonial army and police. During the Third Anglo-Burmese War (1885) and the 'pacification' that followed it (1885-1890), Karens and other minority soldiers fought alongside the British against Burman insurgents. In 1941-1945, they also fought together against the Japanese.

'Divide and rule' worked plenty of mischief, setting different groups against each other. At Rangoon University, stolid but hard-working Karen students were often regarded by their Burman classmates as 'pets' of their British teachers. When political activism became a student pastime during the 1930s, Christian Karens generally avoided it.

The division of Burma into two administratively distinct entities, Burma Proper and the Frontier Areas, meant that the country was never really united under a single government, though separate civil services in each region were under the authority of Burma's governor. Burma Proper had a semi-parliamentary system by the late 1930s, while the British preserved the 'feudal' character of chiefly or princely rule in the Frontier Areas. Unlike Burma Proper, the Frontier Areas were subjected to systematic neglect, due to chronically slim budgets. They had next to nothing in the way of social services such as public education and health (though missionaries often filled the gap), and were not developed economically save for jade mines in the Kachin hills and the Namtu lead and silver mine in the Shan States. Then as now, the two regions were remote from each other, their inhabitants living in largely different worlds, making national unity next to impossible.

Without attributing particularly benevolent motives to the British, who above all wanted Burma to turn a profit and, with a few exceptions, maintained a cool and distant attitude toward

their native subjects, as amply illustrated by George Orwell in his novel *Burmese Days*, it is reasonable to suggest that British Burma was a work in progress. Given time and peaceful conditions, some of the problems connected with the plural society and the lack of integration between Burma Proper and the Frontier Areas could have been worked out. This is not to suggest that Burma should have remained British. By the late 1930s, most intelligent people in Britain and the colonies alike knew that the 'Age of Empire' was drawing to a close. This would have been true even if the 'Greater East Asia War' had not spread to Southeast Asia.

During the 1920s and 1930s, British colonialism in Burma, relatively liberal compared to the Dutch regime in Indonesia or the French in Indochina, was caught in an ultimately fatal contradiction. Outside of some indigenous and immigrant minority groups such as the Karens, the people regarded their British masters coolly, without enthusiasm. A vocal minority, with broad popular support, saw them as illegitimate. As mentioned, when open resistance such as the Saya San peasant revolt of 1930–1931 broke out, it was brutally suppressed.

But Britain had parliamentary government, and colonial policymakers could not ignore public opinion at home (though they listened less attentively to opinion in Burma itself, a major source of alienation). Burmese political demands – as opposed to armed insurgency – could not be dealt with by using bullets.

Wary of public opinion at home, insufficiently bloody-minded to crush unarmed civil dissent in the manner of the notorious General Dyer,<sup>15</sup> the colonial regime was in a quandary by the late 1930s. Plans for granting Burma Dominion status were discussed amongst British officials and the more conservative Burmese politicians, but no schedule for the achievement of self-rule within the British Commonwealth was announced. Massive demonstrations upcountry and in Rangoon in 1938–1939 won popular support for the radicals, especially the Thakin Party, which rejected any kind of cooperation with the colonial regime. After war broke out in Europe in September 1939, the Churchill government short-sightedly demanded that India and Burma

contribute to Britain's defence without offering anything concrete in return. Churchill's determination to maintain the colonial status quo drove both established politicians such as Dr. Ba Maw and the militant Thakins into an alliance, and set the stage for Japanese intervention.

## THE JAPANESE INTERLUDE

Burma during the war was like grass trampled by fighting elephants. Not only was it a major battlefield, involving hundreds of thousands of Allied and Japanese troops in pitched engagements up and down the country, but it was fought over twice: first, when the Japanese successfully drove the British out in 1942, capturing Rangoon in March and Mandalay in May; and secondly in 1944–1945 when British Commonwealth and other Allied forces commenced an offensive after the collapse of the disastrous Japanese Imphal Campaign, launched from Burma into north-eastern India. The Allies moved into northern Burma in late 1944–early 1945 and recaptured Rangoon by May 1945. According to D.G.E. Hall, 'Seen as a whole, the battle for Burma was the largest single action fought against the Japanese.'<sup>16</sup> Untold numbers of Burmese died, mostly from disease or starvation.

In general, Burmese (or Burmans) seemed to have welcomed the arrival of the Japanese, viewing them as liberators. But hospitable feelings were short-lived. Many Japanese troops had fought for years in China, and viewed local populations as enemies. Slapping the faces of civilians became routine. The *Kempeitai* (Japanese military police), ostensibly on the lookout for British spies and communists, conducted a reign of terror, detaining and torturing people for little or no reason. Its behaviour became so bad that wartime leader Ba Maw had to intercede with the highest military commanders to curb the worst excesses. Throughout the war, he found that the most difficult Japanese to handle were the 'Korea clique', officers who had picked up a deep racial arrogance in Japan's old colonies.<sup>17</sup>

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In addition, Burmese were recruited for Ba Maw's 'Sweat Army', essentially forced labourers who worked under inhuman conditions, especially on the Thai–Burma Railway, the so-called

*The Battles of Burma, 1941–42 and 1944–45*

By the end of January 1942, the Japanese Fifteenth Army had captured Kawthaung, Burma's southernmost point, Tavoy, Mergui and Moulmein. Crossing the Sittang River in late February, it controlled Rangoon by 9 March. British forces, aided by Chinese Nationalist divisions based in Yunnan, hoped to hold Upper (northern) Burma, but the Japanese offensive moved swiftly north, capturing Mandalay on 1 May 1942 and Lashio, where the Burma Road began, on 8 May. British forces commanded by General William Slim staged a retreat into India under harsh conditions, but remained largely intact, ready to fight another day.

Japanese victory was assured by air superiority, and above all superior mobility and tactics, which enabled them to repeatedly outflank the British. However, they were not able to keep the advantage. The Allies perfected combined ground-air operations, as shown in the 'Chindit' operations of 1943 and 1944 commanded by General Orde Wingate, and 'Merrill's Marauders', an American force. The Imphal Campaign of March–June 1944 was a disaster for the Japanese, costing them tens of thousands of casualties and undermining their ability to defend Upper Burma. Slim began an offensive into northern Burma in late 1944, crossing the Irrawaddy in February 1945 and reoccupying Mandalay on 19 March. Thereafter, his forces steamrolled into Lower (southern) Burma, and Rangoon fell without a fight on 2–3 May.

