

*politika* touched on recent Malayan events: the switch in British tactics from union to federation was noted; an increase in labor unrest was remarked, as exploitation resumed. There was, however, no mention of independence or of a national liberation struggle comparable to that noted in Burma.<sup>162</sup>

The Russians, then, were no more helpful than the British and Chinese in suggesting an alternative to the policies which Loi Tek set after the war and which Chen Peng allowed to continue in force until early 1948.

COMMUNIST TAKE-OFF IN BURMA

In Burma—whose revolutionary movements we have discussed only up to 1935—a full-fledged Communist movement did not emerge until the war. There had been some exposure to Marxist ideas prior to 1935, but Marxism had made no perceptible impact on the nationalist movement as a whole.

During the latter part of the 1930's Marxist study groups sprang up among students and former students of Rangoon University. Indian Communists were particularly active in the formation of these groups. According to Thein Pe Myint (one of the earliest Burmese Marxists), his first contact with Communists was in Calcutta where he spent two years following his graduation from Rangoon University in 1935; a Bengalese Communist named Dat returned with him to Rangoon in 1938 and helped organize the first Marxist study group in Burma. Although the group evidently stayed intact only a few months, it brought together several of the later leaders of the nationalist movement including, in addition to Thein Pe Myint (then known as *Tet Pongyi*, after the title of a book he had written in Calcutta on monastic reform), Bo Let Ya and Aung San. Aung San served as secretary of the group. About the same time another Marxist study group was organized in Rangoon by Ghoshal, an Indian graduate of Rangoon University who had also just returned from India. In 1939 Ghoshal attempted—but evidently failed—to unite

<sup>162</sup>I. Lemin, "Sovremennye problemy Britanskoi imperii," *Mirovye khoziaistvo i mirovaia politika*, No. 6, June 1947, p. 3.

a number of these Rangoon groups into a single Communist organization.<sup>163</sup>

Indians thus played an important role in early Burmese Marxism, setting a precedent which was to last for more than a decade. The material studied by these groups, according to participants, included such literature as they could obtain in English, since nothing, of course, was available in Burmese. Stalin's principal writings, for instance, were known to them. Attention was also given to the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Short Course)*; *New Age*, the publication of the Indian Communists; Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China*; and Dimitrov's speeches in the Comintern. There was evidently some familiarity with the decisions of the Seventh Comintern Congress of 1935, but little concept of how to apply united front tactics in Burma. It was only after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact that a united front against British imperialism was seriously discussed among Burmese Marxists; Bo Let Ya, for instance, speaks of a 1940 symposium on this subject in which he, Thein Pe Myint, and Thakin Nu participated.

All participants in these early study groups interviewed by the author stress the identity of the Marxists' goals with those of the *Thakins*, the more radical element of the nationalist movement growing out of the *Dohbama Asiayone* (We Burmans Association). As Bo Let Ya states it, the Aung San study group thought of itself as the "prime mover" of the *Thakins*, and he makes much of the fact that Aung San was at the time secretary both of the group organized by Dat and of the *Thakins*. The diversity of the careers later pursued by members of these groups also testifies to the fact that Marxism continued to appeal to the Burmese during the pre-war years primarily as a panacea for independence, not as a distinctive social and political philosophy; they accepted as much of it as suited their purposes and ignored the rest.

<sup>163</sup>The activities of these early Marxist study groups in Rangoon were described to the author during interviews in January 1962 with several participants, including Thein Pe Myint, Bo Let Ya, and Thakin Kyaw Sein, the leader of still another such group.

There was no direct contact whatsoever, insofar as is known, between Burmese Marxists and the Comintern. Moscow's attention to Burma, after the brief interest expressed in the peasant uprisings early in the 1930's, was negligible until the very end of the decade. In December 1939 an article in *Mirovoe khoziaistvo i mirovaia politika* called attention to Burma as a critical British possession in the East now that England had been excluded from China by the Japanese. The article noted the "low level of political consciousness" within the colony, which gave Japanese agents a fertile field for intrigue. A few rudimentary labor and peasant organizations are mentioned, as well as several political parties and secret societies, but no reference is made to the *Thakins*—and of course none to the Marxists.<sup>164</sup> An article in a party journal in June 1940 was elementary and displayed little familiarity with commonly known facts about recent developments in Burma (which the author insisted was properly pronounced "Barma").<sup>165</sup> Other items on Burma appearing in Soviet periodicals during the Nazi-Soviet era were concerned primarily with the strategic importance of the Burma Road, which the British closed as a supply line to China in July 1940.<sup>166</sup>

