Burma in Revolt

Opium and Insurgency Since 1948

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Author's Note

The annual production of opium in the Burmese sector of the Golden Triangle totalled some thirty tons when Burma became independent from Britain in 1948. The country was then a promising young democracy with a bustling free-market economy. The living standard was one of the highest in Asia and the level of education far surpassed that of its then backward neighbours such as Thailand.

Forty years later, Burma was listed as one of the poorest nations in the world; in October 1987 the government in Rangoon even had to apply for Least Developed Country status with the United Nations. Higher education lags far behind even Bangladesh to the west, and all universities and colleges have in any case been closed most of the time since June 1988 (as well as being closed, off and on, in the 1960s and 1970s). Even more startlingly, according to American estimates, the 1992–1993 harvesting season yielded at least 2,575 tons of raw opium, an 8,000% increase since 1948.

Insurgencies in Thailand and Malaysia, which at one time threatened to overthrow the regimes in those countries, have been resolved by a combination of military pressure, political concessions and economic incentives. In Burma, the conflict between the central government in Rangoon and the country's many ethnic minorities entered its 47th year in 1994 with no end in sight. The government has over the past four years struck a number of cease-fire agreements with some of the major groups which has reduced the scale of the fighting, but the ethnic rebels have not been offered any political concessions. According to the terms of these cease-fires, the insurgents have also been allowed to retain their arms and control over their respective areas; the ethnic problem has been frozen rather than solved. Burma today has at least 50,000 armed rebels and ex-rebels who are not under any central governmental control.

While other countries in the region are developing into freer, more open societies, once-democratic Burma has been ruled by a military dictatorship since 1962.

The complex nexus between the drug problem, military rule and Burma's civil war has hardly been considered when international narcotics agencies have discussed the drug problem in the Golden Triangle. The emphasis has been on showcase "crop substitution programmes" (UN agencies) or

support for the military government's supposed "campaigns against drugs" (the US Drug Enforcement Administration).

Two US researchers, Alfred W. McCoy and Alan A. Block, have aptly pointed out that the failure of Western drug policy is due mainly to a fundamentally wrong approach: "treating global narcotics trafficking as if it were a localised vice such as pornography or prostitution". Consequently, millions of dollars have been wasted on largely meaningless projects, while the opium production is increasing steadily, year by year—and almost no attempts have been made to address the underlying historical, social and economic factors behind the drug explosion in areas such as the Golden Triangle.

The aim of this book is to explain how Burma's booming drug production, insurgency and counter-insurgency interrelate—and why the country has been unable to shake off thirty years of military rule and build a modern, democratic society. Burma's ethnic strife is not a peripheral problem confined to the country's border areas: it is a central issue. Without a lasting solution to the ethnic question and the civil war, Burma will remain a source of political despair—and drugs from its sector of the Golden Triangle will continue to flood the markets of the world.

Introduction and Acknowledgements

I made my first clandestine journey into rebel-held areas of Burma in January 1981. Carrying a knapsack on my back, I caught a bus from Bangkok's Southern Bus Terminal and travelled out 120 kilometres west to Kanchanaburi on the River Kwai, where Allied prisoners built the fabled bridge during World War II. That was as far as public transport went at that time.

After spending a night in a rat-infested hotel near the market in Kanchanaburi, I boarded a Land-Rover, named rather grandly "the Land Tour Company", and began a gruelling, ten-hour journey along a narrow, winding dirt road through dense forest towards Sangkhlaburi, 225 kilometres further up the river. Sangkhlaburi in those days was a pleasant, picturesque town, located amidst the jungles surrounding the upper reaches of the River Kwai. It consisted of half a dozen rows of wooden shophouses and a truck stop, where vehicles of World War II vintage gathered in the morning. But the main landmark was an impressive wooden structure spanning the river, which resembled a mini replica of the Golden Gate Bridge.

My goal was a trim Baptist Mission compound on the opposite bank of the Kwai. I arrived there exhausted in the late afternoon, and looked up my only contact, given by some friends in Bangkok: Benny Htoo, a former police officer from Burma who in 1949 had joined the rebellion of the ethnic Karen minority to which he belonged. He had fought for several years with the forces of the Karen National Union (KNU) in the hills of Burma, and later retired with his wife, children, grandchildren and a number of other relatives to a house adjoining the missionary hospital in Sangkhlaburi.

At first I had some difficulty locating where he lived, but while walking along a dusty path, I caught sight of an elderly gentleman trimming his hedge. He appeared educated and I politely asked him in English for directions. He lowered his secateurs and replied in flawless Queen's English: "Ah, young man, are you looking for Benny's? That's right over there." He pointed towards a brown-stained house down the village road.

The man at the hedge, I later learned, was Saw Henson Kya Doe, a Sandhurst-trained former brigadier-general of the Burma Army. He had gone underground in the late 1960s to fight against the military government in Rangoon and later settled in Sangkhlaburi.

I met Benny, a jovial and extremely hospitable man in his sixties, and stayed in his house overnight. Early the next morning, I started walking along a dusty path through the jungle towards my final destination: Three Pagodas Pass on the Thai-Burma border. It took me all morning to cover the last twenty-five kilometres up to the pass. Following a rutted dirt-track through the jungle, I laboured under the blazing sun, passing only a few, tiny villages of bamboo huts along the way. When I finally spotted the three small white pagodas—which have given the pass its name—in a glade in the forest, I was met by two young, tough-looking guerrillas riding bareback together on a pony.

Noticing their automatic weapons, I thought it prudent to stop. They spoke a language I had never heard before, but from the tone of their voices I gathered they wanted to know who I was and where I was heading. Feebly, I replied: "Yoo Shoo, Saw Yoo Shoo," the contact name Benny had given me. I was promptly escorted by two other armed guards to Yoo Sho's bamboo house.

My new host turned out to be a former Union Military Police officer. He had disappeared into the jungle to join the KNU when the Karen uprising broke out in 1949, never to return to "civilisation" again. Together with his wife Elsie (who died of cancer a few years later) he made my stay at Three Pagodas Pass both pleasant and educational. From him I received my first introduction to Burma's decades-long civil war, its tragedies as well as its complexities.

Later, from my base in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, I made many more illegal trips across the border into rebel-held areas of eastern Burma. In April 1981, I spent almost a month with Shan guerrillas in the hills across the border from Mae Hong Son in northwestern Thailand. This was when I met Hseng Noung, the woman guerrilla soldier who later, in 1983, became my wife. Together, we visited practically every other ethnic rebel army in Burma that was based within reach of the Thai border: the Karennis, the Pa-Os, the Mons, the Was and the Lahus.

We also travelled to the Bangladesh-Burma border in early 1984 to look into the Muslim question in Arakan. At that time, very few journalists were paying much attention to the seemingly bizarre, Burmese sideshow. People perceived events in Cambodia, Vietnam and even Laos and Thailand as far more important.

Hardly anyone else, apart from the magazine I had begun writing for in 1982, the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, was interested when in March 1985 my wife and I left Bangkok for India to embark on our most challenging trek thus far: to cross the ethnic guerrilla areas of northern Burma, from the wild Naga Hills to Kachin State in the northernmost corner of Burma, and on to the communist-controlled territory adjacent to the Chinese frontier in the northeast. Somehow, we succeeded. During our eighteen-month jour-

ney on foot, and by elephant, mule, bicycle and river boat, we covered 2,275 kilometres through some of the most remote and least accessible parts of the country.

We became the first journalists to reach areas controlled by the Kachin Independence Army in the far north and the then-powerful Communist Party of Burma in northeastern Shan State. We emerged through Sipsongpanna in southern China in April 1987, and returned to Bangkok to do our stories and to write *Land of Jade*, a book about our experiences in the insurgent-held north of Burma.

Not long afterwards, central Burma erupted. Hundreds of thousands of people in towns and even villages across the country took to the streets to vent years of pent-up frustration with a xenophobic military regime which had turned what was once Southeast Asia's richest country into an economic and political wreck. The uprising was drenched in blood. Thousands of men, women and children were gunned down in Rangoon and elsewhere as the army sprayed automatic rifle-fire into crowds of unarmed demonstrators. The present regime, the State Law and Order Restoration Council, assumed power.

I chronicled these dramatic events in *Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy*, which is based mainly on interviews with people who participated in the Burmese pro-democracy movement of 1988–89. Forgotten Burma was suddenly back on the map again. Even the minority issue received the attention it deserved when, in the wake of the massacre in Rangoon, pro-democracy activists from the urban areas arrived in rebel-held territory along the Thai border.

It was then that I decided to write this book about Burma's civil war, to put the fighting into a historical perspective and to do my best to rectify many of the myths and misconceptions which surround the decades-long conflict. I wanted to explain why once prosperous Burma had fallen into social, political and economic ruin, and why it had become the world's biggest producer of heroin.

Again, as with *Outrage*, I decided to base this book on interviews with people who had participated in the movement rather than rely on largely inaccurate newspaper reports. I had already collected thousands of pages of notes during my many trips to the Thai border and our long trek through the north. I supplemented these with more interviews in 1991, 1992 and 1993 in Thailand, China, the US, Bangladesh and India. Rebels and former rebels were more than willing to cooperate with me, and they often went out of their way to collect the information I requested, or to introduce me to other veterans of the civil war.

It was a far more difficult task to get Rangoon's side of the story. Burma's military government remains one of the most reclusive regimes in the world, and although I did manage to visit Rangoon twice in 1989 (I had

previously visited the country legally in 1977, 1979 and 1981), my repeated visa applications since then have been routinely rejected, or simply not answered. Fortunately, I was able to meet in Bangkok a number of retired Burma Army officers who had taken part in counter-insurgency operations in the northeast of the country and against the Karens on the Thai border. Otherwise, I have had to rely on official Burmese publications and newspapers for the Burma Army's version of events.

Since Burma's civil war may be one of the most confusing issues in Asia today, with its many armed groups, factions and fronts, I have added four appendices which I hope will serve as useful references for journalists, scholars and diplomats alike: a chronology; a reasonably complete list of rebel groups; biographies of major leaders of the insurgency; and a list of independent Burma's founding fathers, the legendary Thirty Comrades, and their fates.

This book would not have been possible without my patient wife, Hseng Noung, who helped me interpret numerous interviews and translate documents from the original Burmese into English. David Steinberg of Georgetown University, Josef Silverstein of Rutgers University, Alfred McCoy of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Mary Kay Magistad of National Public Radio and the *Washington Post*, Robert Karniol of *Jane's Defence Weekly* and my old friend Chao Tzang Yawnghwe, who read parts of both the early draft and the finished manuscript, offered helpful criticisms. I am also grateful to Pippa Curwen for proofreading the text and tidying up my English, and to the Open Society Institute in New York for financing the production of this book. But, above all, I wish to thank the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for providing a research grant, which enabled me to take time off from my regular work as a journalist to write this book.

Bertil Lintner
Bangkok

Prologue: Murder in the Secretariat

On the morning of 19 July 1947 a green-painted army jeep came speeding through the streets of Rangoon. Its occupants were dressed in military fatigues and were brandishing tommy-guns and other semi-automatic weapons. No one paid much attention to them; World War II had just ended and military-looking people were no strange sight in the Burmese capital.

The jeep stopped outside the Secretariat, a Victorian-style, redbrick building in central Rangoon. Security was tight, as the Governor's Executive Council, the pre-independence *de facto* Burmese cabinet led by Aung San, was in session. Aung San, the architect of Burma's imminent freedom from British colonial rule, had been warned that his life might be in danger, but somehow the gunmen aroused no suspicion as they drove through the central porchway and entered the Secretariat complex.

The hitmen, guns in hand, jumped out of the jeep and half-ran towards the main building. They hurried upstairs and on reaching the room where the cabinet was meeting, they pointed their guns at the assembled ministers, shouting: "Remain seated! Don't move!" Aung San rose to his feet—and the men opened fire. The shooting continued for about thirty seconds, and the uniformed men left the building, jumped into their jeep outside and accelerated away.

It was 10:37 A.M. Other people in the Secretariat were soon jostling in through the open doorway. The pungent smell of carbide and fumes of heavy smoke filled the room. Tables and chairs were overturned and soiled with blood. Nine bullet-ridden bodies lay on the floor: Aung San; his close friend and erstwhile student leader Thakin Mya; Ba Choe, the former editor of the nationalist *Deedok* journal and now a prominent statesman; Razak, a Muslim school principal and politician; Aung San's elder brother Ba Win; Mahn Ba Khaing, one of the few ethnic Karens to have participated in mainstream Burmese politics; and Sao Sam Htun, the *saohpa*, or prince of the Shan State of Möng Pawn, who had taken part in the efforts to amalgamate the minority-inhabited frontier areas with Burma proper. There was also Ohn Maung, a deputy secretary of the Ministry of Transport, who

had entered the conference room to submit a report when the assassins struck, and Ko Htwe, Razak's eighteen-year-old bodyguard.

The nation was plunged into grief. Its most competent leaders, who had been preparing to take over Burma after the British, were dead before the country had even become independent. Aung San, the national hero, the *Bogyoke* or General, was only thirty-two and left behind his wife, Khin Kyi, and three small children: two sons and a two-year-old daughter.

On the same day, the Rangoon police arrested U Saw, a right-wing politician who had been Aung San's main rival for the premiership of independent Burma, and charged him with murder. U Saw was convicted and hanged in May 1948.