The Japanese suffered over 185,000 deaths in Burma both in battle and due to disease and starvation. Many were killed by ethnic minority guerrillas, especially the Karens. British and Commonwealth forces suffered some 74,000 casualties, and the Chinese a much higher number, though uncounted. For the most complete account, see Louis Allen, *Burma: the Longest War* (London: Phoenix, 2000).

'railway of death'.<sup>18</sup> Deprived of food, shelter and medical treatment, tens of thousands died laying tracks through the fever-ridden, mountainous jungle. The post-1988 military regime has also used forced labour on a large scale, including for the construction of a

rail line between Ye and Tavoy in southern Burma, which has been called a 'second railway of death'.

As Japanese forces advanced into the country in early 1942 and the situation looked increasingly hopeless, the British carried out a 'policy of denial', destroying much of Burma's excellent infrastructure, including rail lines, most of the river boats operated by the Irrawaddy Flotilla, oil refineries and communications networks. Japanese and British air raids wreaked havoc on Burma's cities. During the March 1945 battle for Mandalay, the beautiful royal palace built by King Mindon in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was burned to the ground.

It took more than a decade to repair the economic damage. Japan played an important role in reconstruction, signing a treaty with the government of independent Burma in 1954 to provide US\$250 million in war reparations, supplemented in the 1960s by a further US\$140 million in 'semi-reparations'.<sup>19</sup> But the easy prosperity of the pre-war years was a thing of the past.

The influx of arms during 1941–1945 and the creation of armed units in Burma Proper and the Frontier Areas, both national armies and local militias, made for an environment not unlike that of Afghanistan today. After foreign enemies were finished fighting the big battles, local warlords and ethnic minority rebels continued to settle scores and push their own agendas through the barrel of a gun. The resort to force became a reflex, and remained one long after 1945.

Both the colonial and wartime periods posed problems for the country's national identity, its 'state-ness', aptly symbolized by the 1945 destruction of Mindon's palace. The British colonial regime was not concerned with nation building. The political entity they governed was an assemblage of ethnic groups living under one or the other of two separate administrations, in Burma Proper and the Frontier Areas. British Burma, despite its economic dynamism, civil society, and high education standards, was a Rube Goldberg contraption, rife with internal contradictions, which collapsed easily under external pressure.

The Japanese impact on the country during 1941–1945 was to open up space within which a *Burman* nation could be constructed.

Both the Japanese and their collaborators – principally Dr. Ba Maw, who became head of the *Baho* or Central Executive Administration after the British were driven out in 1942 and in August 1943 *Nain-ngandaw Adipadi* or Head of State of ‘independent’ Burma within the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere – were adept at symbolic politics, blending Pan-Asianism with evocations of Burma’s pre-colonial glories. What Ba Maw calls the ‘Burmese Era’ was also a time of institution building under the auspices of the ‘totalitarian’ state that he established.<sup>20</sup> The most important institution, however, was the army, which was established not by himself but the Japanese, and which unlike its colonial counterpart was largely if not exclusively Burman.

In other words, radical political and social changes made possible during the Japanese occupation created a ‘post-colonial’ state with an evocative and authentic (though selectively constructed) national identity, *for the ethnic majority*. But this was achieved at the price of excluding most of the indigenous and foreign ethnic minorities from the political-military centre. And after 1941, the ‘political’ and ‘military’ spheres were inseparable, since men with guns, rather than colonial officials or elected politicians, dominated the political stage.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

Until Burma became nominally independent in August 1943, it was governed by a Japanese Military Administration (*Gunseikanbu*), which viewed Burma primarily as a supplier of natural resources and manpower for the war effort. It was subordinate to the Southern Area Army, headquartered in Singapore, which had control over not only Burma but also large areas of Island Southeast Asia, and ultimately to Imperial General Headquarters (*Dai Hon’ei*) in Tokyo. Supreme executive authority was vested in the commander-in-chief of Japanese forces. The Imperial Army, independent of the Military Administration, wielded tremendous power.<sup>21</sup>

Most of the *Gunseikanbu* personnel were civilians employed by the Army, seconded from the Home Islands, who were responsible for securing the local population's cooperation through Ba Maw's 'Burma *Baho* [Central] Government'. On the regional and local levels, the administrative structure established by the British was largely preserved, and many British-era Burmese civil servants remained at their posts. Given the dislocations of the war, language barriers, and especially the divergent points of view held not only between Burmese and Japanese but also among the Japanese themselves (especially civilians versus Army officers), the system was not very efficient.

By the end of the war, Burmese civil servants in the districts and towns, who before 1941 were among the most respected people in the colonial society, had suffered a great fall in prestige, since they had been deprived of signs of high status by the wartime government – including the colonial-era expectation that ordinary people would prostrate before them, and call them *paya*, 'lord' – and were perceived as unable to shield the people from economic hardship or Japanese oppression.<sup>22</sup>

Although the *Gunseikanbu* was abolished after 'independence', Ba Maw's government, despite great efforts on his part, was unable to operate independently of the Japanese Commander-in-Chief. This meant that Ba Maw was widely dismissed as a Japanese puppet, the ruler of a monsoon 'Manchukuo' (the state established by the Japanese in northeastern China in 1932), who had no choice but to collaborate in the increasingly desperate Japanese expropriations as the end of the war drew near. In the economic sphere, the Japanese Army established a cartel arrangement of favoured companies who controlled manufacturing and the diminishing export-import trade. Because of Tokyo's policy of self-sufficiency in the occupied territories, which was made further necessary by the depredations of Allied submarines, the large number of Japanese soldiers (some 300,000) essentially lived off the land.<sup>23</sup>

Although Burma did not suffer the terrible famines of Japanese-occupied Java or northern Vietnam (or for that matter, Bengal in British-ruled India), the failure of Ba Maw and his elite civil

servants to prevent falling standards of living and Japanese abuses of power, especially by the *Kempeitai*, resulted in their political sidelining after the war.<sup>24</sup> It was the Thakins, especially Aung San, whose originally collaborationist army at the beginning of the war had risen against the Japanese in March of 1945, who were able to lead the vanguard in the struggle for independence against a restored British regime.

