

## *Race and Resistance in Burma, 1942–1945*

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The President of the United States of America and the Prime Minister, Mr Churchill, representing His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom . . . respect the right of all people to choose the form of government under which they will live, and they wish to see sovereign rights restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them.

Article III  
*Atlantic Charter*  
12 August 1941

WITHIN six months of receiving its independence from Britain in January 1948, the Union of Burma was wracked by a number of insurgencies. While one of the most serious was by communists denied a place in the new government, at least four others were inspired by racial antagonisms, with Muslim Arakanese, Karens, Kachins and Mons all attempting to assert separatist claims against the Burman-dominated central government in Rangoon. To different degrees, these insurgencies are still continuing and have been joined by the secessionist rebellions of other minority groups such as the Shans and Chins. Indeed, members of almost every major ethnic group in Burma have taken up arms against the central government since 1948 and by a recent count more than a dozen separatist insurgencies are currently being waged against the Ne Win regime.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, these racial antagonisms have their origins in the country's pre-colonial and colonial past, but the differences which arose after the defeat of the Japanese in 1945 were greatly exacerbated by the events of the war period. Even more than was seen before 1942, racial divisions became political divisions, with the majority Burmans and minority hill peoples tending to choose opposite sides and different visions of the country's future. In this they were encouraged by their imperial sponsors, with effects which can still be seen today.

<sup>1</sup> P. Janke, *Guerrilla and Terrorist Organisations: A World Directory and Bibliography* (Harvester Press, Brighton, 1983), pp. 135 *et seq.* See also the *Annual of Power and Conflict 1978–79: A Survey of Political Violence and International Influence* (Institute for the Study of Conflict, London, 1979), pp. 416–19.

There have been few careful, objective studies of the various internal and external factors affecting Burmese<sup>2</sup> political developments during the war period. Robert Taylor's 'Burma in the Anti-Fascist War'<sup>3</sup> is a notable exception to this rule, but while effectively dispelling many of the myths that have come to surround the nationalist movement at that time, he tends to concentrate on the complex interrelationships between the different factions in the centre and gives little attention to the racial minorities on the periphery. Given that the most important political actors in the struggle for Burmese independence both during the war and after it were almost without exception ethnic Burmans, this is hardly surprising, but to discount the role of the national minorities in the country's 'frontier fringe' is to overlook factors that were to have a significant impact on the country's political future. Josef Silverstein gives greater weight to racial factors in his study, *Burmese Politics: The Dilemma of National Unity*, but claims that the second world war 'created new conditions that made it possible for the socially and politically divided peoples to come together and lay the foundations for a new, united society.'<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, the war period probably saw a greater hardening of divisions between the majority Burmans and minority hill peoples, as well as the development of new rifts that were to lead directly to the many attacks on the Burmese Union after 1948. In this regard, the policies of the Allies towards the anti-fascist resistance groups among the Burmese between 1942 and 1945 played no small part in the breakdown of the new state.

The political entity traditionally known as Burma has been described as an 'ethnic archipelago',<sup>5</sup> with a central lowland area populated mainly by ethnic Burmans, Mons (also known as Talaings) and pockets

<sup>2</sup> Before 1948, the term 'Burmese' was usually given to ethnic Burmans with the various hill peoples identified by their ethnic names, such as Kachins, Chins, Shans etc. After 1948, when the independent state of Burma demanded an adjective to describe its citizens, the name 'Burmese' was used for all the population of the Union, while the term 'Burman' was reserved for members of that particular ethnic stock. To complicate matters, however, the British administration in Burma prior to 1948 often used to include the Mons and Arakanese, and at times the Shans, in the term 'Burmese' and the same term is still the only one which adequately describes the kingdom which the British conquered in the nineteenth century, despite the fact that it was dominated at times by a Burman monarch and at others by a Shan. Wherever possible, the various racial distinctions made in this paper reflect the established usage.

<sup>3</sup> R. H. Taylor, 'Burma in the Anti-Fascist War', in A. W. McCoy (ed.), *Southeast Asia Under Japanese Occupation* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> J. Silverstein, *Burmese Politics: The Dilemma of National Unity* (Rutger's University Press, New Brunswick, 1980), p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> B. Crozier, *The Rebels: A Study of Post War Insurrections* (Chatto and Windus, London, 1960), p. 84.

of Karens, surrounded by a fringe of largely autonomous hill peoples, possessing distinctive languages, cultures and political traditions. With the exception of the Arakanese in the west (who absorbed many aspects of Indian civilization and once enjoyed an empire of their own) and the Shans on the northeastern plateau (who like their Thai cousins enjoyed a highly sophisticated Buddhist culture) the hill peoples of Burma were much less developed than those living on the central plains. In 1942 these highland communities were largely untouched by the political struggles that were taking place between the British and the emerging Burmese nationalist movements.<sup>6</sup> The one exception was the Karens, large pockets of whom had moved from the eastern hills and settled in the Irrawaddy delta, where they established communities among the Burmans.<sup>7</sup> Estimates vary widely, but in 1941 there appears to have been some 13 million Burmans and 500,000 Karens in the central plains, coexisting uncomfortably with one million Indians and around 150,000 Chinese. In the surrounding highlands there were about 50,000 Chins, 150,000 Kachins, one million Shans and another 500,000 Karens.<sup>8</sup>

When the British deposed the Burmese king Thibaw in 1885, and so completed their three-stage conquest of the country,<sup>9</sup> they 'pacified' the

<sup>6</sup> Kachin, Chin and Karen soldiers were used, however, to help quell the Hsaya San rebellion of 1930-32. This rebellion, inspired by a complex mixture of economic, social and religious factors, was later appropriated by the more politically conscious Burmans in the cities as an example of widespread nationalist feeling against the British. Both the rebels and the politicians in question were overwhelmingly Burman. See, for example, P. Herbert, *The Hsaya San Rebellion (1930-32) Reappraised*, Working Paper no. 27, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies (Monash University, Melbourne, 1982), and by R. Solomon, *Saya San and the Burmese Rebellion*, Rand Paper P-404 (Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, 1969).

<sup>7</sup> This description of the ethnic composition of Burma is necessarily very brief. Southeast Asia is one of the world's most complicated linguistic regions—linguistic criteria being the most common basis for the classification of tribes and ethnic minorities. One survey has claimed 242 different spoken languages and dialects in Burma, or by ethnographical analysis, 172 different 'tribes'. For a scholarly study of this question, see P. Kunstadter, *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities and Nations* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1967), vol. 1 pp. 75 *et. seq.*

<sup>8</sup> These figures are based on the wartime estimates used by C. Cruickshank, *SOE in the Far East* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983), p. 163. Different estimates are given elsewhere, but as the 1941 Census figures for race were lost as a result of the Japanese invasion all such information must be considered approximate only. Crozier gives a figure of 1,367,673 for the number of Karens in 1949, although the Karens themselves claimed over 2 million. Crozier, *The Rebels*, p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> The coastal strips of Arakan and Tenasserim were lost to the British in the First Burmese War of 1824-26. In the Second Burmese War of 1852 Britain won control over the Irrawaddy delta and Pegu district as far north as Prome. The remainder of the country (and the Burmese monarchy) fell in the Third Burmese War of 1885. See, for example, F. N. Trager, *Burma: From Kingdom to Independence: A Historical and Political*

hill people and extended formal control over the frontier fringe, but like the Burmese kings before them the British were satisfied with indirect control over these areas through the traditional chiefs and tribal councils.<sup>10</sup> The remainder of Burma was ruled directly by the colonial administration until 1923, when the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 were extended to Burma.<sup>11</sup> Under the 1923 constitution, however, the frontier fringe, which constituted almost half the area of Burma and held around sixteen per cent of its population, was specifically excluded from the jurisdiction of the new Legislative Council. These ‘scheduled areas’ remained under the direct control of the Lieutenant Governor and were administered through a separate Frontier Service. This arrangement continued under the Act of 1935, which formally separated Burma from India and gave the Burmese a greater role in their own government. Under a separate Instrument of Instruction the Governor was charged with special responsibilities to protect the interests of the minorities and the Karens, Chinese and Anglo-Indians, like the Europeans, were guaranteed representation through reserved seats in Parliament. While ostensibly to protect the legitimate interests of the minorities and certain economic groups, this system in practice ensured that the elected Burmese seated in the House of Representatives could never command an absolute majority.<sup>12</sup> Thus, as Silverstein has written:

the evolution of self government in Burma helped to foster and intensify ethnic pluralities and national disunity by emphasising differences and by reducing the national power of the majority, through artificial institutional devices.<sup>13</sup>

This was to have profound effects on the nationalist movement which was then gathering strength.