After war broke out in Europe the *Thakins*, both Marxist and non-Marxist, used England's preoccupation with the war to press more vigorously than before their demands for independence. At the end of September 1939, for instance, they put forth a three-point program which in effect demanded England's recognition of Burma's right to be independent, preparations for a Constituent Assembly, and immediate self-government; the program became the basis for the formation of the so-called "Freedom Bloc," an alliance of the *Dohbama Asiayone* and the Poor Man's (*Sinyetha*) Party of Dr. Ba Maw, the first Burmese premier under the 1936 Constitution.<sup>167</sup> The Freedom Bloc sought

<sup>164</sup> V. Bushevich and A. D'iakov, "Obostrenie imperialisticheskikh protivorechii na Dal'nem Vostoke i Birma," *Mirovoe khoziaistvo i mirovaia politika*, No. 12, December 1939, pp. 119-26.

<sup>165</sup> D. Gol'dberg, "Birma," *Propaganda i agitatsiia*, No. 21, June 1940, pp. 60-1.

<sup>166</sup> E.g., "Doroga Birma-Kitai," *Sputnik agitatora*, No. 20, 1940, pp. 43-4; other items are listed in *Bibliografiia Iugo-vostochnoi Azii*, p. 75.

<sup>167</sup> The three-point program was printed in *New Burma* (Rangoon), October 6, 1939; see Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, p. 416.

to extend its contacts abroad. In addition to liaison already established with the Congress Party in India, a good will mission was sent to China at the end of 1939 to establish relations with the Kuomintang; Thakin Nu, who was a member of this mission, reported on the success of the mission following its return. Bo Let Ya led a similar mission to Bangkok, but evidently without success. Contacts with the Japanese, which were conducted at various levels, proved in the long run to be more fruitful. Ba Maw, for instance, as early as the autumn of 1937 established personal ties with officials in Tokyo which helped to ensure Japanese support of the national movement after the fall of Burma. Left-leaning *Thakins* within the Freedom Bloc also made contacts with Japanese agents, more furtively. Aung San and Bo Let Ya were secretly in touch with Japanese army officers in Rangoon during 1940. At the end of 1940, Aung San, reportedly on a mission to the Chinese Communists bearing a letter of introduction from the CPI, was arrested by the Japanese in Amoy and released on condition that he collaborate with Japan. He returned secretly to Burma in 1941, with the help of the Japanese military attaché in Rangoon, and was able to recruit a number of *Thakins* for military training by the Japanese on Hainan. This group, limited to thirty by the *Thakins* themselves (and thus known as the "Thirty Comrades"), returned to Burma in the wake of Japanese troops in 1942 and became the nucleus of the Burma Independence Army (BIA).<sup>168</sup>

Not all *Thakins*, it should be noted, approved of ties with the Japanese. The more orthodox Marxists such as Thein Pe Myint and Thakin Soe, for instance, attentive to the anti-Japanese line which prevailed in Moscow during the first year or more of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, appear to have resisted the trend

<sup>168</sup> Many details of the Freedom Bloc's foreign contacts during 1939 and 1940 were revealed in a speech delivered by Aung San in Rangoon in August 1945; an English translation of his speech, entitled "The Resistance Movement," was loaned to the author by Professor John H. Badgley. Additional details were given to the author by Bo Let Ya, a close associate of Aung San, and by Dr. Ba Maw during interviews in Rangoon in 1961 and 1962. Their evidence is corroborated by other accounts of this era based on different sources: e.g., Cady, *op. cit.*, pp. 418, 428-9.

of Aung San's strategies; it was their opposition in all likelihood which limited the number of Burmese to be trained in Hainan to thirty. At any event, the flirtation with Tokyo, in 1940 and 1941, led to the first signs of division within the *Thakin* movement—albeit still of a minor nature—and, since it was the Japanese who were to prevail in Burma, to a lessening of orthodox Marxist influence in the nationalist movement as a whole.

The British, in the meantime, responded to these maneuvers by Burmese nationalists with increased vigilance. In July 1940 a number of *Thakin* leaders were arrested, including Thakin Nu, Thakin Soe, and Than Tun, the two latter subsequently to emerge as leaders of the Burmese Communist Party. In August Dr. Ba Maw was arrested and, amidst manifestations of general public indignation, sentenced to a year's imprisonment; this was extended indefinitely a year later by the new premier U Saw, less for considerations of state than for reasons of personal political rivalry. Warrants were also issued during 1940 and 1941 for the arrest of other *Thakin* leaders—including, of course, Aung San, Thein Pe Myint, and Bo Let Ya—but many escaped detection.