### BUILDING A BURMAN ARMY

From the beginning of their recorded history, the Burmans have cherished martial values, not unlike the Japanese. At its most powerful in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the Burman state subjugated non-Burman states on the periphery of the Burman heartland (the Mons, Shans, Arakanese) and expanded into what are now Laos, Thailand and northeastern India. An eighteenth century Burmese king, Hsinbyushin, even defeated repeated Chinese invasions of the Shan States. The British colonial era, then, was something of a hiatus in which the Burmans were disarmed. The colonial armed forces consisted of soldiers brought over from India, or, as mentioned, non-Burman ethnic minorities. In 1939, the Burma Defence Force had in its ranks only 472 Burmans (a category which apparently also included Mons and Shans), compared to 3,197 Karens, Kachins and Chins.<sup>25</sup>

Rangoon University had a Training Corps that was popular with Burman students, though there was no opportunity for them to pursue a military career after graduation. The major political parties, including the Dobama Asiayone (Thakins), the Myochit or Patriot Party and even the Rangoon University Student Union, had paramilitary units (*tat* in Burmese) who guarded leaders, kept order during rallies, and sometimes acted like Mussolini's Blackshirts. Rejecting Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent methods of struggle, the Thakins employed militant, aggressive rhetoric and planned armed struggle against the colonial regime. The decision of the Imperial General Headquarters in late 1941 to give

Colonel Suzuki Keiji authority to organize a Burman armed force to assist in the Japanese invasion of the country had an immense psychological impact on the ethnic majority.

The establishment of the wartime army constitutes mythic history, involving the heroic adventures of Aung San and the 'Thirty Comrades'. Soon after the outbreak of war in Europe, Dr. Ba Maw, who had been ousted as prime minister following the anti-British demonstrations of 1938–1939, talked with the Japanese consul in Rangoon, sounding him out on getting financial and other assistance from Tokyo. One of his closest associates, Dr. Thein Maung, became head of the Japan–Burma Society after his visit to Tokyo in October–November 1939 (the Society's secretary was Colonel Suzuki).<sup>26</sup> As ties between Ba Maw, Aung San, and the Japanese grew closer, Tokyo loomed large in their planning for an anti-British underground movement. By this time Ba Maw and the Thakins had joined in a united front, the Freedom Bloc, and Aung San was the Bloc's secretary.

With a price set on his head by the British authorities, Aung San left Burma with a fellow Thakin in August 1940, bound for Amoy (Xiamen) on the China coast. Just whom he planned to contact remains unclear. In her biography of her father, Aung San Suu Kyi claims that his intention was to get support not from the Japanese but from the Chinese communists. When he and his comrade failed to contact communist agents, they reluctantly accepted the invitation of a Japanese agent to be flown to Tokyo to meet Colonel Suzuki.<sup>27</sup> In *The Minami Organ*, Izumiya Tatsurō, a wartime subordinate of Colonel Suzuki, cites a Burmese source that '(a)t Amoy, Aung San intended to make his way overland to Chungking [Chongqing] despite the length of the journey. But they did not succeed, and after wandering around aimlessly for a few months, [they] were contacted by one Major Kanda of the Japanese Military Police.'<sup>28</sup> In 'Burma's Challenge', Aung San indicates the mutual reluctance of the Japanese and leftists like himself ('Bolsheviks' in Japanese eyes) to cooperate, and that

I was sent out to China and given a blank cheque by my comrades to do what I thought best for my country. As the China–Burma Road was closed, I had to go to China by sea and that, even though insignificant in itself, caused our later association with the Japanese. I couldn't reach the interior of China [where the communists were based] by sea. I was told I could reach Amoy only and then would have to rely upon my own resourcefulness to get to the interior of China.<sup>29</sup>

Ba Maw's version of events written up in *Breakthrough in Burma* does not mention China, claiming that he, Aung San, Dr. Thein Maung and a Japanese diplomat planned Aung San's escape, and that Amoy was chosen as his destination since it was close to the Japanese colony of Taiwan. Though they arrived in Amoy without incident, the two Thakins spent a couple of desperate months, ill and short of funds, before Aung San wrote a letter to his comrades in Rangoon asking for help. Thein Maung arranged with 'Minami Masuyo' (Colonel Suzuki's assumed name, as he was then in Rangoon posing as a correspondent for the *Yomiuri Shimbun*) to have Taiwan-based *Kempeitai* agents rescue them.<sup>30</sup> There is no evidence that the two Thakins attempted to leave the port city and strike out for the interior.

In November 1940, they met Colonel Suzuki in Tokyo, where, Aung San comments, 'I had to make the best of a bad job'.<sup>31</sup> They agreed that Aung San would go back to Burma under cover to recruit more young men from his party to form the nucleus of an anti-colonial army. Though unenthusiastic about Japanese plans to invade Burma, he believed, rather naively, that while Japanese and British forces were fighting along the border, his new army could declare independence and seize power. Suzuki established a secret organization, the *Minami Kikan* (Minami Organ, *minami* being both Suzuki's cover name in Rangoon and the Japanese word for 'south'), to coordinate their activities in Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asia.

By summer 1941, 27 men from the Thakin Party had been smuggled out of Burma by sea and overland, and brought to Japan. Together with Aung San, his original Amoy companion and a Burmese student

in Tokyo, they were taken to a specially constructed training facility at Sanya on the Japanese-occupied island of Hainan, China, to receive military instruction.<sup>32</sup> These men were the legendary Thirty Comrades, the core of the first Burman armed force since the fall of the Burman kingdom in 1885, the Burma Independence Army. Their training, which was so tough that at times some of the Thakins were on the verge of revolt, lasted from April until October.

The Japanese divided the Thirty Comrades into three groups: one group, including Aung San, were to assume command and administrative positions in the new army; a second group, including a Sino-Burmese Rangoon University dropout, Thakin Shu Maung (better known as Ne Win), were to carry out guerrilla and sabotage activities behind enemy lines; while the third group, composed of younger Thakins, received training as field commanders.<sup>33</sup> Because few if any of the trainees knew Japanese, instruction was carried out in broken English.