*Analysis* (Pall Mall Press, London, 1966). A more partisan account is given in Htin Aung, *The Stricken Peacock: Anglo-Burmese Relations 1752–1948* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1965).

<sup>10</sup> For an account of this period see C. Crosthwaite, *The Pacification of Burma* (Frank Cass, London, 1968). Sir Charles Crosthwaite was Chief Commissioner of Burma during the period 1887–90. The Burmese did in fact occupy the Shan States for a period.

<sup>11</sup> The chief executive of Burma was elevated to Lieutenant Governor in 1897. At that time a small Legislative Council was established, consisting of four officials and five nominated non-officials. In 1909 the Morley–Minto reforms for India were applied to Burma and the Lieutenant Governor’s Council was enlarged to fifteen with two elected members. One of the nominated members of the Council was drawn from the Indian community, another from the Shan chiefs. A Shan chief had been on the 1897 council also.

<sup>12</sup> J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (New York University Press, New York, 1956), p. 168.

<sup>13</sup> Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, p. 29.

The modern nationalist movement in Burma was essentially Burman in character. Heavily influenced in its early stages by the Buddhist *sangha* (or monks) it laid stress on Buddhism and particular cultural values such as the Burmese language and Burmese literature. By the 1930s, however, these elements were fading and the movement fell under the influence of laymen, in particular a group of young radicals led by Aung San and other former students from the University of Rangoon. As members of the *Dobama Asiayone* (or ‘We Burmans Society’) and calling themselves *Thakin* (or ‘Master’) they opened their ranks to all Burmese, regardless of their ethnic background. In addition to independence for the whole of Burma the Thakins demanded ‘internal freedom’, defined as ‘the welfare of one and all, irrespective of race, religion or class or sex.’<sup>14</sup> The movement attracted some Indians and a number of Mons and Arakanese, but remained overwhelmingly Burman.<sup>15</sup> Calls for a united Burma free from British rule found few sympathizers among the minority peoples, who stood to be swamped by the inevitable Burman majority that would follow independence. Those Karens who were prepared to countenance an end to British colonial rule sought instead a state of their own, in which their rights would be protected.<sup>16</sup> This fundamental difference in perception was manifested in the Burma Parliament where the representatives of the minorities constantly blocked reforms which would have exposed them to greater Burman rule.

Before 1930, the Burmese nationalists had not challenged the British argument that historically the ‘scheduled areas’ were separated from Burma proper and always had been. The Simon Commission in 1930 and the Round Table Conference of 1931–32, however, acted as foci for local grievances against the colonial regime.<sup>17</sup> Of these, the place of the Indians in the country’s administration and commerce was perhaps the most important, but also raised at this time was the abolition of communalism in politics and the physical reunification of Burma—the abolition of the scheduled areas. In addition, a persistent claim by the

<sup>14</sup> Aung San, *The Political Legacy of Aung San*, compiled by J. Silverstein, Data Paper no. 86, Southeast Asia Program (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1972), p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Maung Maung, *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements in Burma 1920–1940*, ANU Monographs on South Asia no. 4 (Manohar, Delhi, 1980), pp. 197, 230 *et. seq.*

<sup>16</sup> As early as 1930 the Karen leaders realized that reserved Parliamentary seats alone would not protect them from the Burman majority, and began to agitate for a separate Karen state (Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, pp. 45–6). This constituted a radical change in Karen policy at the time.

<sup>17</sup> The Simon Commission was charged with investigating the operation of the 1922 reforms. The Burma Round Table discussions were on the future political development of Burma.

nationalists was that the British conquest and continued hold over the country stemmed in large measure from its success in dividing the peoples of Burma and using them against each other.<sup>18</sup> The basis for this complaint lay not only in the administrative arrangements instituted by the British since 1885 but also in the practice of excluding the Burmans from the country's armed forces and recruiting only the members of the hill tribes.

Although U Nu has stated that the trouble between the Burmans and Karens began in 1942,<sup>19</sup> there was a long history of communal feeling between the hill peoples and the Burmans. The Burmese monarchy had reviled the minorities as illiterate pagans and treated them harshly whenever their paths crossed. The Karens suffered most, being at the mercy of the Burman communities in the delta. Of all the ethnic minorities it was the Karens in particular who welcomed the advent of the British, seeing in colonial rule the means of gaining protection from the majority race and of getting opportunities previously denied them. As animists they were also more susceptible to Christian influences than the Buddhist Burmans, Mons, Arakanese and Shans, and European missionaries were soon promoting the Karens to the British administration as loyal subjects willing if necessary to protect the interests of the Raj against those of the Burmans.<sup>20</sup> Karens were recruited to help overthrow the Burmese king in 1885 and, like the Chins and Kachins later, came to be viewed by the British as one of the 'martial races' with which they had become familiar in India. By the beginning of the twentieth century these hill peoples had established themselves as the source of the colony's military manpower.

Before the separation of Burma from India there were no Burmans in the regular Burma Army and, until shortly before separation, none in the military police. There had been some effort to recruit Burmans before and during the first world war, but in 1925 a decision was taken by India Army Headquarters to recruit only Chins, Kachins and Karens. All Burmans then in the army were discharged on the grounds that it was not only unnecessary and uneconomical to retain them, but also unwise. The Burmans in general had not made good soldiers, it was felt, and their loyalty had become increasingly suspect as nationalist agitation mounted. The decision was a blow to Burmese pride and was

<sup>18</sup> Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, pp. 43–4.

<sup>19</sup> U Nu, *Saturday's Son* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1975), p. 164.

<sup>20</sup> Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, p. 180. See also Furnivall's shorter *The Governance of Modern Burma* (Institute of Pacific Relations, New York, 1958), p. 10 and G. E. Harvey, *British Rule in Burma 1824–1942* (Faber, London, 1946), p. 40 *et. seq.*

bitterly denounced in the Burma Parliament, but as defence was an area reserved for the Governor's control there was little the Burman MPs could do.<sup>21</sup> After 1935 the British recognized the need to open the ranks to Burmans, but little effort was made to meet it. In addition, the 'best kind' of Burman youth was not attracted to a career in the armed forces, which tended to be viewed as an instrument of state power in which the minorities helped repress the legitimate aspirations of the Burman majority. As J. S. Furnivall noted: 'the army remained non-Burmese, entirely distinct from the people and an instrument for the maintenance of internal security rather than for defence against aggression'.<sup>22</sup> At the outbreak of the second world war in 1939 only 472 Burmans (including here Mons and Shans) were members of the regular armed forces, although together they constituted 75.11% of the country's population. The figures for the hill tribes were rather different—there were 1448 Karens (9.3% of the population), 868 Chins (2.3%), 881 Kachins (1.05%) and 168 members of other ethnic groups.<sup>23</sup> Of the officers, only four were Burman while 75 came from the minority races.<sup>24</sup> The hurried recruitment of Burmans after Japan declared war in 1941 failed markedly to change this situation and when the Japanese invaded Burma in January 1942 many Burmans deserted, some to join the rebel Burma Independence Army (BIA).<sup>25</sup>

