

Intermezzo 1: The Japanese Period (1942-1945)

On 26 December 1941, the Burmese Independence Army (BIA) was solemnly founded in Bangkok. This happened by way of a blood drinking ceremony performed according to an old military tradition called *thway thauk* (blood drinking) after the name of small infantry units of the royal army the members of which were sworn in to an attitude of utmost loyalty to one each other.¹ Shortly later, the members chose *noms de guerre*. Aung San became Bo Teza (Comrade Fire) and Shu Maung chose the name Ne Win (Bright Sun). Like some others, he retained this name after the war.

This act happened only some weeks after the Japanese air force had attacked Pearl Harbour, and three days after Japanese air planes had dropped the first bombs on Rangoon as the opening of the Japanese conquest of Burma with the assistance of the BIA under the leadership of the Japanese Army intelligence officer Suzuki Keiju and Aung San. The Japanese Army entered Rangoon on 8 March 1942 after Ne Win - in traditional Burmese civilian dress - had arrived there already on 2 February to organise guerilla activities.

The British governor Reginald Governor Dorman-Smith left Rangoon end of February and in May settled down in Simla (Shimla), the former summer residence of the British administration in northern India, as the head of the now exiled British administration of Burma. Before him, Paw Tun and Htoon Aung Kyaw who had occupied the posts of premier and finance minister in the last Burmese ministry and some other officials- mostly non-Burmese - had already arrived there. The governor and his officials continued to represent the legitimate Burmese government under the Government of Burma Act of 1935. The British parliament endorsed this position by continuing the validity of Section 139 of the Act that authorised the Governor in a situation "in which the government of Burma cannot be carried on in accordance with this Act" to issue proclamations and laws.²

From there on, a new version of "two Burma's"³ came into being, British-Burma as part of the British Empire and a future member of the Commonwealth of Nations and Japanese-Burma as a part of the Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere comprising the area between Japan and India. Until then, the British province of Burma had been internally divided in Burma proper and the frontier areas, now it became a battlefield on which a western democratic colonial power and its American and Chinese allies fought against a fascist Asian superpower claiming to liberate East Asia. The two divides came together in the fight of the two armies in the battles on Burmese soil during the war. On one side stood the Burma Independence Army (BIA) and its renamed successors⁴ assisting the "Army of the Greater Japanese Empire" to drive out the British. On the other side, four battalions of "Burma Rifles" existed since 1937. They were composed of two units of Karen and one each of Chin and Kachin soldiers and fought together with soldiers from India under British commanders.

1 The name re-emerged after the military coup of 1 February 2021 when "Thway Thauk" groups allegedly targeted people opposed to the military government (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/2/shadowy-pro-military-militias-target-myanmars-anti-coup-movement>; accessed 23.5.2023). For a speech given by Aung San Suu Kyi to commemorate the ceremony in 2019 see https://www.facebook.com/350296402336877/photos/a.350307885669062/465051837527999/?type=3&locale=ms_MY (accessed 23.5.2023).

2 <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1943/may/26/burma-proclamation> (accessed 28.8.2020). A first proclamation was issued by the Governor on 10th December 1942 and approved by parliament on May 26, 1942.

3 The term is borrowed from Callahan 1996:

4 The number of soldiers of the BIA was considerably reduced by the Japanese authorities in 1942 and its name was changed to Burma Defence Army (BDA). After the declaration of independence on 1 August 1943 another name change to Burma National Army (BNA) took place.

In contrast, the civil reactions to the Japanese invasion were rather diverse. Besides those Burmese who had left the country either to continue supporting the British and the 30 Comrades who underwent training on Hainan under Aung San's leadership, many other Thakins had been imprisoned because of their anti-British agitation. While in Insein Jail, the communist Thakins Soe and Than Tun, who later headed two Burmese communist parties, wrote a manifesto in which they declared that the main objective was to oppose Japanese fascism and support the British, at least for the time being. Soe went underground with some comrades after having left prison in course of the British retreat to fight the Japanese while Than Tun joined the Burmese administration under Ba Maw's leadership as an executive overseeing agricultural affairs. Other communists, the most prominent of them Thein Pe, went to India and supported Force 136, the British intelligence organisation through their contacts with their comrades staying behind in Burma. Finally, some prominent members of the pre-war political elite were interned by the British for different reasons. Saw was taken to Uganda after he had contacted Japanese officials in Lisboa on his flight back from the USA during his time as prime minister in 1951. Ba Sein and Tun Oke from the "conservative" Tkahin movement that had split in 1938, were brought to Malaya in 1943 when Burma officially was declared an independent country. Officially they became ambassadors to the Japanese vassal states Manchuako and China.