On both sides, the alliance was one of convenience. The Burmese needed foreign assistance. The Japanese, seeking a favourable end to their war with China, which had broken out in July 1937, wanted to shut down the Burma Road through which the Americans and British supplied Chiang Kai-shek at his wartime capital of Chongqing. After northern Vietnam fell into Japanese hands in September 1940, cutting off a rail route between Hanoi and China, the Burma Road, which wound through the mountains from the railhead at Lashio in Shan State to the Yunnan Province capital of Kunming, was Chiang's only outlet to the sea. According to Japanese sources, the volume of arms and supplies carried over the road expanded from 2,000 tons in 1939 to 10,000 tons in 1940.<sup>34</sup>

Following the Pearl Harbour attack and the landing of Japanese troops at Kota Baharu, Malaya, on 8 December 1941, the Thirty Comrades were brought to Bangkok, and on 28 December the Burma Independence Army (BIA) was officially established. Colonel Suzuki assumed command, while another Japanese officer was chief of staff. Aung San was designated senior staff officer, and Shu Maung appointed head of an army group in charge of 'interior sabotage'. Each of the Thirty Comrades took a *nom de*

*guerre* reflecting pride in their new mission, including Aung San (Bo Teza, the 'fire commander') and Shu Maung (Bo Ne Win, the 'shining sun commander'). Suzuki assumed the name Bo Mogyo, 'commander thunderbolt', which showed his adroitness in manipulating cultural symbols. According to an old prophecy, Burma's British conquerors (symbolized by an umbrella) would be struck down by a thunderbolt. A rumour was let around that Suzuki was the descendant of Myingun Min, a prince of the defunct royal dynasty, thus a *minlaung* or pretender to the throne. On the day the BIA was founded, the Thirty Comrades performed the *thwe thauk* or blood drinking ceremony, in which each donated some of his blood, mixed with liquor, which they drank together. This ceremony, like the Bo Mogyo legend, drew deeply on Burma's warlike past.<sup>35</sup>

The BIA accompanied Japanese forces penetrating Burma in the first months of 1942. Its rank and file, which numbered as many as 30,000 (of whom only about 4,000 actually took part in military operations), was filled with Burmese living around Bangkok and the Thai–Burma border, augmented by thousands of young village volunteers inside Burma. Although the new army distinguished itself in several engagements with the British, notably at Shwedaung near Prome, a British intelligence report published in late 1943 says that '[a]bout half the BIA consisted of high minded young Nationalist idealists but the other half were mere thugs out for what they could make. Most of the members enlisted to get in on the ground floor of the new government.'<sup>36</sup> The BIA soon degenerated into an armed mob as law and order inside Burma broke down in the wake of the British retreat. This led to inter-ethnic violence that surprised even the Japanese (see 'Ethnic Conflict', p. 25).

Loved and feared by his men but an irritant to his superiors, 'Bo Mogyo' was relieved of his command, and sent home in June 1942. Ba Maw compared him to T.E. Lawrence, the agent of a big power who gains mastery of a small country's local knowledge, and seems to feel split loyalties. According to U Nu, Suzuki said that if the Japanese refused to grant Burma independence, 'Then tell them

that you will cross over to some place like Twante [near Rangoon] and proclaim independence and set up your own government. If they start shooting, you just shoot back.<sup>37</sup> This romanticism was at odds with the views of the top brass, who exercised tight control over the country in order to extract its natural resources.

With the establishment of the Burma Defence Army (BDA) in summer 1942, replacing the BIA, the rationalization of the armed forces was begun. The new army had a planned troop strength of 10,000 (British intelligence reports that only about 5,000 were actually mobilized by late 1943), and was a structured institution with a general staff and officers' and enlisted men's training facilities. In its first year of operation, the officers' training school at Mingaladon north of Rangoon trained 300 officers for the BDA, of whom the top 30 were sent to Japan for further training. During the war, a large number of Burman officers entered military academies in the Home Islands, absorbing Japanese military doctrine.<sup>38</sup>

By the time Burma was declared 'independent' by the Japanese in August 1943, the armed forces, renamed the Burma National Army (BNA) were free of formal Japanese control. According to U Maung Maung, there was little communication between the BNA at its headquarters in Rangoon and the Japanese command across town, except for liaison officers. Ne Win succeeded Aung San as commander-in-chief of the armed forces with the rank of colonel, while Aung San became defence minister in Ba Maw's cabinet.<sup>39</sup>

The impact of Japanese tutelage on the present *Tatmadaw* or armed forces is difficult to assess. Some of the Thirty Comrades were eager students. In U Maung Maung's words, 'They behaved and dressed as much like Japanese officers as they could.'<sup>40</sup> Others, including Ne Win, apparently resented the forceful imposition of Japanese values, especially during the time on Hainan. But Ne Win received counter-insurgency training from the *Kempeitai*, and the sophisticated Military Intelligence apparatus he established after Burma became independent may owe something to his Japanese teachers. After 1988, some democracy activists claimed the *Tatmadaw* copied its brutal pacification tactics in the Frontier Areas from the Japanese. There are more than superficial

resemblances between the *Tatmadaw's* 'Four Cuts' policy against ethnic minority rebels (to cut, or deprive, rebels of recruits, funding, supplies and information) and the Japanese army's *sankō seisaku* or 'three all' policy in China ('kill all; burn all; destroy all').<sup>41</sup> But war atrocities have their own dynamic, and there is no reason to believe that an army largely unconstrained by public opinion or the rule of law – as Ne Win's was even before his coup d'état in 1962 – would have followed civilized rules of war, even if the Japanese had never come to Burma.