The withdrawal of the British before Japanese forces in the spring of 1942 immediately altered the prospects for the nationalist movement in Burma. The imprisoned leaders were released. Ba Maw headed a pro-Japanese government which included a curious (in retrospect) assortment of future Socialist, Communist, and resistance leaders: Aung San served both as Minister of Defense and Commander of the newly created Burma Independence Army (later in the occupation called the Burma National Army); Thakin Nu was Foreign Minister; Than Tun was Minister of Agriculture. In 1943, after Japan granted "independence" to Burma, the Ba Maw cabinet became the first government of an allegedly sovereign nation. From the outset of the occupation, however, differences intensified within the Freedom Bloc, and especially among the *Thakins*, concerning collaboration with the Japanese. Initially the prevailing view, inspired by the experience of the "Thirty Comrades," was in favor of collaboration as the quickest route to independence. How-

ever, as disillusion with the Japanese grew, a resistance movement gradually developed throughout the country under the leadership of Thakin Soe. As in Indonesia, there was some co-ordination between the collaborationist and underground leaders and there were instances—similar to Sukarno's intervention in behalf of Sjarifuddin in 1943—of government officials protecting members of the underground: in 1942, for instance, Bo Let Ya, who was Aung San's deputy in the Ba Maw government, shielded Thein Pe Myint from arrest by Japanese occupation authorities.

The co-ordination during the first year or more of the occupation, however, should not be exaggerated; in general, the two leaderships went their separate ways awaiting a clearer delineation of the political forces at work in Burma before linking their fortunes. Ideology, it should be emphasized once again, was not yet at issue. Different views on the question of relations with the Japanese did not reflect significant ideological differences within the *Thakin* movement. All, excluding only Ba Maw and his immediate followers, considered themselves Marxists in one degree or another. Socialists and Communists by 1943 were perhaps more clearly distinguishable than before the war—Aung San, U Ba Swe, Bo Let Ya, among others, now stood forth as Socialists; Thakin Soe, Thein Pe Myint, and Than Tun, as Communists—but serious rivalry between the two groups did not appear until the closing months of the war. The two above-ground leaders of the so-called Socialist and Communist factions, Aung San and Than Tun, were both friends and allies and linked to one another by marriage to sisters. It is accordingly inappropriate to seek correlation in Burma between Socialists and collaboration, on the one hand, and Communists and non-collaboration, on the other. In this sense there was less distinction between collaboration and non-collaboration in Burma than in Indonesia.<sup>169</sup>

<sup>169</sup> The events of the wartime period are again drawn in large part from the author's interviews with Burmese who took part in them, notably Ba Maw, Thein Pe Myint, and Bo Let Ya, and from Aung San's address in August 1945 (see above). While some discrepancies occur in their accounts, especially in the interpretation put on different episodes, to the extent that the evidence of these Burmese leaders has been used here, it does not conflict with the more detailed

The Burmese Communist Party was officially launched at a "congress" called by Thakin Soe in 1942 or 1943. Fewer than ten, it is reported, attended. Thakin Soe was elected Secretary; Than Tun, who was evidently present at the secret meeting though a member of the Ba Maw government, was named his deputy.<sup>170</sup> In March 1944 an agreement was reached between the Socialists (organized since 1941 as the People's Revolutionary Party) and the Communists to collaborate in a resistance movement against the Japanese. An instruction explaining the agreement to both Communist and Socialist cadres called for the organization of a unified resistance movement within two months, after which a date would be set for the commencement of organized operations. The instruction continued: "We must regard the Fascist Japanese forces as our first and worst enemy. . . . We must seek friendship of Soviet Russia and the Allied Forces. After we have driven out the Fascist Japanese we must form organizations along democratic lines and start talks for independence. We will fight any foreign power which presents itself as detrimental to the rights of the Burmese people."<sup>171</sup>

In August 1944 nine Socialists, Communists, and Army leaders—all but two of them members of the Ba Maw government—met at the Rangoon home of Thakin Nu (who was then politically neutral) and launched the organization subsequently to be known as the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, or AFPFL. Aung San was named President of the organization and Than Tun Secretary-General.<sup>172</sup>

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and generally accepted accounts of Burmese wartime politics in such studies as Cady, *op. cit.*, Chapter XIII; Trager, *Marxism in Southeast Asia*, pp. 28-31; and Tinker, *The Union of Burma*, pp. 9-18.

<sup>170</sup> The date of the founding of the BCP is disputed. Thein Pe Myint gives the date as sometime during 1942, Bo Let Ya as sometime during 1943; neither, however, was present at the "congress."

<sup>171</sup> The full text of the seven-point instruction is given in Trager, *op. cit.*, p. 30; it is translated from a 1952 Burmese Communist pamphlet entitled "Who is Right, The AFPFL or the Communist Party?" in the possession of Frank N. Trager.