BIA soldiers 1942

Tun Oke, the only civilian member of the 30 comrades who had not participated in the training on Hainan Island, had been appointed head of a Burmese administration formed by the Japanese shortly after the conquest. His Baho (central) government however had no power. The hopes of the BIA under Aung San's leadership that had quickly increased in numbers to take over government functions were thwarted by the Japanese. The first acts to take over administrative functions shortly after the withdrawal

of the British had resulted in communal violence between Burmese and Karen and Arakanese and Muslims in the Ayeyarwady Delta and in Arakan respectively. The effects of the massacres happening then had a massive impact on the collective memory on all sides involved that are still felt today. In July 1942, the number of BIA soldiers had to be drastically reduced and renamed Burma defence Army.⁵

Ba Maw had been contacted by the Japanese in Upper Burma after he had left Mandalay Prison. He was brought to Maymyo (Pyin U Lwin) where he met some Thakins most of them having been detained by the British as he had been. ⁶The Freedom Bloc alliance was thus renewed and a new united party was formed, named the *Do-Bama Sinyetha Asiayone* (We-Burma Proletariat Association). Furthermore, a committee was put up to prepare for a new Burmese administration. Many pre-war Burmese politicians participated in the venture, only Ba Pe refused.

5 Another name change happened when Burma became nominally independent in August 1943. It was renamed Burma National Army (BNA). Ne Win replaced Aung San as its commander after the latter had taken over the defence ministry"

6 Japan had been politically very active in Burma even before the war. A main reason was the construction of the Burma Road between Lashio in northern Shan State and Kunming in China's Yunnan Province in 1937 and 1938. The main aim of the road was to assist the Chinese government of Chiang Kai-shek in Chongqing against the Japanese aggression.

According to a number on contemporary witnesses, the people of Burma very quickly realised that the new masters of the country could not be regarded as liberators. They had not only not released Burma into independence as anticipated but had acted as oppressors that were even worse than the British. Khin Myo Chit, a young Burmese writer at that time, describes the “difficulties” to cope with the behaviour of the co-Asians in this way:

The difficulty that rose out of the difference of tongues was found to be unsurmountable. Deaf and dumb language did not work at all and misunderstandings frequently occurred.. When a Japanese soldier misunderstood, peoples’ faces were sure to be slapped. This was regarded by the Burmese people as the greatest humiliation of their lives. So it was that from the very beginning that the much wanted claims of Nippon-Burmese Cultural ties were seriously jeopardised. (Khin Myo Chit 1946: 4)

Such experiences constituted a much harsher cultural clash than the unwillingness of the British elites at the beginning of the century to take off their shoes when entering a pagoda.⁷

Nevertheless, on 1 August 1943 a Burmese administration headed by Ba Maw was installed and Burma was nominally declared an independent state. The essence of the new order was expressed by the slogan "One Blood, One Voice, One Command". According to the memories of the Director of Press and Publicity under of the government, "one blood" was to signify the unity of all races traditionally living in the country, "one voice" denoted single-mindedness and "one command" the leadership of one person on top of the state (Hla Pe 1961: 16-17).

The preliminary constitution⁸ invested all power in the Head of State (Burmese: *Adipadi*) who was to be advised by a Privy Council of 20-25 politically experienced members over the age of 40 that in a way took the place of the (quasi-)parliamentarian bodies of the colonial era. A Constituent Body was to be appointed to draft the final constitution to be implemented after the end of the war. These provisions showed some semblance with the realities under royal rule, too. The kings had been advised by a council of ministers called *hluttaw*, a word now designating the parliaments of the country. Accordingly, the ceremony performed on the occasion contained elements of royal times.

An impressive ceremony in which Dr. Ba Maw was installed as *Adipadi* - the Head of the State - then took place. Everything in the setting was calculated to recall the old royal traditions. The music played was the customary accompaniment of the entry of the King in *pwes* [stage performances; *hbsz*] the announcer was a dwarf; and Thakin Kodaw Hmine, in administering the oath, addressed Dr. Ba Maw as Ministers of old addressed the King. (Tun Pe: 73)



Source: Alamy



Painting of the Independence Ceremony by Japanese artist Ryōhei Koiso (Source: Wikimedia)

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In retrospect, this event of 1 August 1943 was called a "sham independence". It seems, however, that many Burmese people very much appreciated the event. In retrospect, a chronicler of the period noted:

The early days of independence were days of pageants, shows, symbols and forms; and amidst all these came that great patriot of Bengal, Subhas Chandra Bose. The life of Bose had thrilled the hearts of young Burmese. [...] He was enthusiastically welcomed and with his arrival, the new trend of thought was that since Burma had struggled against the British, they were bound by a common cause and ties of friendship with India. [...] The slogan 'on to Delhi' and new methods of greetings by Indians with a semi-Hitler salute accompanied by the words 'Jai Hind'⁹ [*Victory for India; hbz*] became the fashion in Rangoon. The Indian problem seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth. (Hla Pe 1961: 37)

Subhas Chandra Bose, the Bengal nationalist and leader of the Indian National Army, had been flown in from Singapore as Ba Maw's guest of honour. Bose had been twice elected president of the Indian National Congress and was regarded as a rival of Gandhi. Aung San met him twice in 1940 when he travelled to India with a Thakin delegation. He admired the Indian leader and shared his conviction that it could be necessary to use violent means to achieve independence (Heikkilä-Horn: 158; Zöllner 1996: 440-444). After an escape from house arrest in Calcutta, he had gone to Germany, was disappointed by Hitler's refusal to recognise Indians as equal partners of the German Aryan, came back to Asia on board of a German and a Japanese submarine and founded the Indian National Army (INA) with Indian prisoners of war captured by the Japanese troops. In 1944, he moved the the army's headquarters to Rangoon to assist the Imperial Army in conquering India.