The most important of the Thirty Comrades and their Thakin comrades, many of whom had communist sympathies, had grown thoroughly disgusted with Japanese-style sham independence by mid-1944, and established an underground Anti-Fascist Organization with Aung San's blessing. As British Commonwealth forces fought their way into central Burma the following year, Aung San ordered the BNA to rise up against the Japanese on 27 March 1945. Allied with Louis Mountbatten's South-East Asia Command, they received a new designation, the Patriotic Burmese Forces (PBF). The twenty-seventh of March is now an important national holiday, originally known as (Anti-Fascist) Resistance Day but now Armed Forces Day. If the meaning of the original name celebrated the 'people's army's' determination to drive all foreign imperialists out of Burma, the later name highlighted the *Tatmadaw's* self-perception as the sole defender of the country's independence and sovereignty.<sup>42</sup>

In *Breakthrough in Burma*, Ba Maw writes that Aung San, despite his original misgivings about the Japanese, had by 1943 begun to absorb Japanese militarist values, asserting that the commander of the armed forces had the right to deal directly with the head of state, rather than through the cabinet. He also resented being called as a witness in a court case, saying that it was demeaning to the army. Ba Maw warned the young leader, 'Do not let such thoughts [Japanese victories in the war] make you too Japanese in the wrong things. Remember that the army belongs to the state, and not the state to the army.'<sup>43</sup> Aung San seems to have taken this lesson to heart, since after the war he frequently emphasized that the army must serve the

people, rather than the other way around.<sup>44</sup> But he was assassinated by a political rival in July 1947. Burmese often call *Bogyoke* (General) Aung San the ‘father of the Tatmadaw’. After his death, the army’s ‘stepfather’, Ne Win, had rather different ideas.

In terms of personnel, the new Burma Army established by the British after their reoccupation of the country in 1945 was an unstable joining together of two antagonistic groups: BNA/PBF veterans, mostly Burmans, and ethnic minority ‘class units’ which had remained loyal to the Allies. A Karen, General Smith Dun, was appointed commander-in-chief. Ethnic minority soldiers outnumbered the Burman contingent, but the ethnic and communist revolts of 1948–1949 caused many minority troops to mutiny. Others were purged from the ranks. Smith Dun retired, to be replaced by Ne Win as supreme commander. From that time on, Ne Win and his close cronies from the wartime era dominated the military, and after 1962 the Army-State.

Ba Maw argues that Suzuki and Aung San’s decision to recruit the Thirty Comrades from among a single faction of the Thakin Party rather than a plurality of factions aggravated the personalistic and factional nature of Burmese politics.<sup>45</sup> In fact, few of the Thirty Comrades had a role in the post-war state, especially the post-1962 Army-State. The most important legacy of Ne Win’s rise to military prominence during the war was his establishment of a traditional Burmese-style personal dictatorship, centred on himself, in which he quite consciously assumed the role of king.

The Japanese did not build the Army-State that rules Burma today. But in promoting the rise of a Burman military largely independent of civilian authorities, much like their own, they planted seeds that grew during the ensuing post-war years of turmoil. The Japanese and their Burman allies succeeded in driving out the white colonialists, as Hasegawa has argued. But a worldview placing the military at the centre of the political system contributed to the establishing of a ‘post-colonial’ regime that, by the 1960s, was more oppressive than the colonial original. And as Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt, former Prime Minister and head of Military Intelligence, once said: ‘Our Tatmadaw was made in Japan.’<sup>46</sup>

## ETHNIC CONFLICT

The central issue in Burmese politics today is not the well-publicized battle of wills between Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the military junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), but how centuries of hostility between the ethnic minorities and the majority Burmans can be ended, how the different groups can be included in a new national community on the basis of equality. Minority scholars point to the fact that ethnic conflict, though not modern 'ethnic politics', has been going on since the beginning of the country's recorded history: for example, the Burman wars during the eleventh to eighteenth centuries against the Mons, who established sophisticated polities in Lower Burma. They argue that no political arrangement that ignores the aspirations of the minorities, especially in the Frontier or Border Areas, can bring genuine peace.<sup>47</sup>

The view espoused by the Burman military, especially since the establishment of the first Army-State by Ne Win in 1962, is diametrically opposed to this, asserting that although Burma is a multi-ethnic society, the different indigenous groups are fundamentally the same. According to one SPDC commentator, 'We all descended from the Mongolian Tribe and therefore we, the indigenous races, are not aliens but kith and kin.'<sup>48</sup> They claim that the present discord among ethnic groups is due to the colonial-era destruction of a primordial 'national identity'. The British policy of 'divide and rule', set 'kith and kin' against each other. The truth is that the British, determined to transform an unruly, independent kingdom into a pliable, money-making venture, made use of ethnic divisions, but did not invent them. Among the Karens, the old admonition of mothers to their children – 'Eat your rice quickly. The Burmans are coming!' – was not British propaganda, but part of their long history of oppression at Burman hands.

The Japanese interlude made the ethnic situation far worse than it was under British rule, for two reasons. First, the collapse of social order following their invasion set the different groups against each other, especially in Lower Burma. The level of violence

was unprecedented. Secondly, the war put the minorities and the Burmans on different sides, the former largely supporting the British, the latter the Japanese – at least until the uprising of 27 March 1945.

After the British began their retreat from Burma in spring 1942, Karen soldiers serving in their ranks were discharged and went home to their villages, often bringing their arms with them. Because they refused to surrender their guns, they and their families soon became targets of the BIA, especially in the Irrawaddy Delta where a large number of Karens lived. Often, Karens joined forces with local Indians to fight the BIA and other Burmans. To punish Karen guerrillas for the death of one of his officers, Suzuki ordered the BIA to destroy two large Karen villages, killing all the men, women and children with swords. This incident ignited a race war, with more massacres on both sides, before the regular Japanese army could impose order and rein in the hooligan element in the BIA. The worst incidents were in the Myaungmya District south of Bassein in the Irrawaddy Delta, where an estimated 1,800 Karens were killed and 400 of their villages destroyed.<sup>49</sup>

According to Ba Maw, the Karens never forgot these incidents. One Karen leader told him that:

As long as the Burmese [Burman] big race ways towards us do not change ... this rebellion, even if it should be crushed in the end by superior numbers and arms, will go on in the hearts of the Karens, and will break out again and again till the two races part for good.<sup>50</sup>

Most Karens and Karenni, a closely related people living along the Thai-Burma border, remained loyal to the British, carried out underground anti-Japanese operations, and received Allied arms shipments by air. In the last months of the war, Karen and Karenni guerrillas claimed to have killed 12,500 Japanese troops retreating to the Salween River.<sup>51</sup>

According to Ba Maw, ethnic violence in Arakan, western Burma, was even worse than that between Karens and Burmans.

Buddhist Arakanese and mostly Muslim Bengalis attacked each other, and Bengalis crossed over from what was still British territory to help their co-religionists.<sup>52</sup> Today, Karen guerrillas and Arakanese Muslim militants continue to resist the central government in two of the country's most tenacious insurgencies. In these areas of Burma, it is not incorrect to say that World War II continues.