When the more radical young Burmese nationalists failed to make any headway against the British by the late 1930s, they decided that armed action was the only avenue left open to them if they were to achieve independence. After unsuccessful attempts to enlist support

<sup>21</sup> Maung Maung claims that Burman members of Parliament agitated for the creation of more representative military units not from an awareness of the country's needs but from feelings of nationalism and Burman pride. Maung Maung, *Burma in the Family of Nations* (Djambatan, Amsterdam 1956), p. 90. F. S. V. Donnison described the problem in quite different terms: 'The majority race would be unrepresented in the military forces of the new state. And the disadvantage of this would not be merely sentimental or psychological: the loyalty of the tribesmen from whom the army was constituted would be in the last resort not to the Burma of the Burmans but the tribal communities of the mountain fringes of Burma, communities whose interests were often sharply divided from those of Burma proper, and most of whom regarded the Burman with a blend of distrust, contempt and fear.' F. S. V. Donnison, *Public Administration in Burma: A Study of Developments During the British Connection* (Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 1953), p. 97.

<sup>22</sup> Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, p. 183. See also U Ba Than, *The Roots of the Revolution* (Director of Information, Rangoon, 1962), p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, p. 184.

<sup>24</sup> Maung Maung, *Burma in the Family of Nations*, p. 90.

<sup>25</sup> U Ba Than, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 24. His claim that some members of the Burma Rifles were 'won over' is confirmed by Slim, who reported desertions from 'Burman units'. W. Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (Cassell and Co., London, 1956), p. 34.

from China, they managed to secure the assistance of the Japanese, already preparing for a thrust into Southeast Asia.<sup>26</sup> A small group of Burmese was smuggled out of Burma to Japan and China, where they underwent military training. Except for two Shans, the 'Thirty Comrades' as they became known, were all ethnic Burmans.<sup>27</sup> In January 1942 the group returned to Burma at the head of the invading Japanese. Apart from those Japanese marching with them, their newly formed Burma Independence Army consisted of a mixed group of some 200 Shans and expatriate Burmans recruited in Bangkok the month before. A number were Thai nationals. Hailed as the first truly Burmese army since that of Mahabandoola,<sup>28</sup> however, the BIA quickly attracted a large following. By the time it had reached the capital two months later its number had swollen to over 10,000,<sup>29</sup> most of whom appear to have been Burmans. There was little enthusiasm for the BIA on the part of the national minorities. In more ways than one, the war had become a racial conflict.

As the colonial administration retreated north before the Japanese advance, the communal tensions which underlay Burmese politics since the British conquests the previous century quickly became apparent. The Indians were the first to suffer, as they had in a number of riots before the war, but so, too, did the Chinese and the national minorities.<sup>30</sup> Of the latter, the worst treatment was meted out to the

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Yoon Won-zoon, *Japan's Scheme for the Liberation of Burma: The Role of the Minami Kikan and the 'Thirty Comrades'*, Papers in International Studies, Southeast Asia Series no. 27 (Ohio University, Athens, 1973).

<sup>27</sup> Most of the Thirty Comrades were drawn from a secret sub-group of the *Dobama Asiayone* formed in 1939 and known as the Burma Revolutionary Party. At least one appears to have been of mixed race. One of the Thirty Comrades died during training in China, and only 29 returned to Burma in the BIA.

<sup>28</sup> Mahabandoola was the celebrated Burmese general who won a resounding victory over the British forces in 1824, during the First Burmese War. See A. T. Q. Stewart, *The Pagoda War: Lord Dufferin and the Fall of the Kingdom of Ava* (Faber, London, 1972), pp. 37–8.

<sup>29</sup> Estimates of the size of the BIA vary greatly depending on the political sympathies of the source. The figure of 10,000 is from Yoon Won-zoon, 'Japan's Occupation of Burma 1941–1945' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, New York University, 1971), p. 173. Some estimates range as high as 200,000 (J. Lebra, *Japanese Trained Armies in Southeast Asia: Independence and Volunteer Forces in World War II* (Heinemann, Hong Kong, 1977), p. 65. Trager, citing a rather unreliable Burmese source, claims 50,000 (Trager, *Burma: From Kingdom to Independence*, p. 59). U Ba Than seems safe in claiming 23,000 BIA members by May 1942, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 33.

<sup>30</sup> In 1941 there were about 1 million Indians in Burma, most in the cities. In 1930 there had been severe anti-Indian riots in Rangoon and in 1938 severe anti-Muslim



Karens who fell into the hands of the BIA. There were serious outbreaks of racial violence in the Salween district in the east and to a greater extent in the Irrawaddy delta where what amounted to a race war raged among the Burman and Karen communities for some three months or more.<sup>31</sup> These outbreaks were in part a reflection of deep-seated Burman resentment against the Karens, but they were also fired by Burman accusations that the Karens remained loyal to the British and were hiding arms badly needed by the rapidly growing BIA. Whole communities were put under arrest simply because they were Karen and there were a number of public executions, either for 'disloyalty' to the new Burmese regime, or to make an example of those unwilling to cooperate with the BIA. There were also acts of retribution for Karen guerrilla attacks. Ironically, many communities (both Burman and Karen) turned to the Japanese for protection against the rampaging soldiers of the BIA, and Karen counter-attacks.<sup>32</sup> Tensions continued throughout 1943 and although a reconciliation of sorts was achieved between the Burmese nationalists under Aung San and the Karen leaders in 1944, the events of 1942 were never forgotten.

The hill peoples in the northern and western fringes of the country fared rather better. The Shans did not escape one BIA 'spree'<sup>33</sup> but were able quickly to persuade the Japanese to withdraw all their forces from the Shan States and leave them to manage their own affairs, in return for an oath of loyalty to the new regime.<sup>34</sup> Even after Burma received nominal 'independence' from the Japanese and the new government was given jurisdiction over the Shan States, Burmese military units were not permitted to operate there. Nor did the BIA, first reformed and named the Burma Defence Army, then after independence the Burma National

riots. Racial hatreds were fuelled on both occasions by economic difficulties faced by the predominantly Burman agriculturalists in the districts. See M. Collis, *Last and First in Burma (1941–1948)* (Faber, London, 1956), p. 106, and Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma: Memoirs of a Revolution 1939–1946* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1968), p. 198.

<sup>31</sup> See in particular Ba Maw, *Breakthrough*, pp. 187–96 and I. Morrison, *Grandfather Longlegs: The Life and Gallant Death of Major H. P. Seagrim* (Faber, London, 1947), pp. 70 *et. seq.* and 183 *et. seq.*

<sup>32</sup> Ba Maw, *Breakthrough*, p. 155. Even communities of loyal Burmans sought Japanese protection from BIA mobs. See U Ba U, *My Burma: The Autobiography of a President* (Taplinger, New York, 1959), p. 160.

<sup>33</sup> The term is Maung Maung's, in his hagiographical *Burma and General Ne Win* (Asia, Bombay, 1969), p. 122.

<sup>34</sup> Ba Maw, *Breakthrough*, p. 200. Also, Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, p. 54. U Ba Than is incorrect when he states that the BIA never went into the Shan, Kachin or Chin areas. They made one foray into the Shan States in 1942, referred to above. U Ba Than, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 32.