U Nu, the deputy leader of Burma's main political party at that time, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League—which had been founded by Aung San shortly after World War II—took over as prime minister. He was a devout Buddhist and an outstanding intellectual, but hardly the strong leader Burma needed during its first, difficult years of independence.

The full impact of Aung San's assassination was not truly fathomed until many years later. Despite his youth, he was already a veteran of Burma's struggle for independence. In 1936, he had been the key leader of a student strike at Rangoon University, participated in the formation of the *Dohbama Asiayone*—Burma's most intensely nationalistic organisation prior to World War II—and linked up the movement with workers in the oil fields and peasants in the countryside. He had left secretly for Tokyo in 1940 and returned to Burma to gather recruits for military training in Japan. The group, known as the "Thirty Comrades", set up the Burma Independence Army in Bangkok on 26 December 1941 and entered Burma with the Japanese soon afterwards.

He later turned against the Japanese and contacted the Allies, and when the Japanese were forced out in May 1945, Aung San had become Burma's national hero. The Thirty Comrades came to occupy an almost mythical role in modern Burmese history; they were the fathers of Burma's independence as well as its armed forces.

On 12 February 1947, five months before his assassination, Aung San had signed an agreement with leaders of the Shan, Kachin and Chin ethnic minorities in the market town of Panglong in the Shan states, paving the way for the proposed Union of Burma under a federal constitution. The ethnic minorities in Burma's frontier areas were traditionally deeply distrustful of the Burmans in the central plains, and many were downright worried that they would come under Burman domination when the British withdrew.

Some minorities, notably the Karens, did not even participate in the Panglong Conference, but they had their own legal, political organisation, the Karen National Union, and informal negotiations were in progress in Rangoon.

In the mainstream political arena, the situation was also extremely volatile in the late 1940s. The well-organised Communist Party of Burma (CPB) had played an important role in the anti-Japanese struggle and emerged from the war as one of the country's most powerful political organisations.

Against the Communists stood the Socialists, who in a Burmese context were more right-wing than most other political groups during the post-World War II era. Despite their name, the Socialists were a well-organised, non-communist grouping that competed with the CPB for control over the workers and the peasants and their organisations.

But Aung San's position was unique even in this field. He happened to be the brother-in-law of the CPB leader, Thakin Than Tun, and enjoyed at the same time an excellent relationship with Socialist stalwart Kyaw Nyein, with whom he had served on the same executive committee of the Rangoon University Students' Union in the 1930s.

With Aung San as a neutralising factor gone from the political scene, the confrontation between the Communists and the Socialists escalated, and the minorities lost perhaps the only Burman political leader they had ever trusted. Independence finally came at the auspicious hour of 4:20 A.M. on 4 January 1948; the timing had been carefully selected by Burma's astrologers, whom even the Western-educated political leaders often consulted. The Union Jack was lowered and the last British soldier marched past, accompanied by a military band playing "Auld Lang Syne".

As no single person any longer enjoyed the respect and undisputed loyalty given to Aung San among the rank and file as well as the officer corps of the armed forces, power struggles ensued. By mid-1948, most units had mutinied and turned their guns against the government in Rangoon. The Communists also went into armed rebellion—and were followed by the Karens, the Mons, the Karennis and some other ethnic minorities who resorted to armed struggle, demanding independence or autonomy for their respective areas. The disintegration of Burma had begun.

1

"The Rangoon Government"

On 2 April 1948, the sound of gunfire broke the bucolic peace of Paukkongyi, a tiny village near Pegu in the central Burmese dry zone. A Burma Army patrol had discovered that a group of Communists, who had just escaped a crackdown on their movement in Rangoon, were hiding out in the village. Armed with pistols and shotguns, they fought back when the government troops launched an attack. The gun battle lasted for about an hour, before the poorly armed Communists beat a retreat into the forested hills southwest of Paukkongyi. The first regular battle in Burma's decades-long civil war had taken place.

The Communist Party of Burma (CPB) had operated openly until 28 March of that year. Its headquarters had been located in a two-storey, white-plastered brick building at 138 Bagaya Street in Kemmendine, a relatively plush Rangoon suburb. Previously a pawn shop owned by a Chinese merchant, the house had been acquired by the CPB shortly after the Japanese withdrawal from Rangoon in May 1945. A big room downstairs housed the CPB's printing press and the editorial office of its *Communist Daily* newspaper, the theoretical journal *Pyithu Ana* "People's Power" and other party publications.

The central committee and the politburo had met almost daily in a meeting hall upstairs, where the party's second congress had been held in July 1945. Revolutionary posters adorned the walls and there was always febrile activity as party members came and went. Youthful Red Guards in semi-military fatigues, sporting caps with a red star and arm bands with the hammer and the sickle, guarded the premises. These Red Guards were mostly young Communists who had served with Aung San's militia, the People's Volunteer Organisation, prior to the CPB's expulsion in October 1946 from the national front, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL).

The party leaders were all relatively young men in their late twenties or early thirties. Most of them had been student activists in the turbulent 1930s,

when the *Dohbama Asiayone* dominated Burmese politics. Some had fought against the Japanese during the war. One of them was Thakin Than Tun, a short, burly schoolteacher from Pyinmana, a dusty town on the Rangoon–Mandalay railway in the central plains. He became the general secretary of the party and later led it underground. Thakin Than Tun was married to Daw Khin Khin Kyi, the sister of Aung San's wife, Daw Khin Kyi. He had a reputation for being honest, forthright and uncompromising.

The party's main theoretician at this time was Hamendranath Ghoshal, a Burma-born, upper-caste Bengali Brahmin. His father had moved to Burma in the wake of the British crackdown on the so-called "terrorist movement" of militant nationalists in his native Calcutta at the turn of the century.[1] One of the original founders of the party, Ghoshal and five other young activists had first met in a small flat in Rangoon's Barr Street on 15 August 1939 to set up the CPB.

Present at that time, and still active in the 1940s, was also Thakin Thein Pe. He had served as councillor for agriculture and rural economy or, in effect, minister in Aung San's pre-independence cabinet from September to October 1946, the highest post ever held by a Communist in the British Empire. Thakin Thein Pe was a good-looking, bespectacled intellectual who charmed most women he met.

This was a quality he shared with Thakin Soe, Burma's most radical Communist. Soe had been expelled from the CPB in early 1946 and set up his own Communist Party (Red Flag). He subsequently went underground in Dedaye north of Thegon in the Irrawaddy delta region, where he had fought against the Japanese during World War II. His small squads of men, mostly old followers from the anti-Japanese struggle, who were armed with weapons left over from the war, were already carrying out small-scale guerrilla attacks in the countryside by the end of 1946.

Thakin Soe, a cheerful, stout-bodied Mon from the Moulmein area in the southeast, was an excellent classical singer and violinist. He had worked for the Burmah Oil Company at Syriam, across the river from Rangoon, for fourteen years before becoming an armed revolutionary in 1946.

One of the most serious of the young Communists in Bagaya Street in the late 1940s was Thakin Ba Thein Tin, the 34-year-old, stoney-faced son of a petty Chinese trader from Tavoy and an ethnic Burmese mother. An avid reader of Marxist classics, and well-versed in European literature as well, he had joined the party shortly after the first meeting in 1939. When the widely respected student leader and trade unionist Thakin Ba Hein had died from malaria at the age of thirty-three in November 1946, Ba Thein Tin was elected to the three-man politburo, which also included Thakin Than Tun and Ghoshal.

"At first, we had no weapons there," says Khin Maung Gyi, then a twenty-year-old student activist and party member. "But as the situation

became more tense in late 1947, we stocked the office with tommy-guns and Canadian-made .38 revolvers."[2]

The government became increasingly nervous as Communist-inspired labour unrest proceeded to shake Burma in February 1948. A strike at the Burmah Oil Company had led to clerks and office workers in Rangoon walking out as well. Thakin Than Tun, Thakin Ba Thein Tin, Ba Hein's widow, Khin Gyi, and a few other CPB leaders had just attended the 2nd Congress of the Communist Party of India and a youth conference in Calcutta. The CPI congress in particular had advocated a more militant line than before.

In India, a rural rebellion had broken out in Telengana in Hyderabad State in 1946 and was still continuing when the Calcutta meetings were held. When the CPB delegates returned to Burma in mid-March, a massive peasant rally was organised in Pyinmana. A crowd of more than 70,000 people listened to speeches by Thakin Than Tun and passed resolutions supporting the strikes in Rangoon.

On 12 March militant Socialists, staunch opponents of the CPB, gathered at Bandoola Park near the City Hall in central Rangoon. Speakers at the public meeting made impassioned appeals, urging the people to attack newspapers which they considered pro-communist and therefore, in their view, anti-national. Crowds armed with daggers, cudgels and axes stormed into the editorial offices of the *Pyithu Hittaing* ("People's Forum"), run by *Journalgyaw* Ma Ma Lay, the widow of a well-respected Burmese newspaperman, *Journalgyaw* Chit Maung.

The offices of *Oway* and the *Seepwayey* ("The Economist") were also ransacked by angry mobs. Communist leader Thakin Than Tun had already told his opponents in no uncertain terms what would happen if the Socialists came close to his headquarters: "If they dare to come and attack us, we shall fill the Bagaya Chauk [a small gully near their party headquarters] with the bones of the Socialists."[3] He also openly challenged the prime minister himself, branding him a "fascist" and adding: "Thakin Nu wants to live in peace. So let us send him to the most peaceful place." In a Burmese context, this meant the grave.[4]

The country was in turmoil, and finally, on 25 March, Prime Minister U Nu ordered the arrest of the increasingly troublesome Thakin Than Tun. Perhaps predictably, the Communist leader reacted with defiance. On the day of his supposed arrest, he addressed a 3,000-strong crowd of workers in central Rangoon.

Two days later, U Nu issued an ultimatum to the CPB:

> We have waited till now before taking action under the law, but our patience is about to end. As the threat is that the Communists will resist by force the application of law to the strikers ... [we must] prevent with our lives the possibility of a civil war [and seek] a union of the progressive elements in the

> country and form a united front with a united programme .... This ... has been accepted by the AFPFL as well as by the Socialist Party and we communicated the proposals to the CPB. A reply is due at 4 P.M. today.[5]

When no response was forthcoming from the Communists, U Nu instructed his powerful home minister, Socialist leader Kyaw Nyein, to raid the CPB's headquarters in Bagaya Street.

On the morning of the 28th, the atmosphere was ominous. The CPB had learned about the order in advance through their own people in the Home Ministry.

"Usually a car would come and pick us up at our homes to take us to our party headquarters," recalls politburo member Thakin Ba Thein Tin. "But that morning no one came. We waited until 10 A.M. and then sent a young party member to find out what was going on. He returned, telling us that the police had raided our headquarters. Our driver had escaped."

At 11:30 A.M., the politburo issued instructions to all party leaders to leave Rangoon as soon as possible and move to rural areas, where armed struggle was to be organised. This decision to go underground was far more serious than that taken by Thakin Soe and his Red Flag radicals two years earlier, which had led to only a few skirmishes with the police. The CPB was one of the most powerful political organisations in Burma at that time. Now, it was civil war.

According to Thakin Ba Thein Tin, not everyone in the party's top leadership supported the move. Ghoshal, whose main political constituency was the mostly Indian proletariat in Rangoon, had been the mastermind behind the strikes in February, and he wanted to continue the urban struggle. On the other hand, Than Tun and Ba Thein Tin, who had just returned from India and were inspired by the Telengana example, advocated armed struggle in the rural areas.[6]

While many cadres immediately heeded the order issued on the 28th, several CPB leaders remained in hiding in Rangoon, moving from safe house to safe house to evade arrest. But one by one, the members of the central committee also slipped out of Rangoon. Thakin Than Tun went in disguise by train, protected by sympathetic railway workers. Thakin Ba Thein Tin left by car and Ghoshal simply caught the bus to Toungoo. It was mid-April and *Thingyan*, the yearly water festival, was being celebrated throughout the country. The CPB leaders took advantage of the usual chaos and confusion surrounding the festivities.

By the end of April, all central committee members had managed to escape from Rangoon. Although more than 300 party members and organisers had been apprehended by the police during the sweeps in late March and early April, only one member of the central committee, Red Guard leader Thein Dan, was arrested.

The top leadership was assembled again in May in Kyaukgyi-pauk near Toungoo, a town on the main railway line from Rangoon to Mandalay. The decision to resort to armed struggle was accepted and Ghoshal pledged to follow the majority line. A central military commission for the "People's Liberation Army of Burma" was formed and various strategies discussed. There were plenty of arms in the countryside, left over from World War II, and the CPB already had a strong support base in the Pyinmana area, to where the leaders moved shortly after the Kyaukgyi-pauk meeting.

Ye Tun was a CPB organiser in Pyinmana in the 1940s. The area had been dominated since pre-war days by powerful landlords, and the party had mobilised thousands of landless peasants to refuse to pay rent to the landowners: "Party members and farmers also used to enter the fields in large numbers, armed with ploughs. There were many fields where the peasants paid no rent, and therefore it was not legal to grow anything there. But our party workers and the peasants would quickly plough the field and plant seedlings. Once planted, the police did not dare to take the seedlings away. No one was allowed to destroy a planted field. In this way, land was actually confiscated from the landlords and handed over to the tillers."[7]

The "plough struggles", as they became known, sometimes developed into armed conflicts. This was the case in March 1947, when "Operation Flush" was mounted to suppress a short-lived peasant rebellion in the Pyinmana area. The local uprising was most probably instigated by the CPB and it led to Burma's first counter-insurgency campaign. The operation was commanded by one Col. Ne Win of the 4th Burma Rifles (Burifs), who struck with a heavy hand. This did little to enhance already diminishing sympathy for the central administration.[8]

Anti-government sentiments were further fuelled by allegations of outright robbery by the 4th Burifs during the offensive. According to Thaung Htut, a native of Pyinmana: "Valuables stolen in the villages were sold by army officers to Daw Pu, a Muslim jewellery dealer and money-lender in Pyinmana. She as well as the officers of the 4th Burifs became rich as a result of the campaign."[9] The Pyinmana countryside was bubbling with discontent, and there was now even more fertile ground for Communist propaganda.