Khin Myo Chit highlights the enthusiasm of the days as well, but adds a sarcastic commentary:

Celebrations and merry making were carried out nation-wide. The Burmese conducted their celebrations so enthusiastically that in Rangoon some of the tactless commercial firm directors were inclined to be outspoken when they saw their employees participating in the demonstrations of national joy. Why such a fuss over an empty thing! Do you all think you are getting real independence? Take those flowers off your button hole and get down to work." (Khin Myo Chit 1945: 21)

Thakin Nu, who took over the post of foreign minister on independence day, entitles the chapter about his recollections on 1st August in his recollection of the "Five Years in Burma" under Japanese rule¹⁰ with the emphatic line "Free! Free! Burma is Free!" (Nu 1954: 70) Furthermore, he published his first – and only – novel shortly before the day as a kind of present to honour the auspicious occasion and wrote in the foreword that independence would provide him the chance to fulfil his dream of serving his country as a writer (Zöllner 2023: 38-50).

One can conclude that that the "sham independence" was regarded as an event of high symbolic significance. The anticipation of "real independence" was celebrated. In a style as if this goal had already been reached. The allusions to the royal times as well as the emphasis on oneness suggest that the absence of any elections as a means to legitimise the new order was not seen as an obstacle to celebrate the symbolic freedom achieved. Of course, emotionally uploaded feelings connected to the day were not shared by all residents of the former British province. The event was predominantly an affair of the ethnic Bamar.

The same applies to actions undertaken to "clean" the country from the British colonial heritage. Streets and places were renamed, among them the former Churchill Rd. that now was named Komin-kochin Rd. reviving Thakin Ba Thoung's contribution to the Burmese independence struggle

9 The slogan was popularised by Bose who later established the headquarters of the Indian National Army in Rangoon

10 The book was published shortly after independence in Burmese under the title given here. In 1954 an English translation that somewhat changed the composition of the book to accommodate western readers. It is entitled "Burma under the Japanese".

and the political party of the Thakins formed to contest the 1936 elections. A statue of the monk U Wisara close to the Shwedagon Pagoda who had died in 1929 after a hunger strike in prison. Defence minister Aung San unveiled the statue in October 1943 stating that "as the national independence attained so far is not yet permanent because we have not yet won this war we are unable as yet to enjoy the taste of national independence, of *loki nibbana* (wordly Nirvana)". (Houtman 1999:34)

Aung San's remark echoed the conviction of that the Burmese leaders that the achievement of "full independence" lay still ahead. As a consequence, the preparations to Throw off the Japanese yoke happened very early inside Burma as well. Parallel to the cooperation with the Japanese, a resistance movement emerged led by a coalition of the army, the communist party and a group that later became known as the socialist party. These three factions from 1944 on formed an "anti-fascist" front in August 1944¹¹ that developed into the Anti Fascist Peoples' Freedom League (AFPFL) formed in Rangoon at a meeting in early March 1945. Aung San, Soe and Than Tun were given responsibility for military, political and international affairs respectively (Taylor 1985: 109). Later, many other groups joined the league under Aung San's leadership.

Some weeks later, on March 27, 1945, Aung San ordered the BNA to turn against the Japanese troops after he had got in contact with the Allied forces through those communists who had opposed the Japanese and supported the British in Burma and India from the beginning.

After the defeats of the Japanese army at Kohima and Imphal in north-eastern India in June and July 1944, it was pushed back by the allied forces under the command of the British admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten. The allied troops reached Rangoon in early May 1945.

Head of state Ba Maw joined the Japanese in their retreat and was flown to Tokyo. After the Japanese surrender on September 2, 1945, he was imprisoned for some time by the US authorities. He was not charged however and returned in September 1946 to his homeland. He founded the Mahabama (Great Burma) party, but never made a successful political comeback.

The following decades of Burmese history were dominated by three persons who served under him in after August 1, 1943: Aung San as defence minister, Nu as minister for foreign affairs and later as minister of information – and Ne Win as Aung San's successor as head of the Burmese army.

The interlude of Burma's history during the Japanese occupation between early 1942 and May 1945 was highly ambivalent. One aspect of this ambiguity is the fact that the Burmese army participated both in the driving out of the British and the Japanese colonialists as a junior partner of two empires with quite antagonistic ideological concepts. It further was

an important transition period in which the country for a very short time enjoyed the feeling of having thrown off the colonial shackles. "Real" independence however - with or without elections - was still far away.



U Wisara monument (Photo: H.-B. Zöllner)

11 For details of the resistance see Maung Maung 1089. The author was Aung San's assistant during the Japanese period and later helped to build up the Tatmadaw under Ne Win's leadership. and describes the event from the perspective of a "young officers group" to which he belonged.