Army (BNA),<sup>35</sup> ever operate in the Chin Hills or Kachin areas. Because of the monsoons and transport difficulties, even the Japanese pulled up short of the Burma frontier in 1942 and although they later penetrated as far as Imphal and Kohima in their 1944 *U-GO* offensive, these border regions remained largely free of foreign troops. The Japanese put some effort into propaganda in an attempt to win over the northern hill peoples, but in general did not attempt to occupy their lands.<sup>36</sup> The main racial conflict in the northeast was the age-old rivalry between the local people and the Chinese, some formations of whom were initially sent by Chungking to help stem the Japanese advance, but who quickly retreated from it. Again, it was ironically the Japanese who were able to protect the local villagers from the depredations of these 'allies'.<sup>37</sup> There were also savage outbreaks of racial violence in the Arakan region, as the local people turned on the Indian refugees fleeing west to British territory. In this area, however, it was the BIA and Japanese together who managed to restore a measure of control and communal order.<sup>38</sup>

When the Japanese invaded Burma, almost the entire British administration managed to escape to India, including its Indian component which had formerly dominated the civil service and private bureaucracy. The country was thus left in the hands of the Burmese, who under Japanese control were permitted to form a subordinate administration in August 1942. A year later Burma was declared an independent country and a national government established under a former Prime Minister, Dr Ba Maw. The new state promptly declared war on the Allies. Many Thakins were appointed to Cabinet positions or given senior ranks in the renamed Burma National Army. In different ways, Ba Maw and the younger nationalists around him attempted to create a united Burma free of the racial divisions which had marked the colonial regime. In his attempts to forge a unified country under his own totalitarian rule, the President took as an official slogan 'one blood, one

<sup>35</sup> The Burma Independence Army was disbanded by the Japanese in the middle of 1942, largely because of its unruly behaviour but also because the Japanese feared that such a rapidly growing force could constitute a threat to their own position in Burma. In July 1942 a smaller, more disciplined force of some 3000 BIA men was selected to form the Burma Defence Army (BDA) and steps taken to make this the core of an independent Burmese military force under Japanese control. Aung San was placed in command and Thakins Ne Win, Yan Naing and Ze Ya commanded its three battalions. A Military Academy was established outside Rangoon. When Burma received its 'independence' from the Japanese in September 1943, Aung Sang was made Minister for Defence and the army renamed the Burma National Army, under Ne Win.

<sup>36</sup> F. S. V. Donnison, *British Military Administration in the Far East 1943-1946* (HMSO, London, 1956), pp. 10-11.

<sup>37</sup> Ba Maw, *Breakthrough*, p. 202.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203-4.

voice, one leader'.<sup>39</sup> Ba Maw sent missions to the areas of Karen settlement in an attempt to defuse the resentments left smouldering by the 1942 racial troubles. A Karen was appointed to the new Privy Council. Yet despite these gestures it was clear to the national minorities that the 'one voice' would speak in Burmese and the 'one leader', Ba Maw, would be a Burman. The President's official slogan only served to strengthen fears among the Karens in particular that the Burmans had still not abandoned their 'big race' ways.<sup>40</sup>

The Thakins took a radically different approach, but one which they had espoused during the 1930s. They accepted the diversity of the many races in Burma and sought to reassure the national minorities that under an independent Burmese government their particular cultures and traditions would be respected. The Thakins were at pains to disassociate themselves from the excesses of the BIA and made considerable efforts to heal the scars of 1942. The leaders of some offending BIA detachments were executed. Numerous high-level missions were sent to Karen settlements in the delta, led by Aung San, U Nu and other Ministers in the new government.<sup>41</sup> Mainly through the commanding personality of Aung San, two Karens, one a Sandhurst-trained former officer in the regular Burma Army, were persuaded to join the BNA. They were placed in charge of a newly-formed battalion of young Karens. A number of Shans also joined the BNA.<sup>42</sup> While these efforts to overcome the racial divisions within the country were partially successful, the Thakins in fact added to them by splitting the national minorities, notably the Karens, into those factions which were prepared secretly to work with the Thakins for the overthrow of the Japanese and ultimate independence, and those who preferred to work with the British and against the inclusion of the minorities in an independent Burma after the war.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195, Morrison, *Grandfather Longlegs*, p. 92. Burmese, for example, was made the official language of instruction in all the country's schools, instead of English.

<sup>41</sup> U Nu, *Burma Under the Japanese: Pictures and Portraits* (Macmillan, London, 1954), p. 98, and Maung Maung (ed.) *Aung San of Burma*, Yale University Southeast Asia Studies (Nijhoff, The Hague, 1962), pp. 49 *et. seq.* and 72 *et. seq.*

<sup>42</sup> Because the Shans were often counted among the Burmans (as were the Mons and Arakanese, assimilated to a large degree since they were included in Britain's Indian possessions in 1826) it is difficult to specify how many Shans actually took an active part in the AFO. Silverstein's figure of 5000, however, seems too high. Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, p. 60.

<sup>43</sup> Some accounts sympathetic to the Karens have tried to suggest that this apparent defection to the Thakins was a ruse, and that the Karen battalion of the BNA planned to turn on its Burman fellows when the Japanese hold was weakened. In addition, some

The Japanese, too, played a significant role in exacerbating racial tensions during this period. The initial impetus behind the training of the Thirty Comrades and formation of the Burma Independence Army was ostensibly part of a Japanese policy to conduct a *Seisen* or holy war 'to liberate the 130 millions of tropical peoples [from] the colonial policy of the white peoples'.<sup>44</sup> Before and during the invasion of Burma Japanese propaganda broadcasts repeated the slogan 'Asia for the Asians', a theme faithfully taken up by the puppet Burmese government. U Nu, Foreign Minister after 1943, published a document in 1944 which stated that 'it is the duty of all Asiatics . . . to participate in the destruction of the Anglo-Saxon influence in the East'.<sup>45</sup> Teams were sent out to the districts to help cultivate an 'Asian mood'. The Japanese included an Indian on the Rangoon Municipal Corporation in an apparent attempt to win the support of Indians who had remained in Burma, but persistent Japanese propaganda stressing the 'glorious past' of the Burmese and hailing them as 'fellow Buddhists' served only to emphasize that the Japanese saw the Burmans as potential allies but viewed the various minorities with suspicion.<sup>46</sup> Such campaigns only added to the fears of the Christian, Muslim and animist peoples already feeling at the mercy of the Burman majority. This was despite the fact that the Japanese themselves in fact treated all Burmese harshly, many of them making it obvious that they viewed all members of the local population as racially inferior.<sup>47</sup>

The invasion of the Japanese in January 1942 and the advent of a Burman-dominated government, however nominal was its role, served to polarize racial attitudes in the country. As Ba Maw put it:

authors have painted the two Karen officers concerned either as unscrupulous turncoats or innocents duped by Aung San. Neither explanation seems plausible, although one Karen officer may have become a *Kempeitei* informer. The Karen battalion served Aung San faithfully after March 1945, helping to fight the Japanese, but otherwise to keep the peace among the delta communities. See for example Morrison, *Grandfather Longlegs*, p. 115 and Maung Maung (ed.), *Aung San of Burma*, p. 50.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in F. N. Trager (ed.), *Burma: Japanese Military Administration: Selected Documents 1941-1945* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1971), p. 15.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Ba Maw, *Breakthrough*, pp. 282-3.

<sup>46</sup> Htin Aung, *The Stricken Peacock*, p. 111-12 and Yoon Won-zoon, *Japan's Occupation of Burma*, p. 189. It should be remembered here that the Japanese were at some pains to win over anti-British elements in India, and needed to demonstrate their comradely attitude to this other 'oppressed' Asian people.

<sup>47</sup> Ba Maw speaks in particular of the 'Korea men' ie Japanese who had served in Korea and viewed them (and presumably other subject races) with undisguised contempt. It is not clear whether or not he included in this term Koreans who had joined the Japanese armed forces and were serving in Burma. They, too, earned an unenviable reputation among the local population and Allied prisoners of war alike. Ba Maw, *Breakthrough*, p. 206 and Morrison, *Grandfather Longlegs*, p. 95.