During the opening months of the war, Burman nationalists 'solved' the plural society problem in a Gordian Knot manner. As the British began their retreat, Burman/Burmese mobs attacked Indians in urban and rural areas of Lower Burma, and hundreds of thousands of them left the country, often on foot through the densely jungled Arakan Yoma mountain range.<sup>53</sup> Tens of thousands died on the perilous journey back to their ancestral homelands, and of those who survived, few returned to Burma after the war. Although an Indian (or rather Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi) minority lives in Burma to this day, especially in Rangoon, the war marked the end of their prominent role in the country's multi-ethnic society.<sup>54</sup>

Of all the Frontier Area regions, the Shan States, a rich mosaic of diverse peoples, was the most fortunate. The Japanese prevented the BIA from entering the Shan States in 1942, probably in order to prevent more racial violence. The Shan *sawbwa* (princes) and other local rulers formally recognized Japanese rule. Although the easternmost principalities, Keng Tung and Mongpan, were handed over to Japan's ally, Thailand, the other Shan States became a part of 'independent' Burma in 1943. The rulers retained the autonomy they enjoyed under the British, and the region was spared the worst calamities of the war.

The situation was quite different in other parts of the Frontier Areas, where the Kachins, Chins and Nagas lived. Because the Japanese were unable to impose effective control over these peoples, who traditionally played an important part in the colonial armed forces, the British recruited them for underground operations and the major push against the Japanese in 1944–1945. Formerly remote and isolated, the Kachin districts (now Kachin

State) became a focal point of the Allied effort to recapture Burma. At one point, the airport located in the small town of Myitkyina (now Kachin State's capital) became the world's busiest as men and supplies were brought in for the campaign in Upper Burma.<sup>55</sup> More significantly, a generation of Kachin war veterans began their own resistance against the Rangoon government in the 1960s, establishing one of Burma's best-organized and effective guerrilla movements, the Kachin Independence Army.

Bitter wartime memories on the part of the minorities made post-war reconciliation almost impossible. Aung San, who had become Burma's most popular leader after the 27 March uprising, seems to have understood that national unity without free participation of the minorities was impossible. At the February 1947 Panglong Conference, he and minority leaders (with the prominent exception of the Karens) laid out the contours of a constitutional settlement establishing a quasi-federal structure of government. But as mentioned, Aung San was assassinated in July of that year. His successors, including even the sophisticated and democratically-inclined U Nu, were less sympathetic to the aspirations of the Frontier Area peoples.

The central government's Burman perspective, combined with the systematic 'Burmanisation' of the army in the late 1940s, combined to create a major national tragedy. By the mid-1980s, when Ne Win was still in power, the former Frontier Areas were dominated by a multi-hued array of ethnic, communist and drug-dealing armies, consisting of at least 28 major groups, of whom the largest, the People's Army of the Communist Party of Burma, commanded 15,000 men, mostly ethnic Wa. According to Martin Smith, this civil war cost an average of 10,000 military and civilian deaths a year between the 1950s and the late 1980s.<sup>56</sup> Though the overflow of the Chinese civil war into Shan State after 1949 and the heavy-handedness of post-1948 Burman governments were the major factors in the state's failure to achieve peaceful national unity, this war had its roots in the Japanese occupation.

## BA MAW AND ASIAN 'IDENTITY'

The *Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho* mentions the Greater East Asia Conference of November 1943 as a focal point for Japan's vision for an Asia freed of Western colonialism. In *Breakthrough in Burma*, Ba Maw devotes a whole chapter to this event, claiming that it was the first expression of a new 'Asian' spirit, a sense of Asian unity and shared destiny, which found its post-war expression in the 1955 Bandung Conference of the Afro-Asian Nations and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, or Pancha Sila, which defined 'a new order in Asia'.<sup>57</sup>

It is easy to dismiss the Conference as nothing but empty words and gestures, especially since 'Greater East Asia' leaders who attended included Wang Ch'ing-wei, whose Nanking regime was propped up by Japanese bayonets, and the premier of Manchukuo, the original puppet state carved out of China by the Kwantung Army in 1931–1932.<sup>58</sup> But this propaganda had great appeal, even among Asians otherwise unenthusiastic about Japanese rule. In the words of the Joint Declaration issued at the end of the conference, the countries of 'Greater East Asia' will 'ensure the fraternity of nations in their region by respecting one another's independence and sovereignty'. This *ideological* contribution of the Japanese to 'Asian identity' was especially attractive to indigenous ethnic/religious majorities (Burmans, Malays, Javanese) who had been marginalized by the colonial plural society.

From the perspective of the beginning of the twenty-first century, the competing models of the western colonial order and the Asian regional unity proposed at the Greater East Asia Conference have an interesting resonance. British Burma was not democratic, but it was an economically liberal society in which different social groups could pursue their interests within the framework of law. It was, culturally, in terms of 'identity', a colourless entity, rational and driven by profit, much like the 'globalised' world order promoted today by the United States. It brought great prosperity, but also great inequality and injustice.

Because, as mentioned, the ethnic winners and losers were clearly identifiable, anti-colonial, nationalist movements such as the Thakins took on an intensely racial flavour, especially in regard to 'foreign' Asians such as the Indians. 'Race' was very much part of the 'Greater East Asia' worldview. In Ba Maw's speech at the Conference, he says, 'My Asiatic blood has always called to other Asiatics. In my dreams, both sleeping and waking, I have heard the voice of Asia calling to her children.'<sup>59</sup>

Ba Maw's state was *post-colonial* in the sense that, in principle at least, it promoted independence, sovereignty and an 'authentic' Burman culture. He was quite aware of Japanese motives in granting Burma 'independence' in 1943, but also saw the opportunities it presented for mobilizing the Burman population. Like Ne Win after 1962, the *Adipadi* borrowed the pomp of the old Burmese dynasties to promote national identity and his own legitimacy. He conducted himself, in manner and dress, like one of the old kings. He sponsored one public ceremony in which 'victory soil' was brought from Shwebo in Upper Burma, the town where Alaungpaya established the Konbaung Dynasty (1752–1885), and placed in a Rangoon park.<sup>60</sup> Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, Burma's greatest nationalist writer who drew deeply on the past to inspire the younger generation of Thakins, declared:

I have never been as happy during my long life as now. ...