<sup>172</sup> The meeting is described in an article by Maung Maung in *The Guardian* (Rangoon), II, 16, March 1955; cited in Trager, *op. cit.*, p. 30. Among those present were Thakin Soe and Than Tun (Communists); Kyaw Nyein, Thakin

The Communists thus played a major role in the AFPFL from its inception. If their following was less numerous than Aung San's—it is estimated that there were 3,000 members of the BCP in 1945 as against 10,000 in the Burma National Army led by Aung San<sup>173</sup>—their superior underground organization and their leading role in the resistance movement prior to 1944 somewhat compensated for the handicap. Moreover, through Thein Pe Myint, the *Thakins'* representative in India since 1942 (and unofficially the Burmese Communists' link with the CPI after the formation of the BCP), the Communists maintained the principal liaison with the Allied forces under Admiral Mountbatten, with whom the AFPFL was now to collaborate. After the formation of the AFPFL Thein Pe appealed to Force 136 for aid to the Burmese underground and after some hesitation on the part of British officers secured a promise of it.<sup>174</sup>

The AFPFL opened its revolt in March 1945 when Aung San, sent by the Japanese into North Burma to attack a British force, turned instead against the Japanese; simultaneously, according to Bo Let Ya, a Burmese unit under his command in the Irrawaddy delta turned against the Japanese there. British

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Mya and U Ba Swe (Socialists); and Aung San and Ne Win (Army). According to one account, based on British Intelligence sources, the name AFPFL derived from the merger of two resistance organizations known as the Anti-Fascist Organization and the People's Freedom League, founded, respectively, by the Communists and by Aung San during 1943; Brimmell, *Communism in Southeast Asia*, p. 186. The same author's assertion, however, that at the time of the formation of the AFPFL the three constituencies (Socialist, Communist, and military leaders) united to form an enlarged Burmese Communist Party, with Aung San as a member of the Central Committee, appears very doubtful.

<sup>173</sup> The estimate of Communist strength in 1945 was given to the author by a former Communist, U Than Maung, during an interview in Mandalay in January 1962; U Than Maung, now a journalist, was formerly a member of the BCP. The estimate of the size of Aung San's forces is one generally accepted by students of Burma during these years; see, for example, Cady, *op. cit.*, p. 483.

<sup>174</sup> For a discussion of the conflicting views on Burma held by Force 136 officers and British civil officials, see Donnison, *British Military Administration in the Far East, 1943-1946*, pp. 346ff. Thein Pe's reception in India was affected by this rivalry: according to his own account, he was initially detained by British authorities following his arrival in India in 1942 and gained access to Force 136 officials only after a visit to Chungking in 1943, where he sought—without success—support from the Kuomintang.

troops in the meantime had launched attacks on Burma at various points, according to a long-delayed plan, and by May occupied Rangoon. Liaison between the British and the AFPFL was understandably irregular during these few months of intense fighting, but was maintained where possible through Force 136 operatives parachuted into Burma after November 1944; the British view, of course, was that the AFPFL was fighting the Japanese under the general command of Admiral Mountbatten.<sup>175</sup>

The first significant differences between the Socialist and Communist factions within the AFPFL arose over the question of relations with the returning British. Most Socialists, including Aung San, initially favored retaining the Burmese National Army as an independent force until assurances of independence were received. The Communists argued for the disbandment of the army—at least as an independent force—and for temporary co-operation with the British. According to Bo Let Ya, Aung San, following his first meeting with the British in mid-May, was persuaded by Thakin Soe and Than Tun that their course was the proper one; in June Aung San, Than Tun, and other Burmese leaders met with Admiral Mountbatten and placed the Burma National Army (now the Patriotic Burmese Forces) under his command.<sup>176</sup> Disbandment and re-registration in a regular Burmese army under British control began soon thereafter.

There are several explanations of Communist strategy during this episode. One is that the party leadership, especially Thakin Soe, who was less intimately associated with Aung San than was Than Tun, doubted the use Communists might make of an armed force so thoroughly under the influence of Aung San; nor would Thakin Soe, who was excessively self-centered according

<sup>175</sup> An account of British-AFPFL relations during this period may be found in Donnison, *op. cit.*, pp. 351ff.