The numerous races that either lived in Burma or met there for the first time under the stark conditions of a total world conflict appeared to be seized by a sudden fear and distrust of one another: the Japanese, the Chinese, the Indians, the Burmese together with the other indigenous peoples, all were turning against one another under the stress of the old, atavistic fear and suspicions, all finding the enemy in the nearest stranger as they did in their tribal days.<sup>48</sup>

Ancient antagonisms, fears and identifications had been revived and intensified. There was little feeling of unity either among the people themselves or between the government and the majority of its subjects.<sup>49</sup> The behaviour of the Burmans as soon as they had achieved a measure of power had served only to convince the hill peoples that their future lay with the return of the British. Not only had the BIA committed atrocities against the Karens, but as time progressed the puppet Burmese government came to be identified with the privations and brutalities endured under the Japanese.<sup>50</sup> In some cases inadvertently, but more often deliberately, these feelings of racial antagonism—both towards the Burmans and the Japanese—were encouraged by the Allies, who saw considerable advantages to be gained in using the minorities, as well as disaffected Burmans, against those holding power in Rangoon.

The anti-fascist resistance in Burma was of two kinds. To most Burmese now, references to ‘the resistance’ will either evoke memories of the March 1945 rebellion against the Japanese by the Burma National Army and its civilian allies, or else the wider nationalist struggle for independence against the British which culminated in 1948. By the end of 1942 Aung San and his fellow nationalists realized that their ‘independence’ under the Japanese was a sham and started to plan for an eventual rebellion against their new oppressors. In this they were joined by a loose coalition of communists, trade unions, youth groups, women’s and religious organizations, including in 1944 the leading Karen organization. This united nationalist front was known first as the Anti-Fascist Organization (AFO), then as the Anti-Fascist Peoples Freedom League (AFPFL). Some of these groups, notably the communists and the loyal Karens, had managed to make contact with the British in 1942, and while some segments of the BNA were anxious to attack the Japanese without outside help, it was agreed that no move would be made until the ground could be prepared for a coordinated rising. Throughout 1944 the AFO maintained secret contact with the Allies, primarily through the communists, until in early 1945 it realized

<sup>48</sup> Ba Maw, *Breakthrough*, p. 205.

<sup>49</sup> Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, p. 49.

<sup>50</sup> Taylor, ‘Burma in the Anti-Fascist War’, p. 167.

that there was little time left to rise before the advancing British robbed them of their chance to claim a share of the victor's spoils. In March the BNA marched out of Rangoon, ostensibly to join their Japanese allies at the front but in fact to join the communists and hill peoples in fighting a guerrilla war against them.<sup>51</sup>

This is not the 'resistance', however, to which Field Marshall Sir William Slim refers in his memoirs, and to which most support was given by the Allies. As early as 1941 the Special Operations Executive (SOE) in London had begun sending teams to Asia to organize 'left behind groups' and plan for an industrial denial campaign in the event that the Japanese should overrun British colonial possessions in the region. SOE's 'Oriental Mission' was also charged with investigating the possibilities of organizing guerrilla forces among the local inhabitants.<sup>52</sup> In Burma these efforts were marginally more successful than elsewhere in Southeast Asia, where there seemed little appreciation of the danger faced from the Japanese. Some attempts had already been made to organize the Burmese hill peoples into guerrilla units, drawing largely on the Frontier Force and Military Police. By the time the Japanese invaded in 1942 SOE had recruited some 2000 Karens in the eastern hills and a smaller number of Kachins and Lahu (related to the Shans) further north.<sup>53</sup> It was intended to create a 'Burma-wide levy force'<sup>54</sup> among the hill tribes before the Japanese invasion intervened. As already noted, the Burmans were not included in this scheme but were hurriedly recruited into the regular Burma Army, with generally poor results.

The British officers commanding the tribal levies had standing instructions that if their areas of operation were overrun, they were to leave their men and head north, where it was expected they would be able to link up with other groups and find safety. The levies themselves were told to hide their weapons and wait until the British returned. Similar instructions were given to the indigenous members of the regular

<sup>51</sup> This complex period of political manoeuvring and development is perhaps dealt with best by Robert Taylor in his essay, already mentioned. It would seem clear from Taylor's careful research that, while seeking independence from Britain, the communists were never prepared to work with the Japanese fascists. Once the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were at war, however, an arrangement with the Allies was ideologically possible. Together with the loyal Karens in the delta they made early contacts with SOE and were only joined by the Thakins later, after the latter had become disenchanted with the Japanese and sought assistance in rising against them.

<sup>52</sup> Cruickshank, *SOE*, p. 68 *et. seq.* and Morrison, *Grandfather Longlegs*, pp. 44–6.

<sup>53</sup> Cruickshank, *SOE*, p. 69. S. W. Kirby, in *The War Against Japan* (5 vols) (HMSO, London, 1965), vol. 4 p. 250 puts the number at around 1500.

<sup>54</sup> Morrison, *Grandfather Longlegs*, p. 45.

forces. After the retreating British had crossed the Chindwin River in May 1942 the tribal battalions were disbanded and most soldiers sent home. As Slim described it:

Each man was given his rifle, fifty rounds, and three months' pay, told to go to his village, wait for our return, and be ready to join any organisation we should start to fight the Japanese in Burma. These men, mainly Kachins, Chins, Karens and other hillmen, almost without exception did so, and in due course formed the backbone of the resistance movements that grew in strength as the Japanese occupation continued.<sup>55</sup>

It was not long before contacts with these hill people were made again.

After all the regular British forces had reached India, irregular units were raised under British officers along the entire length of the frontier fringe 'to serve as a defensive screen and to gain information about the enemy'.<sup>56</sup> In the Arakan, Upper Chindwin and Naga Hills districts they were formed into V Force, in the Chin Hills as the Chin Levies and further north into the Kachin Levies. SOE, operating in the Southeast Asian theatre as Force 136, and the Americans raised other groups in the far north and northeast. Many of these levies were former members of the Burma Army, Frontier Force or Military Police and there appears to have been no shortage of recruits. When SOE handed over its northern operation to the Office of Strategic Services (operating as Detachment 101) in late 1944, it had raised over 2000 Kachin Levies.<sup>57</sup> Despite savage attempts by the Japanese to stamp out Karen resistance in the eastern hills, the 2000 levies recruited in 1942 had risen to some 12,000 by the time the war ended, with more than 80 British officers, 30 British NCOs and some 60 trained Karens having been parachuted in from India to organize and arm them.<sup>58</sup> At one stage there were an estimated 16,000 guerrillas operating in Burma under SOE alone.<sup>59</sup> In addition to

<sup>55</sup> Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, p. 113.

<sup>56</sup> Donnison, *British Military Administration*, p. 13. See also O. Heilbrunn, *Warfare in the Enemy's Rear* (Praeger, New York, 1963), pp. 97–101 and I. Fellowes-Gordon, *The Battle for Naw Seng's Kingdom: General Stilwell's North Burma Campaign and its Aftermath* (Cooper, London, 1971), p. 24.

<sup>57</sup> Kirby, in *War against Japan*, p. 34.

<sup>58</sup> Morrison, *Grandfather Longlegs*, p. 148 and H. Tinker, *The Union of Burma: A Study of the First Years of Independence* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1957) p. 14. Cruickshank states that of the 270 Burmese recruited in India for operations in Burma half were from the hills, the remainder from the plains. It would appear that most of the former were Karens. Cruickshank, *SOE*, p. 12.

<sup>59</sup> *European Resistance Movements 1939–1945*: First International Conference on the History of the Resistance Movements held at Liege–Bruxelles–Breedonk, 14–17 September 1958 (Pergamon, London, 1960), p. 354. The senior British representative at the conference was referring to SOE's Far Eastern operations as part of an address on SOE's primary theatre of operations, i.e. Europe.

their guerrilla activities against the Japanese in the hill regions, members of the national minorities also served in both regular and irregular units as guides, interpreters, scouts and intelligence agents.