Part of the reason why the CPB was so strong in the Pyinmana area could also, somewhat ironically, be attributed to the fact that two of the best-known party organisers there, Mya Than and Mya San, were grandsons of Daw Chan, one of the biggest landowners in central Burma in the 1930s. "It doesn't matter in what direction you point, your finger will always settle on Daw Chan's land," went a local saying in Pyinmana. The fact that her grandsons led the struggle of the landless peasants may seem contradictory, but in rural Asia such feudal allegiances are often more important than ideology.

The nucleus of the Communist army that was being organised in Pyinmana in May 1948 was drawn from two quarters. The first group, and the only ones with a military background, were ex-Burma Defence Army (BDA) personnel, who had fought the Japanese and returned home—with their weapons—when the war was over. But the main force consisted of what Ye Tun terms "converted dacoits": "The Pyinmana area was notorious for dacoits. They organised the villagers and armed them. Some bands had more than 100 men with guns. When they robbed, they robbed entire villages, not just a house or two. Therefore, it was a kind of robbery of one village by another."

These dacoits were organised by the CPB and supposedly given "proper guidance" by its political commissars. But some bands shifted sides as it suited them, and Ye Tun readily admits that it was not an easy task to "convert" these highway robbers into disciplined Marxist guerrillas: "The former BDA men were easier to control. They had fighting experience and were soldiers, not ex-bandits."

And fighting did indeed break out shortly after the first skirmish at Paukkongyi on 2 April, as CPB units attacked police stations in central Burma in search of more arms. Synchronised raids were carried out in Pegu, Myingyan and Toungoo in the central plains, and near the delta town of Bassein as well as in the Arakan area in the west. By May, regular battles were being fought between Communist insurgents and government forces.

The first side to crack under the pressure of armed conflict was not, hardly surprisingly, the hardened ideologues of the CPB. Rifts within the ranks of the government's army soon became apparent after more than a month of bloody clashes. On 15 June, twenty-one privates of the 1st Burifs at Waw in Pegu District defected to the CPB, bringing their firearms with them. In nearby Abya Buda, thirty-one soldiers shot their officer and went over to the Communists.

The following day, more troops from the 1st Burifs at Myitkyo, Pegu, followed their comrades underground, and so did elements from the 6th Burifs. A large chunk of territory around Waw, Daik-U and Thanatbin in central Burma was suddenly under firm Communist control; the first "liberated area" had been established.

Discontent soon spread to the People's Volunteer Organisation (PVO), an association of war veterans that had been set up on 1 December 1945. Known in Burmese as *Pyithu Yebaw Ahphwe*, it had in effect become a militia force loyal to Aung San before his assassination on 19 July 1947. It later split into two factions: a "Yellow Band" PVO led by Bohmu Aung, one of the Thirty Comrades who was close to the Socialist Party, and the much more left-leaning "White Band" PVO led by another of the Thirty Comrades, Bo La Yaung, and Bo Po Kun, also a veteran of World War II.

The White Band PVO went underground on 28 July 1948, taking with them 4,000 men, or approximately 60% of the PVO's total main force.[10] The White PVOs gathered east of Syriam, across the Rangoon river from the capital itself, and dug bunkers and trenches. It was only after the frigate *Mayu* had pounded their positions from the river that the PVO withdrew from the immediate vicinity of Rangoon.[11]

The rift within the military escalated further in July as the cabinet resigned and a power struggle broke out within the top leadership of the regular army. According to an agreement signed in Kandy, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), between the British and the Burmese nationalists in September 1945, independent Burma's army would consist of a total of 12,000 men.

It would be made up of four Burman infantry battalions, as well as other units from the former colonial army so that old sepoys would be attracted to re-enlist: two each from the Chins, the Kachins and the Karens; one field artillery regiment, an armoured car regiment and various reserve and ancillary units and services such as the engineers.[12] But the Communists had infiltrated the 1st and 3rd Burma Rifles and the loyalty of the ethnic battalions was always in question, especially in view of the turbulent political scene that had emerged in 1948.

Home Minister Kyaw Nyein called on U Nu, the prime minister, with an urgent request. The army needed strong leadership to face the crisis, and Kyaw Nyein demanded that either Ne Win or Bo Zeya be appointed defence minister. At thirty-seven, Ne Win was the senior of the two (Bo Zeya was only twenty-eight), but both belonged to the Thirty Comrades. Kyaw Nyein advocated the former: "The only battalion you can rely on is Bo Ne Win's 4th Burma Rifles."[13]

Ne Win got the post, while Bo Zeya together with Bo Ye Htut, another of the Thirty Comrades, showed their dissatisfaction by staging a mutiny. The first unit to rise up was the 1st Burifs in Thayetmyo on 8 August. The following day, they took over the nearby town of Prome and began marching down towards Rangoon. The tiny Burmese air force had only two or three fighter aircraft, but it remained loyal to U Nu's government. They caught the mutineers in the open at Kyungale, north of Tharrawaddy, and strafed them with machine guns and cannon.

U Nu himself recalls in his autobiography *Saturday's Son*: "It was afterwards reported they had time to take cover after hearing the sound of aircraft engines, but they believed Rangoon had already fallen and the planes had come to greet them, so they simply stood in the open field and were killed . . . Almost the entire vanguard of the First [Burma] Rifles became casualties."[14]

On the 10th, 350 officers and privates from the 3rd Burifs, led by Bo Ye Htut, and the Number 3 General Transport Company at Mingaladon airport north of the capital joined the mutineers, and a convoy of thirty-two

trucks rumbled towards Rangoon. Optimism ran high among the gun-wielding young soldiers: "We were certain we were going to capture the capital. We thought there was nothing that could stop us. The troops sang patriotic songs from World War II as the convoy advanced on Rangoon."[15]

But the authorities again responded forcefully by extensive use of aircraft, the only superior force they had left. Sustained airstrikes managed to halt the mutineers at Wanetchaung, just north of the capital. They retreated to Prome—and linked up with the Communists. The Revolutionary Burma Army (RBA) was formed from the former 1st and 3rd Burifs, plus the transport company.

Bo Zeya became the overall commander and allied his troops with the Communists; the combined force was now equipped with machine-guns, mortars, cannons, trucks and even armoured vehicles. They felt confident enough to attack major towns, not just isolated police stations. Like Thakin Soe, the youthful, bespectacled Bo Zeya was an outstanding violinist who composed his own love songs as well.

Meanwhile, the Karen ethnic minority was growing increasingly restive. Many Karens were Christians, converted by mainly American missionaries in the nineteenth century, and there had never been any love lost between them and the Burmans. The Karens had been loyal subjects of the Empire and many of them had fought with the Allies at a time when the Burman nationalists were still siding with the Japanese.

The Karens carried out guerrilla warfare in their rugged hills along the Thai border, ambushing Japanese units and providing the Allies with useful intelligence. Towards the end of the war, large numbers of Karens were recruited into the Burma section of Force 136, Allied-led Special Forces units that carried out attacks behind Japanese lines in Southeast Asia. Burman nationalists, encouraged by the Japanese, attacked Karen villages, and scores of innocent people were butchered.

Shortly after the Japanese invasion in 1942, Bo Tun Hla, an officer in the pro-Japanese Burma Independence Army (BIA; the BDA's predecessor), shot seventeen Karen elders at Papun in the Karen Hills. This was where guerrilla forces led by a British officer who had stayed behind, Hugh Seagrim, were active. In Myaungmya in the Irrawaddy delta region, 150 Karens were slaughtered by the BIA, including a former cabinet minister, Saw Pe Tha, his English wife and their children.

These reprisals against the Karen civilian population were so brutal that Seagrim surrendered to the Japanese rather than see them continue. He was executed—beheaded—by the Japanese shortly afterwards. His self-sacrifice on the Karens' behalf made a strong impression. Many Karens even today talk fondly of their "Grandfather Longlegs". [16]

Centuries of mutual mistrust between the Burmans and the Karens became even more apparent when Burma's independence process began. Led

by Saw Ba U Gyi, a bearded, charismatic lawyer, the Karen National Union (KNU) was set up in February 1947 when several hundred representatives from the Karen-inhabited areas of the Irrawaddy delta region and the eastern hills close to Thailand met in the capital, Rangoon.

Even before World War II, many Karens, favoured by the British because of their courage and loyalty, had served with the colonial army and police force. Their discipline and fighting experience made them confident they would be able to stand up against the majority Burmans. Not surprisingly given their pro-British stance, the Karens wanted a separate state which would remain within the Commonwealth.[17]

Thousands of Karens still held weapons from the war, and when the governor, Sir Hubert Rance, addressed the subject in a letter dated 29 June 1947, Saw Marshall Shwin, a Force 136 veteran, responded by referring to wartime massacres by the Burman nationalists of the BIA: "With the painful memories of Myaungmya and Papun atrocities and other Burmese persecutions first in mind [the Karens] are not going to give up any arms for any pretext whatsoever."[18]

In July 1947 the KNU formed its own militia, the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO), which was commanded by Mahn Ba Zan, a school teacher from Maubin in the delta, and Saw Sankey, a former captain in Force 136. The KNDO and the KNU were headquartered on Ahlone Road in Sanchaung, a Rangoon suburb. KNDO militiamen in uniform, a bugle and cock on their cap badge, carried out daily drills in full view of the public on the lawn outside the office.

The KNU had boycotted the general election in April 1947 although they continued negotiations with the central government after Burma's independence in January 1948. Suspicions ran deep and the formation of the KNDO was a clear indication that the Karens were preparing for armed struggle to obtain a separate state. They were soon joined by the Mons, an ethnic minority living mainly in the coastal areas around the southeastern port city of Moulmein. Unlike the Karens, the Mons have a long and distinguished literary and cultural history. Distant relatives of the Khmers of Cambodia, they had built their own empires before the Burmans took over the Irrawaddy plain.

In March 1948 Mon nationalists set up the Mon National Defence Organisation (MNDO), modelled after the KNDO, with which they cooperated closely. As the situation was dederiorating, Mon and Karen nationalists met secretly and in August they began collecting arms in the Moulmein area. "We got the arms from various village defence forces in the countryside," recalls Nai Shwe Kyin, one of the Mon leaders at the time. "The commissioner in Moulmein summoned us and ordered the surrender of our arms."[19]

When that did not happen, Nai Shwe Kyin and sixteen other Mon leaders were arrested in a crackdown of Moulmein on 26 August. But their

sojourn in jail turned out to be a brief one: KNDO militiamen in collaboration with the Karen-dominated paramilitary Union Military Police simply took over the whole town of Moulmein on the 31st and released the prisoners. Thaton had been captured on the previous day, and an ethnic rebellion in the border areas seemed inevitable—to add to the CPB uprising, the army mutinies and the PVO insurrection which were already in full swing across the central plains.

Moulmein was captured without a single shot being fired, but it was handed back peacefully to the government a few days later when U Nu promised to set up a commission to look into the possibility of granting the Karens local autonomy within the Union of Burma.

However, such attempts to placate the rebellious Karens were effectively thwarted when Burman members of the Auxiliary Union Military Police went on a murderous rampage in the Palaw area south of Moulmein. Many Karens are Christians, mainly Baptists, and it was Christmas Eve. Simultaneously, armed policemen burst into churches in eight villages where Karen Christians were attending the Christmas service. More than eighty men, women and children were butchered. Some say as many as 200 died in the carnage.

Then, in early January 1949, other police units, led by a Socialist hardliner, Bo Sein Hman, bombarded a Karen village in Taikkyi township, sixty kilometres south of Rangoon. The Rangoon daily *The Nation* reported on the 16th that twenty houses had been destroyed and over 150 Karens killed, among them 30 who had been lined up outside the village and executed in cold blood.

Ne Win's 4th Burma Rifles, which remained steadfast in its support for the government in Rangoon, joined the carnage and burnt the American Baptist Mission School in Maubin in the Irrawaddy delta. According to British historian Hugh Tinker: "All over the Delta the night sky turned red as villages burned. The Government looked on, seemingly helpless."[20]

The reason for these senseless killings is hard to ascertain. Tinker suggests that the Burman attacks were instigated by the PVO claiming to represent the government and were not necessarily condoned by higher military authorities. As the PVO was composed of ex-BIA troops, it could thus have been an extension of the Karen-Burman conflict during the Japanese occupation.