It makes me happy beyond words to know that the British have been driven out of our country and a great Asian people have come to liberate another Asian people and given us back our ancient heritage, our land and freedom and religion and culture.<sup>61</sup>

The new Burman state was top-down and homogenizing. Its foundations were the 'leadership principle' ('the Japanese believed in the leadership principle and would only deal with us on that basis'), with Ba Maw himself designated *Adipadi* or Head of State in 1943; and the 'concept and technique of total organization in every area', including a single political party, the Dobama Sinyetha Asiyone (later known as the Maha Bama or Greater Burma

Party).<sup>62</sup> Ba Maw described the Maha Bama Party as ‘a common melting pot for the native races of Burma from which will arise the Greater Burma nation. Our past tribal history has closed, tribal accounts are settled, and a new nation and history now begins. In the past, parties overshadowed peoples. Now we are unifying from the right end, from the people.’<sup>63</sup>

This statement points out the problematic nature of sovereignty and independence in the post-war Asian context. The post-colonial order has emphasized the singular autonomy of *the state* as the ultimate expression of *the nation's* ethnic, racial and cultural unity. What this means is that there is often little or no room for groups within society to assert their own autonomy, regardless of whether they are moderate or extreme, representing ethnic, religious or social interests. The intense preoccupation with unity and sovereignty expressed today by the Burmese military junta was anticipated by the paradoxical and privileged status given to these values at the Greater East Asia Conference. In other words, the Conference posed but did not answer the difficult question: ‘independence’ and ‘sovereignty’ *for whom?*

## CONCLUSION: DID THE JAPANESE LIBERATE BURMA?

There is no doubt that the Japanese occupation hastened Burma's departure from the British Empire. Toward the end of the war, the Churchill government published a White Paper proposing that Burma Proper be returned to the pre-war, semi-parliamentary system after a few years of reconstruction, which was intended to benefit British business interests, with the ultimate goal of self-government. The Frontier Areas, however, would determine their own political future, either together or separate from Burma Proper. This was unacceptable to Aung San and his comrades, who wanted speedy independence and the immediate integration of the Frontier Areas with Burma Proper. Faced with the prospect of fighting a well-armed Burmese guerrilla army, Churchill's

successor Clement Attlee gave in to Aung San's demands, and in January 1948 the new Union of Burma was born.

But war is a blunt instrument, and the old political and social order, imperfect as it was, could not be easily replaced. At the beginning of this chapter, I said that the Japanese occupation represented a fundamental turning point in the country's history, simply because after 1941, men with guns rather than politicians or colonial officials dominated the political stage. The war militarized Burma's society, and the impact of this can be seen six decades later in the political and economic *cul de sac* created by the State Peace and Development Council junta. Of course it is also true that Burma suffered the fate of being propelled directly from the Pacific War right into the Cold War, with the 1948 Communist Party of Burma uprising and large-scale Kuomintang incursions into Shan State in 1950.

One of the best sources on wartime Burma remains Dorothy Guyot's Ph.D. thesis, *The Political Impact of the Japanese Occupation of Burma*. She describes the impact of the Japanese interlude in terms of the realization of aspirations for independence, the sidelining of colonial era élites (including pre-war politicians and civil servants), the political mobilization of the masses, and perhaps most significantly, the 'glorification of violence during the war'.<sup>64</sup> The occupation made possible the emergence of a new modern élite, centred on the Thakins and others who participated in the anti-Japanese resistance. But the militarization and politicization of Burmese society did not create circumstances in which modern (or democratic) political institutions could flourish: even after the war, 'violence and destruction were forms of activity highly acceptable to young Burmese, and open to all who were so inclined. It was much more satisfying and less personally demanding than the humdrum chores mapped out by the élite for the reconstruction of society.'<sup>65</sup>

Guyot's thesis was completed in 1966, and from the perspective of the early twenty-first century we can see that the Burmese élite's antidote for anarchy and violence has been the imposition of an oppressive, homogenizing Army-State, itself a more terrible

instrument of violence than the insurgent bands or ethnic minority insurgents who have roamed the countryside since the 1940s. Political development has not occurred, a constructive and non-coercive political order has not been achieved. In other words, the war and Japanese occupation laid the foundations for the establishment of an Army, and possibly a State (after 1962, an Army-State), but *not* a Nation.

The fundamental issue in nation-building is sovereignty. But sovereignty is not simply the replacement of white faces by brown ones at the apex of the state, the substitution of one ethnic-racial élite by another. Pan-Asianism (in Ba Maw's words, 'I have heard the voice of Asia calling to her children') has proven to be an empty promise, not only in Burma but elsewhere in Asia, little more than a new twist on colonialism.<sup>66</sup> What sovereignty means is that the different peoples who come together as a nation can develop freely, using their own resources and initiatives as well as those from the outside world, to create a national community that has its own vitality and integrity.<sup>67</sup> As Furnivall suggested, what is needed is a sense of the public interest, of shared citizenship, a 'self to govern itself'.

This requires genuine independence, for if a country becomes the plaything of others in their global strategies, not only do the indigenous people lose control of their politics and economies. They are also deprived of the institutions and practices that have sustained them in the past, without being able to develop viable new ones. Burma's great tragedy is that, because of its geographic location, it was the object of empire-building and top-down social experimentation during both the British colonial and Japanese periods. After the war, it became a lamentable side-show in China's internal political struggles, and arguably today has become, under the auspices of the SPDC junta, a satellite of a Middle Kingdom eager to project its power into the Indian Ocean. The Army-State created by the Burmans was meant to secure the country's sovereignty and independence, but its ethnocentrism has led to protracted civil war and a sell-out to foreign interests. Genuine national unity remains elusive.