After 1942, there appear to have been few direct clashes between Burman troops and the hill peoples, yet the active participation of the latter in the British and American forces further separated them from the majority race in their own country. As Joyce Lebra has pointed out, the British and Japanese recruited from basically different ethnic groups in Burma.<sup>60</sup> Through their pre-war recruiting policies and force of circumstances after 1942, the British ranks were filled with hill peoples. On the other hand, it was Japanese policy to avoid those ethnic groups recruited by the colonial regimes. While never entirely confident of the loyalty of the Burmese government they had created, the Japanese nevertheless preferred to recruit Burmans and were prepared to train and arm a Burmese army to fight alongside them. Thus the age-old racial antagonisms felt between the peoples of the hills and the peoples of the plain were strengthened and even institutionalized by the wider geopolitical struggle between the British and Japanese empires.

To the British, gathering strength again in India, the young nationalists who had marched into Burma with the Japanese were collaborators, guilty of treason against the Crown. Aung San was considered a 'traitor rebel leader' of a 'Quisling army', 'whose hands were dyed with British blood and loyal Burmese blood'.<sup>61</sup> The BIA, and its later manifestations the BDA and BNA, was referred to as the BTA, or 'Burma Traitor Army'. While blame for the British defeat was freely apportioned elsewhere as well, there was a strong feeling among the armed forces that their disastrous campaign against the Japanese had been caused in part by the Burmese. Only some 5000 BIA soldiers had actually fought against the retreating British,<sup>62</sup> but they had added significantly to the fear of fifth columnists among the local population and so caused the Allies considerable concern and confusion. Such was the strength of feeling running against the Burmese (of the plains) in 1942 that the exiled Government of Burma felt obliged to try and counter the hostile and even vindictive attitudes then current. In December the Secretary of State for Burma issued a proclamation

<sup>60</sup> Lebra, *Japanese Trained Armies*, p. 64.

<sup>61</sup> The description is Churchill's, given in the House of Commons in 1947 when speaking against the move to grant Burma independence. There is no reason to doubt, however, that he held the same view during the war when the situation in Burma was so much more desperate. He is quoted in Donnison, *British Military Administration*, pp. 369–70.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71 and Collis, *Last and First*, p. 187. That the British civil authorities were not immune from these feelings is clear from U Ba U, *My Burma*, p. 177.



reminding the British troops that they would not be returning to Burma 'in a spirit of vengeance'. Yet even he drew a distinction between those Burmese who had not harmed the British and those who had 'deliberately assisted the enemy's war effort'.<sup>63</sup> Later events were to prompt the Supreme Allied Commander, Southeast Asia Command, to issue an order in December 1944 telling the Allied forces that 'we come to the people of Burma as rescuers from a tyrannical foe',<sup>64</sup> and not in order to exact retribution for past acts.

After the retreat from Burma in 1942 the Government of Burma was re-established in Simla, where it continued to exercise de jure control over those remote parts of Burma which had not been conquered by the Japanese. De facto control of these border regions rested, however, with the armed forces. This led to a number of difficulties, resolved completely only when the Allies, at the first Quebec conference in August 1943, created Southeast Asia Command with Lord Louis Mountbatten as Supreme Commander. Under his authority the administration of the liberated areas of Burma was carried out by the Civil Affairs Service (Burma) (CAS(B)), largely recruited from officers of the Burma Civil Service. The Governor, Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, formally retained full executive and legislative powers but acted largely in concert with CAS(B). The Governor's overriding preoccupation was to restore British administration to Burma and to bring the country to such a stage of political and economic development that it could be handed over to a responsible Burmese government as a Dominion within the Commonwealth. He drew a distinction, however, between the dominant Burmans and the hill tribes like the Chins, Kachins and Karens who 'though no other Burmese party had bestirred itself in this way . . . had raised levies and were valiantly fighting the Japanese.'<sup>65</sup> Dorman-Smith felt that it would be wrong to include these 'staunch allies' in a future Dominion of Burma unless they were agreeable. He proposed to London that after the war the frontier areas of Burma still be administered separately.<sup>66</sup> These views were supported by CAS(B) and were subsequently incorporated into a British government White Paper. It was a policy designed both to encourage the expectations of the hill peoples and further to alienate those nationalists seeking immediate independence for the whole of the country.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Donnison, *British Military Administration*, p. 72.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73. There were reports, for example, of acts of 'ruthlessness' by members of the Fourteenth Army towards the Burmese population.

<sup>65</sup> Collis, *Last and First*, p. 207.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>67</sup> *Burma: Statement of Policy by His Majesty's Government*, Cmd. 6635 May 1945 (HMSO, London, 1945).

Communications between the civil authorities and the armed forces tended to be poor and even after the organization of the CAS(B) into one headquarters by Mountbatten there was considerable confusion and even conflict over the policies to be adopted towards the hill peoples in Burma. The demand for 'partisans' led at times to grotesque situations, with the regular British, American and Chinese armies, as well as the various paramilitary and clandestine services, all competing for local recruits.<sup>68</sup> Before January 1944, when Mountbatten assumed overall command of both civil and military affairs in the Southeast Asian theatre, some levies were under the responsibility of the exiled Burma Government and CAS(B), others the Chiefs of Staff in London and others the British Minister of Economic Warfare. Those levies recruited by the Chinese and Americans were in a different position again. The wider political implications of recruiting members of the local population seem not to have been given very careful consideration by those responsible, who were intent on fighting the war and thus grateful for any help they could get. From this confused situation, however, sprang further misunderstandings among the hill tribes which, like those British government policies already mentioned, were to have considerable long-term consequences.

It was here that the activities of the clandestine services and paramilitary organizations operating in Burma at the time assumed particular importance. At one period there were at least a dozen such organizations, each with their own administration, chains of command and personnel. Some were branches of world-wide organizations controlled from London and Washington, while others were of local

<sup>68</sup> Heilbrunn cites one case of different groups of levies being used in the same area of northern Burma by the United States Army, the Office of Strategic Services and SOE, all without any knowledge of the others. Heilbrunn, *Warfare*, pp. 97–8. The only regular American army unit was the 5307th Provisional Regiment, soon christened 'Merrill's Marauders' by the correspondents attached to Stilwell's Northern Combat Area Command.

<sup>69</sup> Cruickshank names twelve secret organizations in all, but the matter is greatly confused by changes in names, and the use of broad titles which encompass more than one organization. There were also groups like Dah Force, which operated with the Chindit long-range penetration force, and which tended to be viewed by some as a clandestine organization. As far as can be determined, those organizations were as follows:

Force 136 (Special Operations Executive)—responsible for sabotage, subversion and the preparation of resistance groups, also intelligence (controlled from London)

Inter Service Liaison Department (Secret Intelligence Service)—responsible for the collection of secret intelligence from, and counter espionage in, enemy territory (London)

V Force—which operated fighting patrols and collected intelligence deep inside enemy territory (controlled locally)

origin.<sup>69</sup> Their concern for secrecy and their professional jealousies resulted in considerable confusion and overlapping of functions, prompting complaints from both Slim and the American General Joseph Stilwell, who was attempting to work with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek in opening the road from India to China.<sup>70</sup> This confusion was reduced to a large degree in late 1944 when Mountbatten decreed that SOE should assume overall command of all clandestine services in the theatre.<sup>71</sup> The nature of their operations still meant, however, that the civilian authorities and to a lesser extent the military command rarely knew details of clandestine activities, nor were they consulted by SOE. While secrecy was often necessary for reasons of security, it seems clear that its need was often invoked to prevent interference in operations which ran counter in some way to the political policies of the civil authorities. According to Maurice Collis, who was given access to Dorman-Smith's papers after the war: 'SOE was concerned only with easing the path for the army by organising sabotage and rebellion behind the Japanese lines: it left political complications to take care of themselves.'<sup>72</sup> These 'political complications' included relations with the hill people recruited as levies, and in organizing resistance groups in Burma it is clear that SOE was prepared to give