Communal tension escalated even further when an incident involving the KNDO took place in a Burman village, seventy-five kilometres south of Rangoon. U Nu writes in his autobiography:

> The Karens raided the village, took all valuables and executed six men in public. After the KNDO raiders had left, the villagers saw a steamer, with an empty cargo boat in tow, passing by, and frantically signalled it to stop. The

steamer had discharged its cargo in Bassein and was returning to Rangoon. There was a police escort on board. Learning of their terrible misfortune, the police brought the villagers to Rangoon. The following morning, a full account of the atrocities appeared in exaggerated form in the newspapers.[21]

A particularly ugly incident took place in early 1949. A hundred Karen men, women and children near the KNDO headquarters in Ahlone were seized by ordinary Burman townspeople and were imprisoned inside the Christian Church near Mission Road in the Rangoon suburb. U Nu received a curt telephone message from the police: "The mob intends to pour petrol on the building and set it ablaze."[22]

The crisis was defused only by the arrival on the scene of U Nu himself. Meanwhile, however, it was hardly a secret that the Socialists, who were included in the government, were secretly negotiating with the army mutineers, the PVO and even the CPB to obtain their cooperation against the KNDO, thus underlining that ethnic divisions were more important than political conflicts between different Burman groups. Whatever the case, the Karens felt threatened. They moved their headquarters from Sanchaung to a large, colonial-style brick building in Insein, a township with a large Karen population just twelve kilometres north of Rangoon.

Hundreds of KNDO militiamen, led by Saw Ba U Gyi and Mahn Ba Zan, gathered in Insein and began disarming government officials stationed there and in the nearby townships of Gyogon and Thamaing. Late at night on 30 January 1949, the government issued a decree outlawing the KNDO. Troops were dispatched the following morning to Insein to enforce the order. Two armoured cars appeared at Ywathit road junction leading to Gyogon, and fired their guns into Insein. The KNDO clashed with the advancing troops—and the long and bitter civil war between the Rangoon government and the Karens had begun.

Three days later, the entire township of Insein, including the local armoury, had been taken over by the KNDO, and for a day the Karens also held the nearby Mingaladon airport. Insein also happens to be the location of Rangoon's best-known prison, the notorious Insein Jail, and on 2 February, more than 500 prisoners were released by the Karen rebels.

Among them was a convicted murderer, an ethnic Karen named Saw Seaplane. He immediately joined the fighting and later became a prominent rebel leader. Those released also included Capt. David Vivian, a British officer who had been convicted of supplying Aung San's assassins with weapons. Even he joined the KNDO. A new headquarters was established on Rifle Range Road at the foot of Seminary Hill, a hillock on which the Christian missionaries had built a renowned bible school in the 19th century.

Karen troops took up positions all around Insein. Trenches were dug, bunkers constructed and roadblocks erected along the roads leading south to

Rangoon. Kaser Doh, then a 23-year-old KNDO soldier, was there: "We had only one armoured car, eight Oerlikon guns, which we had captured from Mingaladon airport, four 0.5 machine-guns, one two-pounder and some grenade launchers. Most of us were armed with .303 Enfield rifles, Sten guns and pistols. And the enemy bombarded us from every side with twenty-five and eighteen pounders, armoured cars and Sherman tanks. Aeroplanes carried out daily bombing missions from their base at Mingaladon and a government gunboat pounded Insein from its position in the Hlaing river."[23]

Although the bombardment was massive, spirits remained high among the 10,000 inhabitants of Insein and the 2,000 KNDO troops defending the tiny enclave just north of Rangoon. Housewives prepared packets of cooked rice and fish paste, or *ngapi*, for the troops, and girls drove jeeps to deliver the rations to the boys in the trenches along the outer defence lines. Food was never a problem; Insein was the site of several rice mills, and the godowns were quickly taken over by the KNDO. *Ngapi* was brought in clandestinely from Karen villages in the Irrawaddy delta region, southwest of Rangoon and close to the Bay of Bengal.

The church bells in Insein rang every morning as the local Christian population gathered to pray for the troops. Vast stocks of ammunition and a few heavy guns had been captured from the Mingaladon armoury when the airport was raided. The Karen fighters held their positions behind train engines and railway carriages at the locomotive workshop in the suburb, only 200 metres away from the nearest government artillery position.

Saw Ba Thin, a 21-year old KNDO soldier from Henzada who had joined the fighting, was in charge of two sections of troops defending the road leading from Gyogon to the Bible School in Insein. He recalls: "When we returned to headquarters to get more ammunition, we had to cross a huge football field. The Burmese knew this and always fired their Bren guns towards us. We often had to crawl in the ditches along the roads to avoid the machine-gun fire." Saw Ba Thin was armed with a British rifle of World War II vintage and carried a Smith & Wesson revolver in a holster at his hip. "They called me 'the cowboy'," he says, laughing at the memory.[24]

Despite such youthful bravado, casualties were extremely heavy. The wounded were taken to a makeshift field hospital which had been set up in the premises of the General Technical Institute in Insein. Medicines were scarce, but many Karens in government service came to join the KNDO when they heard about the fighting. Dr. Marcus Paw, the Karen chief medical examiner of Burma, showed up in Insein to treat the wounded, as did numerous Karen nurses from hospitals and clinics all over Rangoon.

When Lydia, an eight-year-old Karen schoolgirl from Insein, got tired of staying in the trenches all day, she used to go out with her friends to a mango plantation in the township's Ywama quarter: "Mangoes were in season and we climbed the trees to pick the fruit. But we had to run when

the gunboats in the Hlaing river fired their Bofors cannons into Insein. One of my friends, another schoolgirl, was hit by shrapnel but survived. It was always eerie to go to the mango plantation because it was there the Karens buried their dead."[25]

The fighting continued for weeks, and soon spread to other parts of the country. The Karens in Insein had hoped that Karen battalions in the Burma Army would mutiny and provide them with badly needed reinforcements. This was indeed the case. Already on 25 January, a few days before the siege of Insein, the battle-hardened 1st Karen Rifles, led by Lieut.-Col. Min Maung, had defected and declared that they would join the KNDO; they had been stationed at Toungoo on the Rangoon–Mandalay railway line.

On 5 February, the 2nd Karen Rifles, who were fighting the CPB in the Prome area, also switched sides. They boarded twenty buses and set off for Insein, capturing the towns of Nattalin and Zigon on the way. But they never reached their destination: government forces ambushed them at Wetkaw bridge near Tharrawaddy and they had to retreat.

A few troops from the 1st Karen Rifles in Toungoo did manage to reach Insein, but the main force was stopped at Payagyi east of Rangoon. The 3rd Karen Rifles, stationed in Mandalay and Maymyo in the north, were disarmed and interned. And although they had remained loyal to the government, the three top Karen officers in the Burma Army had already been retired on 1 February, the day after the battle for Insein began.

The commander in chief, Lieut.-Gen. Smith-Dun, was replaced by Lieut.-Gen. Ne Win of the loyal 4th Burma Rifles. The chief of the air force, Wing Commander Samuel Shi Sho, was also dismissed, as was Brig.-Gen. Henson Kya Doe, a Karen who had joined the BIA during the Japanese occupation and after independence had become chief of operations.

Despite these initial victories over the insurgents, the threat to Rangoon became all the more apparent when one of the most loyal units of the Burma Army defected: the 1st Kachin Rifles. They had fought more intensely against the CPB than any other unit of the army, and their 27-year-old commander, Naw Seng, a decorated World War II hero, had earned the nickname "the terror of the Pyinmana Communists". But the mood turned when he was ordered to attack the Karen-held town of Toungoo.

Despite his youth, Naw Seng was already the most battle-hardened and also perhaps the ablest commander in the Burma Army. But the Kachins are Christians like many Karens, and Naw Seng had no desire to fight them on behalf of the Burmans, whom he in any case never fully trusted. On 21 February, he took his entire battalion and went over to the Karens. He joined forces with the mutineers from the 1st Karen Rifles in Toungoo, led by Lieut.-Col. Min Maung, and marched north, occupying one town after another.[26]

Tamla Baw, a young lieutenant in the 1st Karen Rifles, had fought against the CPB in Pyinmana, Toungoo and Pegu before his unit mutinied. He joined

the "Upper Burma Campaign" as the combined effort was called. It seemed almost impossible to reinforce the Karens in Insein, so the only sensible thing to do from their point of view was to carry out diversionary attacks elsewhere in the country. The garrison town of Meiktila in the north fell to the combined Karen-Kachin force on 20 February. Tamla Baw remembers: "We travelled on foot, and by truck, bus and train. There was no real aim or coordination—but a lot of imagination. When we captured Meiktila, we also took over the air base there, including two Dakotas along with some English and American pilots who were flying for the Burmese Air Force. A platoon of Karens boarded one of the planes and a Kachin platoon the other. We flew to Ani Sakhan, a major army base at Maymyo in the hills northeast of Mandalay. Expecting some important visitors from Rangoon to arrive in the planes, all the officers were out to greet them."[27]

But instead, gun-wielding Kachin and Karen insurgents emerged from the planes. They arrested the officers and took over the town, a picturesque hill station built by the British in the late nineteenth century, complete with Victorian brick buildings, golf courses and a botanical garden. Many Karen insurgents were in jail in Maymyo; they were released and rejoined the uprising.

While some insurgents stayed in Maymyo, the main force returned to the plains below where, on 13 March, they captured Mandalay, the second largest city in the country. It had been defended by 3,000 supposedly loyal PVOs, whose attitude was in fact purely opportunistic. After the fall of Mandalay, it was hard to judge exactly which side they were on, and the situation was further complicated by the presence of cadres from the CPB as well as the Red Flags. Before Mandalay fell, more than 200 PVOs had been released from the city jail and armed by the authorities. The remaining prisoners—mostly CPB members and followers of Thakin Soe—were also set free when the Karen-Kachin force marched in.

Nai Shwe Kyin, who was in upper Burma at the time, recalls: "Mandalay was reoccupied by government forces in early April, but through trickery, not an actual military operation. The PVOs were staying in the old fort in the centre of the city, and they were contacted by the government through intermediaries, mostly Buddhist monks. Rangoon played on nationalistic feelings: "You have to liberate the city from the savage Christian Kachins and Karens." They also knew that the CPB and the Red Flags were not on good terms. So one day, the PVOs and monks came in jeeps, pretending they were CPB members and shouting abuse at the Red Flags. The next day, they would pretend they were Red Flags and shouted abuse at the CPB. The outcome was complete chaos. No one knew who was in charge of Mandalay and mobs took advantage of the confusion and looted all the shops in town. Eventually, infighting broke out and the government recaptured Mandalay."

Naw Seng, Min Maung and the others decided to make a push for Insein and Rangoon to relieve the beleaguered KNDO forces there. Thousands of rebel troops marched south and reached Pegu, only eighty kilometres north of the capital. The situation was serious, and U Nu summoned the ablest commander he had left in the army, Brig.-Gen. Kyaw Zaw, the only one of the Thirty Comrades, apart from Ne Win, who was still in active service.

Kyaw Zaw promised that every gun and every soldier he could find would be sent to the Pegu front with orders to fight to the death. U Nu and Kyaw Zaw together boarded a military aircraft and landed at an airstrip 25 kilometres from Pegu to inspect the defence lines. The advance was blocked; on 1 May Naw Seng and his troops withdrew towards Toungoo.

But the defection of Naw Seng's 1st Kachin Rifles and the Karen battalions had considerably weakened the government's counter-insurgency capabilities. Significantly, within four days of Naw Seng's mutiny, the CPB simply walked into Pyinmana and took over the town.

On the same day, 20 February, the town of Yamethin was also captured by Communist forces. Three days later, the CPB took over Myingyan town, and PVOs and RBA forces captured the oil field area of Yenangyaung and Chauk, west of Mandalay, depriving the government of one of its most important sources of revenue.

Magwe and Minbu, two dusty towns in the central dry zone, were occupied by the insurgents on the 25th, and in March the CPB marched into Pakokku, a market town on the banks of the Irrawaddy river between Mandalay and the oil fields of Yenangyaung and Chauk.

In Insein, meanwhile, Kaser Doh was on duty on the main road south of the town: "For three consecutive days in early April, we had heard nothing but the rumblings of gunboat shelling, tank fire, field batteries and mortars. But then, at eight in the morning on the 5th, a jeep with a white flag appeared on the road. It was followed by two saloon cars. They stopped at our roadblock and an army officer stepped out. He was accompanied by diplomats from the Indian and Pakistani embassies in Rangoon and Ah Mya, a Karen Anglican bishop from Rangoon. They said they had been sent to deliver a letter from the government to Saw Ba U Gyi. I radioed our war office in Insein and was told to let them through."

The delegation proceeded to the KNDO headquarters, where a two-hour meeting with Saw Ba U Gyi and his associates ensued. U Nu had appealed for peace and invited the Karen leadership to Rangoon for negotiations. Both sides agreed to a cease-fire for three days.

The following day, Saw Ba U Gyi went to Rangoon, driven in a jeep and accompanied by armed bodyguards and a wireless radio operator. He wore his characteristic green beret, and onlookers immediately recognised the bearded leader of the Karen rebels as they drove up to the old Governor's

House on Mission Road in the capital. He was met there by the prime minister U Nu and Lieut.-Gen. Ne Win, the new army chief.

Although U Nu had a reputation for being fairly sympathetic to Karen demands, his attitude this time was unusually uncompromising, suggesting that he was under severe pressure from his army commanders to deal harshly with the KNDO. After all, Naw Seng's combined Kachin-Karen force was at that moment heading south from Mandalay towards Rangoon. "No concessions were offered; on the contrary, U Nu demanded unconditional surrender. Saw Ba U Gyi left in disgust on the third day," according to Kaser Doh.