Against this background, the question – did the Japanese liberate Burma from colonial rule? – becomes irrelevant, since Burma remains hostage to its own history of ethnic confrontation and the manipulations of its neighbours. True national liberation, *internal* liberation, has not been achieved.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho [New History Textbook]* (2001: 280–281). Both the first and second editions of the middle school textbook, the latter appearing in 2005, have aroused domestic and international criticism for their alleged whitewash of Japan's wartime actions.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.
- <sup>3</sup> Hasegawa (1984: 34, 35).
- <sup>4</sup> Hayashi (2001: 9–32).
- <sup>5</sup> Hasegawa (1984: 34, 35).
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.
- <sup>7</sup> In 1995, when I was living in Malaysia, I noticed that the significance of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war's end was generally felt rather differently by people of Chinese, Indian and Malay descent, due to divergent wartime memories.
- <sup>8</sup> McCrae (1990: 76).
- <sup>9</sup> The 1935 Government of Burma Act separated Burma administratively from India. It established a bicameral legislature, which like the British parliament chose a prime minister. Most legislators were elected from territorial constituencies, others reserved for minority communities and special interests. The governor, appointed by London, had sole authority over matters relating to defence, finances, foreign relations and the Frontier Areas.
- <sup>10</sup> *Thakin* in Burmese means 'master', and Burmese were expected to use it when addressing the British (like *sahib* in India). That young Burmese used the term to refer to themselves had subversive meanings for the colonial regime.
- <sup>11</sup> See Guyot (1966: 14, 15) for a list of *Nagani* books by subject matter: eight of a total of 57 dealt with Russia and Marxism, but six each dealt with China and Ireland.

- <sup>12</sup> Furnivall (1948: 149).
- <sup>13</sup> Pearn (1939: 287); Saitō and Lee (1999: 15).
- <sup>14</sup> Furnivall (1948: 111).
- <sup>15</sup> On 13 April 1919, troops commanded by Brigadier General Reginald Dyer fired at a crowd of peaceful demonstrators in Amritsar, India, killing hundreds; Dyer was never punished, which turned informed Indian public opinion against British rule. See Keay (2000: 475–477).
- <sup>16</sup> Hall (1960: 172).
- <sup>17</sup> Ba Maw (1968: 156).
- <sup>18</sup> One of the engines used on the Thai–Burma Railway is exhibited outside the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, a controversial site strongly associated with pre-1945 Japanese militarism.
- <sup>19</sup> Seekins (1992: 246–62).
- <sup>20</sup> ‘Japanese military totalitarianism could be successfully countered only by our own form of totalitarianism.’ Ba Maw (1968: 319).
- <sup>21</sup> See Guyot (1966: 174–185) and Government of Burma (1943: 1–14).
- <sup>22</sup> Guyot (1966: 239–245). ‘Bureaucrats knew full well they were powerless against the Japanese Army’ (245).
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 172, 177, 183.
- <sup>24</sup> ‘By not joining in the resistance civil servants lost their last, best chance to prove their nationalist bona fides’ (*Ibid.*, 401).
- <sup>25</sup> Hall (1960: 167).
- <sup>26</sup> Ba Maw (1968: 62–64, 110–13).
- <sup>27</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi (1991: 17).
- <sup>28</sup> Izumiya (1985: 23).
- <sup>29</sup> Aung San in Silverstein (1993: 83).
- <sup>30</sup> Ba Maw (1968: 119–125).
- <sup>31</sup> Aung San in Silverstein (1993: 83).
- <sup>32</sup> Lintner (1999: 527–529).
- <sup>33</sup> Yoon (1973: 31).
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* (1973: 2).

- <sup>35</sup> Yoon (1973: 44–46); Ba Maw (1968: 93, 94, 139). The comrades in arms of Burma’s old kings customarily took part in this *pacto de sangre*.
- <sup>36</sup> Government of Burma (1943: 59).
- <sup>37</sup> Thakin Nu (U Nu) (1954: 24, 25).
- <sup>38</sup> Government of Burma (1943: 59, 60); U Maung Maung (1989: 45).
- <sup>39</sup> U Maung Maung (1989: 84, 85).
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.
- <sup>41</sup> As described by Johnson (1962: 55, 56).
- <sup>42</sup> According to informants who spoke to this writer in Rangoon in March 2004, Ne Win changed the name of Resistance Day to Armed Forces Day in order to avoid offending Japan, Burma’s largest aid donor.
- <sup>43</sup> Ba Maw (1968: 269, 270).
- <sup>44</sup> See, for example, Aung San’s article, ‘Burma’s challenge’, saying that ‘pocket armies will not be permitted,’ in Silverstein (1993: 156).
- <sup>45</sup> Ba Maw (1968: 130).
- <sup>46</sup> Houtman (1999: 153).
- <sup>47</sup> See, for example, Chao-Tzang Yawngghwe, ‘Burma: the Depoliticization of the Political’, in Alagappah (1995: 170–192).
- <sup>48</sup> Hla Myint (1997: 141).
- <sup>49</sup> Smith (1999: 62, 63).
- <sup>50</sup> Ba Maw (1968: 195).
- <sup>51</sup> Smith (1999: 63).
- <sup>52</sup> Ba Maw (1968: 203–259).
- <sup>53</sup> According to Bayly and Harper (2005: 167), 600,000 Indians, Anglo-Indians and Anglo-Burmese fled by land and sea to India, of whom as many as 80,000 died. Ba Maw (1968: 200) mentions that about 500,000 Indians fled Burma in 1942.
- <sup>54</sup> Government of Burma (1943: 23, 24).
- <sup>55</sup> Smith (1999: 63). The Kachins won the name ‘amiable assassins’ from their admiring British comrades.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 100–101.
- <sup>57</sup> Ba Maw (1968: 336, 339).

- <sup>58</sup> Other participants were Jose Laurel, president of the ‘independent’ Philippines, Subhas Chandra Bose, leader of the Free India government, Thai prince Waithayakorn, Premier Tōjō Hideki, who served as chairman, and Ba Maw himself. See Ba Maw (1968: 336–47) for a detailed description of personalities and speeches.
- <sup>59</sup> Ba Maw (1968: 343).
- <sup>60</sup> U Maung Maung (1989: 81).
- <sup>61</sup> Ba Maw (1968: 284).
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 279–281.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 279, 280.
- <sup>64</sup> Guyot (1966: 399–417).
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 415, 416.
- <sup>66</sup> For example, in Aceh in western Sumatra, where the people have fought for their independence against the Indonesian Republic just as they fought against the Dutch a hundred years ago.
- <sup>67</sup> At the February 1947 Panglong Conference, Aung San seems to have understood this concept of sovereignty through his recognition of minority aspirations. But his military successors have viewed sovereignty and national unity as top-down and homogenizing.