Z Force—responsible for gathering intelligence up to sixty miles into enemy territory (locally)

Combined Operations Pilotage Parties (sometimes called the Small Operations Group)—controlling maritime raids and special tasks by Combined Operations, the Commandos and others, similar to those functions performed by the Special Boat Squadron elsewhere during the same period

D Division (also D Force)—responsible for strategic deception

E Group—responsible for prisoner-of-war escape matters and some rescue work (formally under London, but largely under local control)

Air Sea Rescue (local control)

Psychological Warfare Division (locally, but under London)

Burma Intelligence Corps—controlling guides, interpreters for forward patrols and assessing information received

Detachment 101 (Office of Strategic Services)—the United States equivalent of the British SOE and SIS (Washington)

Office of War Information—US equivalent of the British Political Warfare Executive (Washington)

See Cruickshank, *SOE*, pp. 169-70; Kirby, vol. 4, pp. 30-1 and Heilbrunn, *Warfare*, p. 38 and 97-101. A slightly different overview from the SOE side is given in B. Sweet-Escott, *Baker Street Irregular* (Methuen, London, 1965), pp. 233-4. None of these sources mention the various groups engaged in collecting electronic intelligence, which to a large degree remain secret. See, for example, R. Lewin, *The American Magic: Codes, Ciphers and the Defeat of Japan* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1983), p. 244 *et. seq.*

<sup>70</sup> The most readable account of this campaign is unquestionably B. Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China 1911-1945* (Bantam, New York, 1972).

<sup>71</sup> Sweet-Escott, *Baker Street Irregular*, p. 234. <sup>72</sup> Collis, *Last and First*, p. 231.

undertakings and encourage expectations far beyond the level to which it was justified in doing so.

In his official history of the *SOE in the Far East*, Charles Cruickshank states plainly that: 'the embryo guerrilla movement among the hill tribes in Burma which SOE developed successfully was based as much on hostility to the Burmese of the plains as on loyalty to the British regime'.<sup>73</sup> It appears that the hill people were encouraged in their traditional racial enmity towards the Burmans and in their belief that, on the defeat of the Japanese and return of the British, they would be rewarded for their services in a particular way. According to one of the British officers working with the levies in the north, the Kachins were convinced that: 'When the time was ripe the Kachins would move back to Myitkyina and invite the good old, kind hearted *asuya*, the British Government of Burma, to come back and pick up things where it had left off.'<sup>74</sup> Other Kachins were equally convinced that they would be given 'an independent state of their own, separate from the Burmese'.<sup>75</sup> It would not be too far-fetched, perhaps, to assume that the strong anti-colonial sentiments of the Americans at the time, Stilwell in particular, helped heighten the expectations of those hill people under U.S. control. Similarly, the Karens who fought so well against the Japanese in the eastern hills believed that they would be rewarded with their own state. The British officers who worked with them traded on the racial antagonisms fuelled by the troubles in 1942 and apparently encouraged the Karens that their dream of a Karen state might be realized after the war.<sup>76</sup> Like their policy towards the Arabs a war before, it seems that the British government, or at least some of its representatives, were prepared to use the indigenous people to support their own war effort, even to the point of deliberately misleading them as to their rewards after the fighting was over.

The differences with the civil authorities, the extent to which the clandestine services were prepared to act beyond established policies and the degree to which immediate military considerations were given precedence over longer term political consequences can all be seen in the controversy over the arming of the Anti-Fascist Organization in 1944. The Governor of Burma and CAS(B) were aware of the initial contacts between the Burmese communists and SOE in 1942 but considered them merely a 'flirtation' with an 'unrepresentative and revolutionary group'.<sup>77</sup> Further contacts were made, however, continuing after the

<sup>73</sup> Cruickshank, *SOE*, p. 5. <sup>74</sup> Fellowes-Gordon, *The Battle*, p. 18. <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>76</sup> Morrison, *Grandfather Longlegs*, p. 17 and Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p. 25.

<sup>77</sup> Donnison, *British Military Administration*, p. 348.

communists formally joined with the BNA and others in forming the AFO in the first week of August 1944. A request for large-scale arms shipments was then sent to SOE, to help prepare for the planned rising against the Japanese. On its own initiative, SOE afforded the AFO 'formal recognition as the Anti-Axis Association of Burma'<sup>78</sup> and undertook to provide enough arms, ammunition and funds to make such a rising a success. All this was done without any formal consideration of the political implications of arming Britain's former enemies in the BNA.<sup>79</sup> As Donnison suggests:

It is indeed remarkable that official assurances which contained such far reaching implications for the future should have been made without consulting the Chief Civil Affairs Officer, and apparently without the approval of the Supreme Allied Commander.<sup>80</sup>

The Head of SOE in the Southeast Asian theatre was aware of the step he was taking, however, and advised his superiors in London of his decision. In order to forestall objections from CAS(B) he also sought the support of the Governor of Burma and the military command.

To SOE's mind, the issue was 'fundamentally very simple.'<sup>81</sup> It was recognized that the support of men politically undesirable in the eyes of the civil affairs officers might cause some embarrassment, even difficulties, after the war when the government of Burma came to be restored. It was also recognized that such a step might even bring closer the independence of Burma and possibly that of India as well. SOE realized, too, the potential problems involved in arming a section of the population which elsewhere it had encouraged the hill peoples to fight. Yet despite these factors, it was felt that to arm the AFO was less of an evil than the prospect of another 5000 soldiers of the BNA adding their support to the Japanese facing Slim in central Burma and crippling his 'fantastic race for Rangoon against the monsoon'.<sup>82</sup> Not only was time running out before the rains were due, but there were at the time severe shortages of Allied manpower and transport aircraft, on which the Fourteenth Army so much depended.<sup>83</sup> Should Slim be unable to reach the Burmese capital before the wet season began the British would have to face the prospect of falling back to their nearest reliable supply point, which was on the Indian border. Besides, SOE felt that there were

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Cruickshank, *SOE*, pp. 175-7.

<sup>80</sup> Donnison, *British Military Administration*, p. 348 and Cruickshank, *SOE*, p. 170.

<sup>81</sup> Sweet-Escott, *Baker Street Irregular*, p. 245

<sup>82</sup> Slim, p. 479 *et. seq.* and Cruickshank, *SOE* pp. 170-7. See also Donnison, *British Military Administration* p. 349 and Sweet-Escott, *Baker Street Irregular* pp. 244-5.