Government records from these informal peace talks say that Saw Ba U Gyi and Lieut.-Gen. Ne Win on 6 April signed a preliminary treaty suggesting an amnesty for all Karens who had joined the rebellion and allowing Karen civilians to keep some weapons for their own protection. This proposal was transmitted to Insein by Saw Ba U Gyi's radio operator. The reply from headquarters contained a set of demands, including one for a nationwide ceasefire and the right of the various rebel groups to retain their arms and territories for the duration of the proposed peace talks. This was rejected by U Nu and Lieut.-Gen. Ne Win.[28]

Whatever the case, disappointment among the Karens turned into fury when they discovered that the battered Burma Army had used the three-day ceasefire to bring down reinforcements by plane from garrisons in upper Burma, including Meiktila, which had been recaptured on 22 March.

During the fighting in Insein, the airport had not been safe for the government to use; it had even been occupied by the KNDO for a day. And although the Karens had suffered badly during the fighting, casualties on the government's side were believed to be much higher. "Morale was low among the Burma Army. The defence perimeter around Insein was a graveyard, littered with corpses, and this was only twelve kilometres from Rangoon," claims Kaser Doh. Three companies of elite Gurkha troops attacked Insein as soon as the ceasefire was over on the 9th.

On 21 May, the Karen leadership held a crisis meeting. They were running short of ammunition, and the ceasefire had strengthened the position of the Burma Army. More than 500 Karens, soldiers as well as civilians, had died in the fighting, and reinforcements from the Karen and Kachin battalions who had rebelled against the government did not seem able to advance anywhere near the capital. The KNDO decided to withdraw from Insein.

Under the cover of darkness in the early hours of 22 May, one Karen platoon after another slipped out of Insein. All night, the sound of roaring truck and jeep engines could be heard as the Karens evacuated Insein. Some units crossed the Hlaing river by boat; the plan was to regroup in the Irrawaddy delta region, where the main Karen population lived.

The delta, with its maze of rivers, islands, rich rice-lands, fruit orchards, jungles and mangrove swamps, was ideal country for guerrilla warfare,

and this was the Karens' next strategy, following the failure of conventional battles. Other units headed north to the Pegu Yoma mountains, and to the Karen-inhabited eastern hills near the Thai border.

Despite the rather noisy evacuation, the government forces that besieged Insein did not interfere. "They probably thought that Karen reinforcements were arriving," an Insein veteran remembers.[29] Indeed, when Karen community leaders in Insein informed the troops that the rebels had left the town, they were met with disbelief. It was not until noon on the 22nd that government forces entered Insein, only to find it empty of KNDO troops. The town was once again in government hands after a 112-day, bloody siege that had cost nearly 1,000 lives.

But the war was far from over. More than half of the country was still occupied by insurgents, and almost every treasury had been looted. Even Rangoon was insecure, albeit for different reasons. According to U Nu: "In the capital itself, the administration wobbled. There were daylight robberies in the heart of town."[30]

U Nu realised that his government would not survive unless outside support could be mustered. In June, he flew to New Delhi for urgent talks with his Indian counterpart, Jawaharlal Nehru. U Nu later wrote somewhat obliquely: "Pandit Nehru treated me with great considerateness and I returned pleased."[31] Indian arms shipments began arriving in Rangoon a few weeks later, and the government felt more confident. The capital, at least, was safe.

In the countryside, however, the situation was still serious. On 25 August, the CPB announced that their "liberated area embraces 71,000 square miles [183,890 square kilometres] with a population of over six million people".[32] The Karens had taken over large tracts in the Irrawaddy delta region, and the Mons were active in the Moulmein area.

Smaller rebellions had also broken out in the Karenni states, home of the Red Karens, a Karen sub-tribe, and among the Karen-related Buddhist Pa-Os in southern Shan State. The Karennis were steadfastly maintaining that their area was already "independent" and they had no wish to join the Union. Led by the *sawphya* (prince) of Kyebogyi state, Saw Shwe, the Karennis were resisting the Burma Army's attempts to incorporate their area into Burma, and the KNDO gave them full support. The Pa-Os had been swept into the rebellion when Naw Seng's combined Karen-Kachin force entered their hilly country in the southern Shan states in August 1949.

Meanwhile, in the Arakan area in the west, near the border with East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Muslim *mujahids*, and local Buddhists led by U Sein Da, a former monk, were also waging local guerrilla struggles against the increasingly isolated government in Rangoon.

By the end of the rainy season of 1949, U Nu's administration was actually in control of little more than the capital and was therefore aptly re-

ferred to as "the Rangoon Government". Minn Latt, a CPB intellectual who later went to study in Prague, recounted from exile his travels through the "liberated areas" of central Burma in that year:

> I remember making a journey from one major [CPB] base to another, covering about 200 miles [320 kilometres] and not encountering a single enemy. Of course, we did not always travel on fine asphalt roads and rails: for the most part we were on the fields, in the jungles, and going over the mountain ranges. Contact between one base and another may have been difficult and slow, but never impossible.
>
> We walked for a great part of our journey. Sometimes we had to take small Burmese canoes called *bauk-tu*. If we had a good *bauk-tu*, all we had to do was to sit still, but if by chance a man found himself in one that leaked, woe betide that man. He would have to keep bailing the water out non-stop. The only thing he could console himself with was that the rains were not coming down. But sometimes they did!
>
> Then we also rode carts drawn by oxen. There are no tarred roads between villages, hence in many parts motorised traffic is impossible. Even in summer, when motor vehicles make their way to villages near the highway, they have to follow the cart-tracks. Thus, in this people's war, the farther a village is away from the highway, the safer it becomes from motorised surprise attacks. In some places, oxen are unable to pull carts through the mud and swamps. Here buffaloes with immense horns take their place. The villagers are always willing to place their means of transport in the hands of their heroic fighters.
>
> We also travelled by military lorries when we came to roads which were controlled by ourselves; we had captured a lot of vehicles from the enemy, including armoured cars and light tanks. Railway was also a means we took. We travelled for about 25 miles [40 kilometres] by rail, driven by revolutionary workers. It was a pity we did not have a chance to travel by motor launches run by the "People's Transport Service", launches that once belonged to the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company.
>
> But in the jungles and mountains, none of the abovementioned means of transport, except, of course, travelling on foot, was possible. We had taken elephants there: elephants, those gigantic creatures that can be conquered by tiny men. They are very useful in jungles and mountains, though they can carry less on their backs than by hauling. They can easily drag huge trunks of timber, but on their backs, they will be able to carry only about six or seven hundred pounds [270–310 kilograms]. They make their way through the jungles, clearing their route through overhanging bamboos. Slowly but firmly, they pick their way along the dangerous paths, which are no wider than their own feet.
>
> Once the *mahout* [elephant driver] gave me command of the beast and slid down holding the huge ears. This man had terrible bouts of malaria attack-

> ing him every now and then. When the attacks came, he would slide off from the elephant and lie down on the wayside covering himself with his *longyi* [sarong]. His fellow *mahouts* would pay no attention to this. "It is nothing unusual." A few minutes later, he would appear somewhere in the front, by means of a short-cut, and nimbly climb up again onto the neck of the animal. As I guided the elephant, I looked at the long line of animals. On their hips were branded the marks of the teak companies they had once belonged to.[33]

Predictably, the government painted a completely different picture of the rebel forces. The official publication *Burma and the Insurrections*, published in September 1949, stated that the rebels

> allege themselves to be fighting for the oppressed masses; surely then they must have a proletarian discipline. But no. In Pegu District, Communists loot villages which support the PVO. PVOs loot all. In Tharrawaddy District, Communists flushed with power, murder people for personal grievances. Many Communist sympathisers are alienated because their personal friends molest their womenfolk. One supreme example is the case of a woman who with her husband had actively helped the Communists seize the town, but who later committed suicide because the Communist leader whom she and her husband had fed and sheltered raped her.[34]

The polarisation of Burmese society appeared complete after barely a year of independence. In December 1948, U Nu issued a desperate appeal to the CPB to come to the negotiating table. His old comrades from student days in the 1930s and the early nationalist struggle—Bo Zeya, Bo Ye Htut, Bo Thein Dan and Bo Thet Tun—were personally invited to talks in Rangoon. The rebel leaders promised to send a reply by 15 March 1949.

On 24 March, the rebels met in Prome to set up a united front, comprising the CPB, Thakin Soe's Red Flags, the PVO, the RBA and local Arakanese insurgents led by Sein Da. On the same day, a statement was issued in response to U Nu's plan for talks: the prime minister would be arrested and arraigned befor a "People's Court".[35]

Both sides were accusing each other of atrocities and boasting about "imminent victory". The Communists were so confident that their leader, Thakin Than Tun, proudly declared: "If we continue to fight with industriousness and determination, we will surely defeat the enemy within two years."[36] And on 19 July 1949, the second anniversary of the assassination of Aung San, U Nu, beleaguered in the capital Rangoon but waiting for more Indian assistance, called on the nation to unite behind his slogan "Peace Within One Year!"[37] Neither of these bold claims turned out to be even remotely close to the truth.

2

The Burmese Jigsaw

Calcutta, the old capital of Britain's Indian Empire, with its impressive Victorian buildings, spacious colonnades and palmtree-lined avenues, may seem an unlikely venue for an international, Communist-sponsored conference. But it is a city in which all that is magnificent about urban India is to be found side by side with abject squalor: its imperial grandeur, its theatres, its coffee-houses and its bookshops are set against some of the most depressing slums, the most wretched pavement hovels, the most noxious pollution and the most irreparable decay in the world.

An Indian weekly once said that parts of Calcutta seem "a city without hope, a soot-and-concrete wasteland of power-cuts, pot-holes and poverty; yet it inspires some of the country's greatest creative talents." It is therefore not surprising that radical ideas have always flourished in this fertile soil, and Calcutta has been the centre for revolutionary movements in South Asia since the beginning of the nineteenth century.

In February 1948, Communists and other leftists from all over the world gathered in this remarkable city to discuss the situation in a world that was changing rapidly in the wake of World War II. The Soviet Union had not only emerged as one of the winners of the war, but it had also proclaimed itself as champion for the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America who were fighting against colonial domination in various forms. Detente with Britain and the US, which in any case had been little more than a marriage of convenience against the Axis powers, was irrevocably over.

At Wiliza Gora in Poland on 22 September 1947, a prominent Soviet theoretician, Andrei Zhdanov, had given a speech on the occasion of the founding of a new organisation that united revolutionary groups from all over the world, the Cominform. He had advocated a much more confrontational line than the global Communist movement had followed since World War II, arguing that the world had become divided into "two camps".

Zhdanov had declared that one was made up of the US, Britain, France, and other "imperialist" powers, while the other camp belonged to the So-

viet Union and the newly established "people's democracies" in Eastern Europe. "Progressive" nations and movements had to support this second camp if they were to have Communist support and sympathy. Many Western observers especially saw the newly established Cominform as a reincarnation of the powerful Communist International, the Comintern, of the 1930s.[1]

This new militant tendency permeated the meeting of the Southeast Asian Youth Conference in Calcutta, which had been called under the auspices of the Soviet-controlled World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY) and the International Union of Students (IUS). On 19 February, an impressive gathering of representatives from India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Nepal, Burma, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaya congregated in a building facing Wellington Square in Calcutta's crowded Bowbazar area, the centre of political activity in the city. The meeting hall had been provided by Raja Subodh Mullick, a prominent Bengali nationalist.[2]

Observers and guests had come from Korea, Mongolia, the Soviet Union, Australia, Yugoslavia, France, Canada and Czechoslovakia. Six representatives of the Communist student movement in China unexpectedly showed up in Calcutta as well: they had not been invited, but their request to be included among the delegates was immediately granted, reflecting growing admiration for Mao Zedong's rapid advances in China at the time.[3]

Not all delegates were Communists, however. There were also other Asian nationalists with no particular sympathy for the Soviet Union. Messages of greetings were read out from a wide range of dignitaries such as India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Ho Chi Minh, the Czech Communist leader Klement Gottwald, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt—and even U Nu.[4]

But nevertheless the conference remained in Communist hands. Controlling the meeting were Joseph Grohman, the Czech president of the IUS, and Jean Lautissier, a young French Communist who represented the WFDY. The revolutionary bloc was further strengthened by the presence of Australia's fire-brand Communist leader, Lawrence Sharkey, then a controversial figure in the movement, as he was engaged in a bitter dispute with the British Communist Party over revolutionary strategies. CPB Chairman Thakin Than Tun and Politburo member Thakin Ba Thein Tin were in India at this time as well, not to attend the youth conference but as guests of the Communist Party of India (CPI), which was to hold its second congress in Calcutta shortly afterwards.

The CPB's links with India, and West Bengal in particular, had traditionally been very strong. The party had actually begun as an offshoot of the Communist movement in India. The first contact had been established when Thakin Thein Pe studied law in Calcutta from 1936 to 1938. It was during this time in India that he met radical members of the Bengal Students' Federation and, possibly under their influence, wrote his famous

novel *Tet Hpongyi* ("The Modern Monk"), which criticised the traditional monastic hierarchy in Burma.[5]

When Thein Pe returned to Burma in 1938, he was accompanied by a prominent Bengali Communist, B.N. Dass, who helped his new-found Burmese comrades establish Marxist study groups in Rangoon and elsewhere.[6] But the firmest link between the Burmese and the Indian Communists was H.N. Ghoshal, who had become one of the party's foremost theoreticians.

Ghoshal was born in Rangoon, but maintained close ties with the Indian Communists. In the second week of December 1947, two months before the Calcutta conference, the CPB sent Ghoshal to Bombay to observe a crucial meeting of the CPI's central committee. There was widespread opposition against the moderate CPI secretary, P.C. Joshi, as the far more militant B.T. Ranadive was gaining support within the party. A rural rebellion had broken out in Telengana in Hyderabad State in 1946 and was still continuing in early 1948. What appeared to be a genuine mass campaign against the landlords and the state autocracy had been set in motion, especially in the two districts of Nalgonda and Warangal.[7]

While in Bombay, Ghoshal gave an interview to the CPI's daily *People's Age*, which contained a critique of the CPB's "rightist" mistakes, and urged the leadership to correct this "deviation".[8] The article appeared on 4 January—which, hardly by coincidence, was Burma's independence day—and it was clearly influenced by the more militant line that the Indian Communists had begun to advocate at this time.[9]

Nevertheless, on his return to Burma, Ghoshal was severely criticised for this "unauthorised" attempt at influencing party policies. He replied that the article, although signed with his Burmese name, *yebaw* Ba Tin, was not written by him but by a CPI leader who wanted to influence his Burmese comrades to adopt a more militant position. Whatever the case, Ghoshal was excluded from the delegations that the Burmese Communists sent to Calcutta in February to attend the youth conference and the CPI's second congress.[10]

On the final day of the youth conference a rally was held in the Calcutta Maidan—a green park in the city centre—and more than 15,000 people showed up. They listened to the radical youth leaders affirm their faith in the final victory of the "peoples of Southeast Asia."[11] In the crowd were four Burmese Communists. Two were official delegates to the youth conference: *yebaw* Aung Gyi and Bo Aung Min,[12] and two participated as observers: Hla Myaing (who surrendered in the 1950s and later became an editor of the state-run *Working People's Daily*), and Khin Gyi, the widow of Thakin Ba Hein, the father of "true" Communism in Burma.[13] Two other leading Burmese Communists, Thakins Than Tun and Ba Thein Tin, later attended the CPI's second congress.

According to most Western historians, this was a major turning point in the history of post-war Communism in Asia. Some observers even go a step further and advocate the theory that the youth conference was the place at which "directives from Moscow" were issued to "start unrest in Asia".[14]

Zhdanov's speech in Wiliza Gora is said to have been the impetus, and the Calcutta youth conference the vehicle for conveying these ideas to the revolutionary movements in Asia. The advocates of this conspiracy theory point to the fact that later the same year Communist-led, armed insurrections indeed broke out in Burma (March), Malaya (June), and Indonesia (September), in addition to already existing conflicts in Vietnam and the Philippines.

The most extreme version of this school of thought is to be found in *Inside a Soviet Embassy: Experiences of a Russian Diplomat in Burma*, which was ostensibly written by a defector from the Soviet embassy in Rangoon. It is, however, more likely that the book was ghosted by his interrogators following the Soviet diplomat's defection to the US in 1960, hence its mixture of apparently genuine reports from inside the embassy—and Western, Cold War-inspired statements such as this one: "the Communist insurrection in Burma . . . had been ordered by Stalin during the infamous 1947 Calcutta Youth Conference along with the Indonesian, Indochinese, Malayan, and Philippine rebellions."[15]

But although there is absolutely no evidence to support this conclusion, it is plausible to assume that the radicalisation of, for instance, the CPI and the CPB that followed arose from a confrontation during the youth meeting—which was also, it should be noted, attended by representatives from Burma's main party, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), and the Indian National Congress.

The young Communists argued that the leaders of their respective countries had achieved a "sham independence" by collaborating with "the imperialists"—which prompted the delegates from the AFPFL and the Indian National Congress to walk out in protest. Some other delegates, notably the Filipinos, even returned home, denouncing the meeting as "Soviet-dominated."[16] The whole affair was in fact so messy that some of the Indian organisers found it necessary to carry firearms to the meeting hall at Wellington Square.[17]

A few days after this rather ill-fated youth conference, the CPI met for its second congress. This meeting went far more smoothly for the militants. Joshi was dismissed from his post and replaced by Ranadive, who in a report to the party stated that "Telengana today means Communists, and Communists mean Telengana".[18]

Thakin Than Tun, the head of the CPB delegation to the congress, thundered in a speech: "Comrades! 1948 . . . will decide the fate of the liberation movements in Southeast Asia." He went on to accuse the U Nu govern-

ment in Burma of being a "subservient tool in the hands of imperialism", adding that thousands of Communist guerrilla fighters were ready to "swing into action whenever the occasion demands it . . . we are making all-out efforts to prevent civil war. But if the national bourgeoisie, backed by Anglo-Americans, insists on having it, well they will have it."[19]

This new militancy was encouraged by the Yugoslav delegates, Vladimir Dedijer and Radoven Zokovic, whose message was well received by the supporters of the Telengana struggle.[20] But Thakin Ba Thein Tin, who attended the congress, dismisses it as a "cock-and-bull story" that a "conspiracy" was hatched even at this meeting.

He says that the decision to take up arms in Burma was solely the CPB's and unrelated to almost simultaneous uprisings in Malaya, Indonesia and the Philippines. Ba Thein Tin also asserts that the only foreign representatives at the CPI congress were the six CPB delegates, Australia's Sharkey, the two Yugoslavs and a young Russian woman who was introduced to him as "Comrade Olga".[21] The Yugoslav delegates went back to Belgrade after the congress; they did not, as claimed by some historians, go to Burma.[22]

Than Tun returned home by plane after the congress, while Thakin Ba Thein Tin remained in the city for a few days before boarding an ocean liner bound for Rangoon. On his departure, Ranadive accompanied him to the jetty. In parting, Ba Thein Tin said: "You have helped our party a lot. But now we have learned that we have to rely on ourselves. You have the right to criticise us and make suggestions. But it's up to us to accept your criticism, and we won't blame you if we take the wrong steps."[23] Ranadive bid his Burmese comrade farewell, and the two men parted, never to meet again. The CPB went underground on 28 March, while the CPI in the end decided to continue working within India's democratic framework, despite the seeds of revolution that had been sown in Telengana.

US historian Charles McLane, who spent years researching Soviet policies in Asia, writes that the "Soviet response to the ensuing rebellions in Southeast Asia followed no fixed pattern", and even that there was "a perceptible decline in Soviet interest in the Burmese insurrection . . . after the spring of 1949"[24]—statements which effectively contradict the assumption that Stalin had mapped out some "master plan" for Communist seizure of power in Southeast Asia.

The most authoritative account of the meetings in Calcutta in early 1948 has been compiled by Ruth McVey. She argues that we can only say with safety that Zhdanov's "two-camp" theory was introduced at the Calcutta conference.[25] But, she adds, "it does not seem likely that the two-camp message lit the revolutionary spark in Southeast Asia, though it may well have added the extra tinder which caused it to burst into flame . . . the opportunity and incentive for Communist rebellion were already present in the countries where revolt occurred."[26]

In Burma, this was certainly the case. The country had a long tradition of peasant struggles, which had little to do with Zhdanov's speech in Wiliza Gora, or the haphazard meetings in Calcutta in 1948. In modern times, this tradition was revived as soon as the British marched into Mandalay in 1885, ending the last of the Burmese kingdoms and finalising the conquest that had begun with the first Anglo-Burmese war of 1824–26. The king, Thibaw, was led away in captivity and sent into exile in India—but the remnants of the old royal army, some of the surviving princes, court officials, village headmen and even Buddhist monks took up the sword in many regions of the old Burmese kingdom, which had now become a province of British India.

According to US historian John F. Cady:

> Throughout 1886 and 1887, every district of Upper Burma was in a ferment of revolt. Military posts and convoys were attacked, and virtually every male villager was ready to fight. The population accepted the hardships of war and enveloped all rebel movements in a conspiracy of silence.[27]

A year after the British conquest, Sir Charles Crosthwaite, an extremely harsh administrator, was appointed chief commissioner of Burma. He mounted a merciless campaign to suppress the rebellions. Mass executions of so-called "dacoits"—the Burmese would say freedom fighters—took place, and villages showing any sympathy for the rebels were promptly put to the torch. The total number of people killed in battle or executed on being captured, by hangings or decapitation, numbered in the thousands. Aung San's maternal grand-uncle, Bo Min Yaung, led one of these local resistance armies; he was among those captured and decapitated by the British.[28]

But the most serious challenge to the British was centred in the southern Shan States, where the famous Limbin prince—the son of the last crown prince of Burma and a disgruntled member of the royal family—had been in rebellion since the reign of King Thibaw. After the British conquest, the Limbin prince continued to fight and managed to unite several resistance leaders into the so-called "Limbin Confederacy", which reduced much of northern Burma to anarchy and desolation.

It took the British five years and the deployment of 60,000 regular troops and military police to stamp out the insurrections in the north. They could hardly have imagined this when they had first marched into Mandalay with just 500 men. The spirit of nationalism then went into the doldrums for almost two decades, as all leading resistance fighters had been eliminated. But even after Burma had been "pacified", in the colonial jargon, there were local uprisings in the Chindwin and Monywa districts, and skirmishes with small bands of guerrillas never ceased.

The whole pattern of peasant rebellions, dictatorial tendencies and social instability in Burma reflects an extremely complicated historical

dichotomy which has persisted as the national dilemma. On the one hand, Burma has a strong authoritarian tradition which, in the past, was represented by the monarchy, and sometimes even by insurgent leaders in the countryside. A Burmese king was "shielded from the eyes of his subjects, wrapped in ritual, and responsible for the [Buddhist] faith; his authority was viewed as semidivine and unbridled", to quote US Burma scholar Josef Silverstein.[29] By the ancient tradition of divine kingship, the monarch wielded unquestioned power over the life and death of his subjects.

Consequently, the people were never consulted and elections of any kind were unheard of. "Authority from above has been accepted by the majority of people, and the leader who holds the palace or seat of government and controls the symbols of authority has the right to rule," continues Silverstein in his analysis. "As a result of this pattern, the people were little concerned with the affairs of the state. The average peasant did not expect the state to do anything to improve his life."[30] In short, the belief in the god-king meant that it was *lese majeste* to suggest or even to imagine any possible limits to his omnipotence.

The state never served as a vehicle for social and economic change. If the state became too oppressive—when, for example, it took an excessive amount of taxes or forced men to fight in needless wars—there was no reason for the individual to rise up against the tyranny. "The political culture of the Burman early was characterised by the people's stoic acceptance of misfortune and the government's excessive demands and victimisation through theft, war and plunder," Silverstein concludes.[31]

The other side of Burma's heritage is represented by a solid intellectual and creative tradition. The yearly cycle in any Burmese village includes a number of *pwes* — the word *pwe* is usually translated to mean a fair, but it is actually much more than that. Every *pwe* worth mentioning includes a theatrical performance, which is vastly enjoyed by all. There are few people in the world who are so fond of culture and drama as the Burmese. Sir J.G. Scott, a Scotsman who wrote about Burma under the pseudonym Shway Yoe in the last century, aptly said that "probably there is no man, otherwise than a cripple, in the country who has not at some period of his life been himself an actor, either in the drama or in a marionette show; if not in either of these, certainly in a chorus dance".[32]

Burma has always had a high literacy rate, and education has been a source of national pride since pre-colonial days. At the age of seven or eight, every Burmese boy was sent to the local monastery to learn to read, write and to memorise Buddhist chants and Pali formulas used in pagoda worship. For girls, education was less universal, but even so, the census for British Burma in 1872 stated that "female education was a fact in Burma before Oxford was founded".[33]

The long and strong tradition of widespread literacy was further enhanced by the introduction of British-style education during the colonial era. Needless to say, the colonial authorities were mainly interested in procuring a stratum of English-speaking civil servants and skilled clerks for foreign companies—but the result also included an abundance of newspapers and bookshops with foreign literature. Along with them came strong Western intellectual influences. The removal of the monarchy in 1885 had cleared fertile ground for the new ideas. The highly creative Burmese psyche flourished and became increasingly politicised. A powerful, intellectual and anti-authoritarian tendency began taking shape which, in many ways, was as deeply rooted in Burmese tradition as the monarchic system.

By the turn of the century, new nationalist leaders had begun to emerge from the youthful ranks of Rangoon College, working hand in hand with others who had set up the first politicised Buddhist societies as early as 1897. The Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) was founded in 1906 by a group of young college students. Soon thereafter senior government servants and barristers also became members, and within a decade the YMBA had established itself as a national organisation.

The original plan for a more firmly organised movement crystallised into the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) in 1917. It drew its supporters mainly from the educated urban middle class; for instance, one of its most prominent leaders in the earlier days was Chit Hlaing, the son of an England-returned barrister.

Dr. Maung Maung, once a renowned Burmese historian, commented on the emergence of the nationalist movement in his study *Burma's Constitution*:

> The press lent support to the GCBA movement. The *Sun*, of course, shone bright, joined by the *New Light of Burma*, the *Liberty*, the *Modern Burma*, the *Bandoola Journal*, and a few others in Burmese; the *Observer*, the *New Burma*, the *Free Burma*, and the *Rangoon Mail* in the English language.
>
> In the early years, the press was one for the common cause, and journalists, like barristers, stood in the vanguard of the movement. Newspapers were numerous and poor, and editors had to be a little of everything on their papers, but they were inspired and dedicated. Only when politics became a profession with political jobs to grab and spoils to distribute did some newspapers sink to the level of personal or party organs.[34]

Another group of urbanites who became involved in the nationalist movement at an early stage were, of course, the students. The first peaceful challenge to the colonial authorities—as opposed to the armed insurrections in the late nineteenth century—came from these young, urban intellectuals in December 1920. A bill had been introduced which would pro-

vide Burma with its first resident university, replacing two colleges that had previously been subordinated to the University of Calcutta.