<sup>83</sup> R. Callahan, *Burma 1942-1945* (Davis-Poynter, London, 1978), pp. 147 and 152-3.

precedents for their proposal in the assistance given by the Allies to guerrillas in Europe. In the words of a senior SOE staff officer at the time:

as with Greece and Yugoslavia, it was decided to give priority to winning the war in the shortest possible time rather than to feel constrained by the political complications which would have to be faced on the outbreak of peace.<sup>84</sup>

By late 1944 the Chief Civil Affairs Officer (Burma) was aware that something important was being kept from him. As Allied forces advanced into the Arakan region and northern Burma they encountered AFO guerrillas claiming SOE protection. In February 1945 the matter came to a head, with CAS(B) bitterly protesting the arming of 'criminals' and 'communist terrorists', and claiming that the price of their cooperation would be the right to share in the government of Burma after the war.<sup>85</sup> CAS(B) felt that it was wrong to put the AFO on a par with the French *Maquis* or partisans in other occupied countries in Europe. The Commander-in-Chief of Allied Land Forces, Lieutenant General Sir Oliver Leese, was persuaded by CAS(B)'s arguments and prohibited the further issue of arms to the AFO (and thus also to members of the BNA). SOE was able to carry the day only by appealing directly to Mountbatten. SOE claimed in addition to its earlier arguments that not to arm the AFO would jeopardize similar operations in Malaya and put SOE operatives in central Burma at risk. SOE also stated that 'if arms were denied to the Burmans of the plains when they had been freely issued to the hill tribes, it would sow the seeds of post-war grievance'.<sup>86</sup> Such seeds had in fact already been sown by SOE's earlier contacts with the AFO, but disingenuous though this particular argument might have been, Mountbatten was inclined to accept it.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>84</sup> J. G. Beevor, *SOE: Recollections and Reflections 1940-45* (Bodley Head, London, 1981), p. 221. See also Sweet-Escott, *Baker Street Irregular*, p. 245. It is ironic, in the light of SOE's confident comparison with the situation in Greece, that the War Cabinet in London should later specifically warn Mountbatten against the creation of another EAM-ELAS in Burma. See Donnison, *British Military Administration*, p. 345 and Mountbatten's own *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia 1943-1945* (reprinted by The English Book Store, Delhi, 1960), pp. 142-5.

<sup>85</sup> Donnison, *op. cit.* p. 349. Sweet-Escott, who was based in Kandy with SOE at this time, appears a little confused over this particular matter. He states that it was the Governor of Burma, Dorman-Smith, not CAS(B), who was unhappy about arming the BNA. It seems clear, however, that it was the civil affairs officers of CAS(B) who became so agitated and not the Governor, who was apparently prepared to live with the decision on the grounds of operational necessity (Sweet-Escott, *Baker Street Irregular*, p. 244). Beevor is no guide in this matter as he was based in Europe and draws heavily on Sweet-Escott's account in discussing SOE's Burma operations (Beevor, *SOE: Recollections*, pp. 220-2).

<sup>86</sup> Cruickshank, *SOE*, p. 177.

<sup>87</sup> Mountbatten, *Report*, p. 143.

The Supreme Commander permitted the arming of the AFO for a mixture of very hard-headed military and political reasons, justifying his intervention in the controversy by saying that it was a political matter which he felt he must reserve for himself. He gave orders that formal recognition was not to be accorded the AFO as an organization and that no undertakings were to be given to AFO members regarding their status after the war. Guerrillas were to be armed on an individual basis only under the supervision of SOE officers in the field.<sup>88</sup>

In practice, this plan was clearly unworkable. The AFO had been recognized by SOE the previous year and arms were being freely issued by its officers working with the guerrillas. It was apparent in any case that the BNA would turn against the Japanese regardless of Allied policy towards it and there was little chance that SOE would be able to keep it under its direction. By his decision, however, later approved by the War Cabinet in London, Mountbatten in effect recognized the AFO (later renamed the AFPFL) as the most powerful and most representative group in the country, and thus helped establish it as the most potent political force in post-war Burma.<sup>89</sup> The loyal hill peoples who had fought for so long against the Japanese had done so within the ambit of Allied control and had no independent political power base or military force comparable to the AFPFL or BNA.

On the defeat of the Japanese in May 1945 there was, as Silverstein has suggested, a certain feeling of common endeavour and achievement among the Burmese resistance groups, a feeling which the AFPFL quickly sought to draw on and utilize in its negotiations with the British over the future of the BNA and of the country.<sup>90</sup> In a speech given in August 1945, for example, Aung San proclaimed that 'Our brothers in the hills, the Kachins, and the Chins also joined in the resistance. The Karens also fought side by side with us.'<sup>91</sup> Considerable efforts have been made since the war to perpetuate this myth, that the hill peoples 'joined' the Burmese nationalists of the BNA in expelling the Japanese, but the situation was in fact quite different. Both the majority of the hill peoples and most of the British forces in Burma drew a clear distinction between those who had collaborated with the Japanese in 1942-44 and

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 143-5.

<sup>89</sup> Taylor has suggested that, had the AFO/AFPFL not been given such recognition in 1944-45, the situation in Burma after the war could have been quite different. There is no escaping the fact, however, that Aung San had won the support of most Burmans and could exercise enormous leverage through them.

<sup>90</sup> Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, p. 61. See also Maung Maung, *Burma and Ne Win*, p. 137 and U Ba U *My Burma*, p. 189.

<sup>91</sup> Quoted in Maung Maung, *Aung San of Burma*, p.98.

those who had held out against them. As F. S. V. Donnison, a senior civil affairs officer at the time, wrote later:

To welcome with open arms an army which had fought against the British on the side of the Japanese for just so long as it had suited them, all of whose members were technically guilty of treason, was a poor way in which to reward and put heart into those (Burmese) who had remained loyal to the British connection or who, without necessarily wanting the continuance of this connection, nevertheless were opposed to the communistic ideas and dictatorial attitudes of the Thakins, and at least were prepared to achieve their emancipation along the gradualist lines to which the British were committed.<sup>92</sup>

Many felt the Karens in particular had been betrayed. There are numerous reports of British officers (both civil and military) privately counselling them to insist on a separate state of their own and the attitude of many of the returning Burma Government officials to BNA members provoked a bitterness that remains today.<sup>93</sup>

In the negotiations with the British after the war the predominantly Burman AFPFL was quickly accorded the primary role and the national minorities found it increasingly difficult to receive a hearing. The delegation led by Aung San which visited London in January 1947 to discuss independence terms with the Attlee Government did not include any representatives of the hill peoples. Aung San's commanding personality won a degree of cooperation from some of them at Panglong the next month but a Committee of Enquiry established later that year to determine the best method of associating the frontier peoples with the search for a new constitution served only to reveal the many divisions among them and the difficulties that would be encountered in securing their full support.<sup>94</sup> It soon became clear that, notwithstanding their agreement in London 'to achieve the early unification of the Frontier Areas and Ministerial Burma with the free consent of the inhabitants of those areas',<sup>95</sup> neither the Burmans in the AFPFL nor the British government were prepared to contemplate an independent Burma without them. Nor were they prepared to wait until the concerns of the hill peoples had been met.

<sup>92</sup> F.S.V. Donnison, *Burma* (Benn, London, 1970), p. 127. See also Sweet-Escott, p. 248.

<sup>93</sup> U Ba U, *My Burma*, pp. 177-85, Maung Maung, *Aung San of Burma*, p. 150 and D. G. E. Hall, *Burma* (Hutchinson, London, 1950), p. 15. Even today it is possible to hear stories from older Burmese about British soldiers who were thought to have joined the Karens in their insurrection against the new Burmese government after 1948.

<sup>94</sup> *Burma: Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry: Report submitted to His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom and to the Government of Burma*, Cmd. 7138 (June 1947) (HMSO, London, 1947).

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 1.



It is not easy to isolate the purely racial factors from others which played a role in determining how any Burmese ethnic group responded to the crisis of the second world war. Immediate concerns were inextricably intertwined with the fears and resentments of generations, feelings that existed both outside the sphere of the British colonial administration and within it. It could be argued that in one sense the war was concurrently being fought on three levels. At the international level, it was a war between the Japanese and the British and between their Burmese allies. At another level, the national level perhaps, it could be described as a power struggle between different Burmese factions, each with their own vision of the country's future. At a third level the war could be seen as a racial conflict with both the majority Burmans and minority hill peoples being used by the two (Asian and Occidental) imperial powers to gain control of Burma for themselves. The Japanese sought to use the nationalist aspirations of one racial group while the British sought to take advantage of the hopes and fears of the other. In this struggle both Burmese groups seem to have been betrayed.