The students and other nationalists had reservations about some details of the bill, including matriculation requirements and tuition costs—but the British lieutenant-governor, Sir Reginald Craddock, turned a deaf ear to the protests. The bill was passed in its original version as the Rangoon University Act on 1 December. Four days later, 500 out of a total of 600 students in Rangoon launched a strike, which was followed by strikes by secondary school pupils in the capital as well as in Mandalay and other towns.

The students camped at the foot of the gold-covered Shwe Dagon pagoda—Burma's holiest shrine, which still dominates the capital's skyline. Despite threats by the Lieutenant-Governor, the public at large helped the strikers enthusiastically. In a statement issued on 8 December, the strikers proclaimed:

> We, the students of the Rangoon and Judson colleges, have entered into a struggle, the end of which no one can yet foresee. But we are firmly convinced of the righteousness of our cause . . . nothing can save the nation but a proud and indomitable stand on the part of Young Burma, with the wholehearted support of the Burmese people.[35]

Not all their demands were met, but the strike ignited a strong flame of nationalism which could not be extinguished. The first national leader to emerge from these early tumultuous years of the reborn Burmese nationalist movement was *Sayadaw* U Ottama, a Buddhist monk who had spent some time in India and Tokyo. He returned to Burma in 1919 and began travelling extensively, preaching patriotism and organising *Wunthanu Athins* ("Nationalist Societies") across the country.

In the Gandhian way, he transformed a basically political issue—nationalism and independence for Burma—into a religious one which appealed even to those who had not received British education. A fiery speaker and agitator, U Ottama attracted a large following of mainly Buddhist monks, who organised demonstrations and meetings. The Imperial Government responded fiercely, bringing in the military police to break up these gatherings.

U Ottama himself was arrested in 1921 because of his militant speeches: he was tried for sedition and sentenced to eighteen months' imprisonment. The impact of this unfair punishment could be felt all over Burma. It was the first time a nationalist had been charged with sedition and, adding insult to injury, he was a Buddhist monk of the eminence of a *sayadaw*, or great teacher: it was a challenge to the dignity of the entire nation. U Ottama was to spend several more spells in prison before his death on 9 September 1939.

The movement took a much more violent turn in 1930 when a revolt broke out in Yetaik village in Tharrawaddy district, where an ex-monk called U Yar Kyaw, a member of the GCBA, was setting up secret societies in the countryside called *Galon Athins*. They were similar to U Ottama's *Wunthanu Athins* but much more masonic in their organisation and way of operating. The *galon* was a powerful bird in Hindu mythology—the garuda in Sanskrit—and these groups attracted many village youths and others from the impoverished countryside, which the splendours of the colonial economy never reached. The people were poor, and they were desperate.[36]

In the meantime, a Burmese, Joseph Augustus Maung Gyi, had been awarded a knighthood and become the first native acting governor (for Sir Charles Innes, who was on home leave in Britain due to illness). Sir Joseph went to the worst affected area, the district of Tharrawaddy north of Rangoon, and held a *durbar* in the town, as he had done in many other places before. At this public audience on 21 December 1930, peasant representatives pleaded to the acting governor to cancel or at least postpone tax collection in the rural areas for a year. Sir Joseph, however, imperiously rejected the request. The following day, the peasants of Tharrawaddy took up arms against the government.

U Yar Kyaw, their leader, was now known as Saya San. He had proclaimed himself king, assuming the presumptuous title of *thupannaka galuna raja* (Illustrious Galon King), and raised an army of disgruntled peasants. With almost bare hands they decided to face the modern guns of the British colonial army: the arsenal of the rebels consisted of no more than 30 firearms, supplemented by hand-made shotguns manufactured from pipe-lengths and bicycle tubing. Apart from this, they had only cross-bows and spears. According to US Professor Lucien W. Pye:

> The Saya San rebellion which broke out in 1931 conformed to the traditional Burmese political and religious pattern of revolts which sought to establish a new monarchy. Guided by soothsayers and supported by magicians, tattooers and the sellers of protective medicines, amulets and charms, the army raised by Saya San placed him upon a throne under the White Umbrella, which symbolised royalty in old Burma, and convinced themselves that they were invulnerable to mere modern guns and weapons. The movement thrived on ignorance, superstition and readiness to accept a mystical and magical view of the universe, to live on unreasonable and emotional expectations of political success.[37]

The majority of the fighters in Saya San's quixotic *galon* army had risen to recover their land from the hands of money-lenders who had taken over vast tracts of the Burmese countryside during the repression of 1929–30. They may have been naive, but their grievances were real, and as Burmese

historian Dr. Htin Aung pointed out: "The only way for the people of Tharrawaddy to end their misery was to rise in rebellion against the British . . . [and] was death not preferable to this misery of poverty under an alien rule?"[38]

Furthermore, their rebellious stance represented a tradition which, in a paradoxical way, was as indigenously Burmese as the subservient acceptance of victimisation through theft, war and plunder which Silverstein has documented. Saya San was the traditional *minlaung* (pretender) to the old Burmese throne, a figure often produced in times of crisis. Given such a leader, even the stoic Burmese would rebel against tyranny.

Saya San first raised his standard at *Alan-taung*—which literally means "the-hill-where-the-flag-flew"—in the rugged, densely forested Pegu Yoma mountain range north of Rangoon, east of Tharrawaddy. A whole battalion of British troops was thrown in against the *galons*. Saya San's headquarters fell and casualties were extremely heavy. But the insurrection spread to twelve out of forty districts, from its epicentre in Tharrawaddy down to the Irrawaddy delta and north to Upper Burma and even to some parts of the Shan States.

The government's forces resorted to brutal suppression: entire villages were razed to the ground, suspected rebels were decapitated and their severed heads displayed as a warning to others. In one particularly gruesome incident, fifteen severed heads were displayed in front of the deputy commissioner's office in Prome. Photographs of the gory exhibition appeared in *The Sun* newspaper, owned and edited by U Saw, and copies were sent to the British parliament.[39]

When the uprising was finally crushed in 1932, more than 10,000 rebels had been killed, 9,000 captured alive and imprisoned, and 128—including Saya San himself and two of his closest associates, Saya Nyan and a hermit called Bandaka—had been hanged. Saya San went to the gallows with his head held high on 28 November 1931. On the government's side there had been no more than fifty casualties, including civil police and officials. Aung San Suu Kyi notes that the rebellion aroused "the patriotic sympathy of the people, who were also repelled by the ruthlessness with which the British dealt with the rebels".[40]

The death sentences were passed by a special tribunal set up by the government to try the rebels. Trials were held in districts where insurrections had occurred, and many nationalistic lawyers eagerly volunteered to defend the accused, most of whom were ordinary, illiterate villagers. But one young pleader stood out among all these lawyers: Maung Saw, a native of Tharrawaddy and an ardent admirer of Saya San. He quickly ascended to prominence following his part in the trial, and the publication of a pamphlet in the form of an open letter to the British Secretary of State. To uphold the glory of Saya San *galons*, U Saw in 1938 raised his own force,

named after Saya San's ragtag band of peasant rebels. The personnel of his new *Galon Tat* wore a green uniform and carried bamboo staves.

The abortive peasant revolt left the colonial victors jubilant in their private clubs all over Burma: they ridiculed the naivety of the superstitious rebels, their hocus-pocus and how easy it had been to defeat them. But to the young intelligentsia in Rangoon and elsewhere, the Saya San rebellion provided an invaluable lesson in the art of guerrilla warfare. The hostilities were far from over; the confident colonial authorities could not have foreseen that just ten years hence the tables would be turned.

Even as the peasant rebels were being slaughtered, serious-minded youths had begun discussing how to organise armed resistance against the British. These young men came from the national schools, which had been established after the 1920 student strike, which used Burmese as the medium of instruction. Many of them already had a sound knowledge of Burmese history and literature as well as Buddhism, more so than those who were being educated at European-style schools.[41]

Thus, although the Saya San rebellion was effectively crushed, it nevertheless played a crucial role in paving the way for the eventual success of Burma's independence movement. Despite the fact that Saya San had wanted a return to the world of the old Buddhist kingdom of pre-British days, the young nationalists had noted that most of his followers were, in fact, young monks and impoverished farmers, and the rebellion had clearly demonstrated their potential.

Leftist ideas had already entered Burma from India and Britain, and in one of those many Burmese ironies, the royalties from a book written by Saya San funded the establishment of a library of the first Marxist literature to reach Burma. Most of this literature was brought in by students returning from England, and a number of book clubs, notably the *Nagani* ("Red Dragon") Book Club, were set up in Rangoon and elsewhere. From then onwards, leftist thinking influenced nearly every political organisation in Burma, including the powerful *Dohbama Asiayone* and the prestigious Rangoon University Students' Union (RUSU).

The militant young nationalists called themselves *thakins* or "masters", a title hitherto reserved for the British. By adding this title to their names, they intended to show that they, the Burmese, were the real masters of the country. The centre of their activity was the leafy campus of Rangoon University—and the most prominent student leaders in the mid 1930s were the young group of five: Thakin Nu, Thakin Aung San, Thakin Kyaw Nyein, Thakin Thein Pe, and M.A. Raschid, a Muslim of Indian origin.

A second student strike occurred in 1936 when the RUSU president, Thakin Nu (later U Nu) and his close associate Thakin Aung San were expelled from the campus. The two were eventually reinstated, but by that time the movement had taken a very definite anti-colonial stand. The anti-

British movement, no longer confined to the activities of groups of militant students in Rangoon, spread across the country in the 1930s. The peasants, hard-hit by the collapse of the international rice market in 1930 and burdened by heavy taxes, were rapidly losing their land to money-lenders and absentee landlords. By the end of the decade, Burma was ripe for a nationwide uprising.

Two years after the second student strike at Rangoon University, the young nationalists spearheaded a mass uprising, and 1938 became known as the "Year of the Revolution", or the "1300 Movement", since according to the Burmese calendar it was the year 1300. A strike broke out among militant workers in the Yenangyaung oil fields southwest of Mandalay. In Rangoon, the students took to the streets and demonstrated against the British authorities.

When the police charged the demonstrators, a young student, Aung Gyaw, suffered a bad head wound from a baton blow, and died in hospital shortly afterwards. He was immediately proclaimed a martyr and all over the country the incensed public joined in the protests. In Mandalay, on 15 February 1939, the police opened fire on a huge demonstration, killing seventeen people, of whom seven were Buddhist monks. "Out of this national and class struggle of the Burmese people and working class emerges the Communist Party of Burma," the Burmese Communists declared much later in their official party history.[42]

According to early British documents, the "father of Burmese communism", was Oo Kyaw, the son of a big landowner in Henzada district.[43] After passing the secondary school final in Burma and the London Matriculation in Ceylon, he went to London in 1927 to study for the bar. Already strongly influenced by Bengali revolutionaries and by the India-based League Against Imperialism, he travelled widely in Europe, where he contacted various Communist groups. Oo Kyaw was believed to have been instrumental in sending Marxist literature back to Burma, and through a lively correspondence with a few selected student leaders back home in Rangoon he managed to pull the movement against the British sharply towards the left.

But no communist organisation was established until Thakin Thein Pe returned from India in 1938. The CPB was officially founded on 15 August 1939 when a group of young Burmese intellectuals met in a small flat in Barr Street, Rangoon. Among them were several student leaders from the *Dohbama*: Thakin Aung San, Thakin Thein Pe, Thakin Ba Hein, and Thakin Hla Pe, later known as Bo Let Ya. The charismatic Aung San was elected general secretary and in the official party history this unpretentious meeting in Rangoon is called the CPB's first congress.[44]

Quite independently from the emergence of the Indian- and British-inspired radical student movement among the Burman intellectuals, com-

munist ideas had also penetrated Rangoon's Chinese community in the late 1920s. "Chinese communism" was first introduced into Burma by Wu Wei Sai (alias Wu Ching Sin) and his wife, who arrived in Rangoon in May 1929 from Shanghai.

He became editor-in-chief of a Chinese-language daily newspaper called *Burma News*, while his wife became a teacher at the Chinese-medium Peng Min School in Rangoon. The couple distributed Communist leaflets in Rangoon's Chinatown and built up a small circle of followers. Their activities were discovered in December 1929 when the special branch of the British police intercepted a letter Wu Wei Sai had written in invisible ink to the South Seas Communist Party in Singapore.[45]

His main message appears to have been that there was no fertile ground for communist ideas among the largely business-oriented Chinese community in Burma. Unlike Singapore and Malaya, Burma had very few labourers of Chinese origin: almost all coolies, dockworkers and other manual labourers in Rangoon were Indian. Wu Wei Sai therefore left Burma in 1930 and was never heard of again.

Only half a dozen members remained in a cell with the pretentious name "the Provisional Committee of the Special Division, Burma, Branch of the South Seas Communist Party". Because they were Chinese, the British police were able to have some of them deported to China. A Chinese cell was also established in Pyinmana but neither this group nor the underground Communist movement in Rangoon's Chinatown had any contacts with the radical Burman movement; instead, their links were with the Chinese-dominated Communist parties in Malaya and Singapore.

As far as is known, the Burman nationalists were unaware of the existence of these Chinese cells. Had the two groups established contact in the late 1930s, it is possible that communism might have succeeded in Burma. For, despite their Indian connections, the young Burmese radicals pinned their hopes for help in their struggle against the British on Mao Zedong and his increasingly victorious Communist army in China, but did not know how to contact them.

Then World War II broke out, a few weeks after the first Communist meeting in Rangoon—and the future of Burma was to change in a way that few had expected. In Asia the fighting had actually begun on 7 July 1937 when Japan attacked Chinese troops at the Marco Polo bridge near Beijing. This was the first move of a carefully calculated plan of conquest; the Japanese intended to establish what they called the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere".

What they really wanted, however, was to expand a strengthened Japanese Empire to include China and other East Asian territories. Nationalist Chinese troops, led by Kuomintang President Chiang Kai-shek, were resisting the Japanese advance in China, and Allied forces established a huge

supply operation through an overland route that became popularly known as the Burma Road.

Tons of vital war supplies were unloaded from ships in Rangoon, then sent by convoys of trucks over the sun-baked plains of central Burma. The road continued through the Shan hills to Lashio, and on to Kunming in Yunnan, southern China. The Japanese began taking a keen interest in Burma, as war veteran Izumiya Tatsuro describes:

> Firstly, there was the Burma Road as the immediate objective. But apart from this, it had not been long since Burma had been conquered by the British, and there was a strong anti-British movement among the Burmans—who constituted the majority among the many races of Burma—because they were severely repressed by the British. The prospects seemed good for operations in Burma.[46]

Aung San and his younger generation of nationalists had decided to fight for complete independence from Britain—not merely Dominion status within the Commonwealth as some of the older politicians advocated—and they were convinced that this goal could be achieved only through an armed uprising. Aung San was only in his mid-twenties but already a political veteran. He had served as the general secretary of the *Dohbama* and, apart from being one of the founders of the CPB, he was also the founder of the Freedom Bloc, a broader alliance of which veteran politician Dr. Ba Maw was the president—and they looked to the East rather than the West for help.

In March 1940, after serving seventeen days in prison, Aung San represented the Burmese nationalists at a meeting of the Indian National Congress at Ramgarh in India. There he met for the first time the urbane, sophisticated statesman Jawaharlal Nehru and also the much more hot-blooded Bengali nationalist, Subhas Chandra Bose.

On his return to Burma, Aung San discovered that the colonial authorities there had issued a warrant for his arrest. He decided to slip out of the country. Together with a close friend, Thakin Hla Myaing, he stowed away on a Chinese ship in the port of Rangoon with 200 Rupees in his pocket and a dream in his heart.

Aung San wanted to fight for Burma's independence and he had been instructed by other militant *thakins* to go to Shanghai to contact the Chinese Communists led by Mao Zedong. But he was in a hurry—the district superintendent of Henzada, a man called Xavier, had publicly advertised a reward of five Rupees to turn Aung San in—so he and Hla Myaing took the first Chinese ship they could find. They disguised themselves as Chinese deck passengers Tan Luan Shung and Tan Su Taung.[47]

It was 8 August 1940, and the ship happened to be destined for Amoy—a coastal Chinese city which was occupied by the Japanese. The Japanese

tracked them down and instead of ending up with Mao Zedong's partisans in the mountains of China, Aung San and Hla Myaing were taken to Tokyo.

The Japanese listened carefully to the two young Burmese. They were promised what they wanted: arms and military training to fight the British. The Japanese took them to Thailand and, while Hla Myaing remained behind in Bangkok, Aung San, again in disguise, returned to Rangoon in February 1941.

The following month, he left with four of his comrades. Among them was close friend Thakin Hla Pe (Bo Let Ya) and Thakin Tun Shein, who later became Bo Yan Naing and married Dr. Ba Maw's daughter. With the cooperation of the Daitoa Shipping Company—one of many fronts for Japanese intelligence—they boarded the Shunten Maru, bound for Tokyo.

Military training began in April with just the six of them: Hla Myaing had returned from Bangkok to join the military exercises, which were held not in Japan proper but on the Japanese-held Chinese island of Hainan.

In April, seven more young *thakins* were also smuggled out of Burma by the Japanese on board a ship called Kairu Maru. That batch included Ko Aung Thein and Thakin Shwe, who were later to be known under their *noms de guerre* Bo Ye Htut and Bo Kyaw Zaw. In early June, three more *thakins* followed, and in July another two arrived in Hainan. A Burmese drama student in Tokyo, Ko Saung, had joined the initial meeting but never participated in the actual military training in Hainan. Including him, there were now nineteen young Burmese nationalists preparing to fight for independence.

Then, in July, an unexpected fourth batch of eleven arrived on board the Koreyu Maru, which belonged to the same Japanese shipping line. This last group included several members of a minority faction of the *Dohbama*, the so-called Thakin Ba Sein-Thakin Tun Oke group. Thakin Tun Oke himself was in the last batch, accompanied by Thakin Shu Maung (later to become Bo Ne Win), who had dropped out of Judson College in 1931 to work as a clerk in a suburban Rangoon post office. Their arrival caused some concern among Aung San and his comrades, who belonged to the majority *Dohbama* faction, which honoured the old nationalist writer Thakin Kodaw Hmaing.

Frictions soon arose between the original group and the late-comers. According to Bo Kyaw Zaw: "Aung San and Ne Win quarrelled quite often [in Hainan]. . . . Aung San was always very straightforward; Ne Win much more cunning and calculating. But Aung San's main objection to Ne Win was his immoral character. He was a gambler and a womaniser, which the strict moralist Aung San—and the rest of us as well—despised. But for the sake of unity, we kept together as much we could."[48]

By now it was clear that the initial unity among the *thakins* belonged to the past. Previously, even though there had been an abundance of different

political parties—the main *Dohbama*, the CPB, the People's Revolutionary Party (PRP), the *Sinyetha* or "Poor Man's Party", and others—these names had meant little since the activities and even the policies of these parties generally overlapped, and since many people were members of two or three parties at the same time. Now, however, various rival factions began to emerge—and the main division of opinion was between the left-leaning Thakin Kodaw Hmaing faction of the *Dohbama* on the one hand, and the extreme right-wing, Axis-oriented Ba Sein-Tun Oke group on the other. Aung San, Bo Let Ya and the more prominent of the *thakins* belonged to the former faction, while Ne Win—who was later to become Burma's military dictator—was one of the most prominent members of the latter.[49]

It should also be noted that the connection with Japan was not established simply because Aung San had caught the wrong ship in Rangoon. Japan's secret activities in Burma had been undertaken by various agents in Rangoon and elsewhere. As early as the 1930s a Japanese naval officer called Shozo Kokubu had made contact with the Ba Sein-Tun Oke faction. In 1940 another nationalist, Dr. Thein Maung, had visited Tokyo on a trip arranged by a Japanese agent in Rangoon, Dr. Tsukasa Suzuki.[50]

However, Thakin Kodaw Hmaing's followers, including Aung San, were suspicious of the Japanese, and the aborted trip to China should be seen as an attempt to find another source of support for the struggle for independence. When that failed, only the Japanese option was open to the young Burmese nationalists.[51]

The Japanese were clearly aware of this, which may help explain why they decided to include the Tun Oke-Ba Sein faction in their training programme. Thakin Ba Sein, the actual founder of the *Dohbama*, had together with Thakin Tun Oke begun contacting the Japanese as early as in 1938. On their recommendation, Ba Sein had already tried to cross the border to Thailand in October 1940, only to be caught and imprisoned.

Whatever the motives of the Japanese, with the arrival of this last batch, they added up to thirty young nationalists. Hence they became known in Burmese history as the Thirty Comrades. Their Japanese commander was Col. Keiji Suzuki, the officer who had apprehended Aung San and Hla Myaing in Amoy. While the only guiding principle of at least the Thakin Kodaw Hmaing faction of the Thirty Comrades was freedom for Burma, Col. Suzuki and Japanese intelligence clearly had other plans in mind.

In order to cut the Burma Road, the Japanese wanted an indigenous Burmese fighting force to boost their chances of success. This intelligence programme was code-named the Minami Kikan, and the young Burmese in Japan unwittingly formed a vital part of it.

In December, twenty-eight of the thirty comrades were transferred to Bangkok; Ko Saung never joined the army and one of the young Burmese, Thakin Than Tin, had succumbed to malaria in Formosa, after the training had shifted

to there from Hainan. The Burma Independence Army (BIA) was formally set up in Bangkok on the 26th. Thakin Hla Pe (*aka* Bo Let Ya) later recalled:

> Enthusiasm ran high and each one of us drew blood from the arm to drink an oath of loyalty. That night we had a meeting of all those who had returned from the training camps in Japan, and Aung San suggested that we should each pick an auspicious name that would give pride and confidence and a sense of mission, a name to carry on our march. It was Aung San's idea and not one that we conceived by collective or prolonged thinking. We liked the idea when it was put to us, and at the meeting we made our selections, tried them out, liked them, and felt a few inches taller wearing the new names.[52]

"Bo" was added to all their new *noms de guerre*: It was a military title that commanded respect and authority. Thus, Aung San became Bo Teza (Powerful Officer), Hla Pe assumed the name Bo Let Ya (Right Hand Man), Thakin Aung Than was Bo Setkya (Officer of the Flying Weapon), Shu Maung became Bo Ne Win (Sun of Glory) and so on. The sole exception was Thakin Tun Oke, who assumed a Japanese name.

Col. Suzuki, the commander of the group, was named Bo Mogyo (Thunder). The Japanese officer had wanted a Burmese name also, and his *nom de guerre* was given to him by Aung San himself. But although Mogyo may mean thunder, there is also a much more subtle explanation to Suzuki's Burmese name. A Burmese saying circulated during British rule: *htiyo-ko mogyo pyit mai*. This prophecy literally meant, "a royal dynasty [the British Raj] will be struck by a bolt of lightning".[53]

In early 1942, the BIA entered Burma together with the Japanese army. Apart from the initial twenty-eight, many more Burmese joined in Thailand and along the border. They numbered about 2,300 in the beginning and soon swelled to 30,000 by the time they reached central Burma. On 7 March 1942, Rangoon was captured by the Japanese, aided by the BIA. The British retreated to the northwest, across the border to safety in India. On 1 August 1943, the Japanese granted "independence" to Burma. Dr. Ba Maw, who had led the *Sinyetha* in the late 1930s became *naingandaw adipadi*, or supreme ruler. He also assumed the title *anashin mingyi kodaw*, meaning "Lord of Power, the Great King's Royal Person". After more than a decade of liberal and left-wing influences, Burma's authoritarian tradition had surfaced again in the form of Axis-sponsored *Führerschaft* with tendencies that clearly hinted at National Socialism. Ne Win became commander of the reorganised Burmese nationalist forces, now renamed the Burma National Army (BNA).

Aung San's daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, has presented probably the best analysis of the nationalist movements of the 1930s in her study *Burma and India: Some Aspects of Intellectual Life Under Colonialism*.[54] Comparing

the different intellectual traditions of these two countries, she argues that already in the 19th century India managed to integrate new, mainly Western ideas relatively harmoniously into its development without losing its identity, whereas the much later and less widespread renaissance in Burma fell short of achieving an East-West, old-new synthesis at the intellectual level. Moreover, there was no time to allow political attitudes to mature before World War II broke out.

Aung San Suu Kyi argues:

> With the advance of the Japanese the Burmese had to face a new set of problems. They had to learn how to cope with a fellow Asian race whose achievements they had admired and who professed to be their allies.... It was against a different background from that which had prevailed under the British that the Burmese had to continue their search for a synthesis of ideas and action which would carry their nation to the required goal as an integrated whole.[55]

The myth of European invincibility had been dispelled—which greatly encouraged the Burman nationalists to look back into history in search of their own military tradition instead of developing the more enlightened tendencies which had begun to emerge in the 1930s, but had never taken firm root in Burmese thinking.

But it was wrong to assume that the Allies had given up. From bases in Assam in northeastern India, preparations began for an alternative to the Burma Road to reach out to the Chinese front once again. The immediate solution was to air-lift supplies from Assam across the mountains of northern Burma—"the Hump" in World War II jargon—and into China. The commanders of the ambitious campaign were two generals who deployed vastly different methods of warfare. One was the enigmatic Briton Maj.-Gen. Orde Wingate who led the "Chindits", named after the *chinthe*, the winged stone lions who are the guardians of Burmese temples. The troops were mostly British, but in their ranks also marched Gurkha Riflemen from Nepal, Nigerians of the Royal West African Frontier Force, Chinese from Hong Kong and native soldiers from the Burma Rifles.

Shelford Bidwell, who fought in the Burma Campaign, writes that among the Chindits "there were symptoms of almost religious fervour inspired by their messianic leader".[56] Wingate always carried his Bible with him, and quoted from the Scriptures freely. "His God," writes Richard Rhodes James, another veteran of the Burma Campaign, "was the God of the Old Testament, a preserver, strengthener and deliverer in battle, who defended the Righteous Cause but insisted His soldiers be worthy of His cause".[57]

Wingate always spoke with his eyes fixed on his listeners and "his harsh, metallic voice, his clear and vibrant style with its evangelical Old Testament flavour and biblical turns of phrase, never failed to grip his audi-