<sup>176</sup> Burmese sources indicate that the meeting took place at Admiral Mountbatten's headquarters in Kandy, Ceylon: e.g., interview with Bo Let Ya and Ba Thein Tin's speech at the London conference of Communist parties of the British Empire, *World News and Views*, March 15, 1947, p. 103. British sources state that the meeting was held in Rangoon: e.g., Cady, *op. cit.*, p. 515, and Donnison, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

to those who knew him during this period, have welcomed the widely acclaimed Aung San within the party leadership, assuming Aung San had any inclination to join it. Accordingly, the wisest course was to dissolve the army and thereby curb Aung San's authority. Another explanation, which finds support in subsequent debates within the BCP, is that the Burmese leadership during this period was afflicted by what was to be called "Browderism"—a tendency, as we have seen,<sup>177</sup> to rely less on traditional oppositionist tactics than on co-operation with Western democratic forces allied with Russia during the war (in this case, the British government). Thein Pe Myint later acknowledged that the materials he sent into Burma from India during this period, both those he transmitted from foreign sources and those he composed himself, consciously reflected the Browderist line. If reports are true that Thakin Soe secretly visited India in the spring of 1945, to consult with Indian Communists, and that Ghoshal returned to Burma soon thereafter after spending the war years in India, both would have brought back similar counsels, since the CPI at this juncture was also following a "Browderist" line.<sup>178</sup>

If the adoption of "Browderism" by Burmese Communists was a consequence of influences from outside the country, the cure of the malady appears to have been related to personal rivalries within the party. During the party's Second Congress, held in the summer of 1945, Thakin Soe, though he had been widely acknowledged even by non-Communists as the real leader of the resistance movement,<sup>179</sup> was sharply criticized by his colleagues

<sup>177</sup> See above, p. 258.

<sup>178</sup> Thakin Soe's alleged visit to India, with the assistance of Communist RAF officers, was mentioned to the author by two Burmese journalists—U Than Maung and U Thaug Myine—during separate interviews in January and February 1962; Ghoshal's return to Burma in 1945 is mentioned in Brimmell, *op. cit.*, p. 189. For Indian Communist policy during the latter part of the war, see Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, pp. 218-22; the line consisted of an attempt, largely futile, to support the British war effort without alienating the militantly anti-British Congress leaders.

<sup>179</sup> Evidence of this is provided, for instance, by Bo Let Ya (a close associate, it will be recalled, of Aung San) who states that Aung San freely acknowledged Thakin Soe's leadership of the resistance movement during his first meeting with

for moral misdemeanors. He was removed from leadership, including membership on the Politburo; Thein Pe Myint was named party secretary and Than Tun chairman of the Politburo.<sup>180</sup>

Thein Pe, who was still in India at the time of the Second Congress, returned to Rangoon in the autumn, according to his account, and assumed leadership of the party. His return assured continuation of the moderate line for the present, despite a reported message from the Chinese Communists about this time to prepare for "armed struggle."<sup>181</sup> Than Tun, whose principal activity during this period was with the AFPFL, of which he continued to serve as Secretary-General, appears fully to have supported Thein Pe's policies.

Thakin Soe, meanwhile, took his demotion badly. He evidently felt that he had been dismissed from leadership on irrelevant charges and that his wartime role in the underground entitled him to greater recognition—within the party at least, if not within the AFPFL. He accordingly seized upon the issue of "Browderism," which by the end of 1945 had been everywhere rejected in the Communist world, and launched a sharp attack on Thein Pe Myint and Than Tun for continuing the moderate line. At a meeting of the Central Committee in late February 1946 he succeeded in forcing from Thein Pe what the latter

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the British in May 1945 and insisted on consulting with him before negotiating further; as a result of this consultation, we have seen, the agreement with Admiral Mountbatten was reached in June.

<sup>180</sup> According to a subsequent report by Thein Pe Myint, the principal charge against Thakin Soe involved an affair he had had with a young Burmese girl attending his indoctrination lectures during the war; a copy of the report, delivered to the Politburo in April 1945, is in the possession of U Thaug Myine and was translated by him for this writer in February 1962.

<sup>181</sup> The origin of the Chinese message, referred to as the "Teng-fa letter," is obscure. Thein Pe Myint, in discussing the letter with the author, described it as a "suggestion" not an "instruction" and felt that the Burmese were in no way bound by it; U Than Maung, whose description of the message parallels Thein Pe's, notes that no notice was taken of the Chinese advice. The author knows of no discussion of the letter in published sources. Teng-fa was a Chinese labor leader who represented the CCP at a congress of the CPGB in London in November 1945; his speech on this occasion, which is not marked by its militancy, is printed in *World News and Views*, December 8, 1945, p. 398.

himself describes as a "confession of guilt" on the issue of Browderism, but he failed, by a vote of 29 to 8, to oust his two rivals.<sup>182</sup>

On the issue of leadership Thakin Soe split the Burmese Communist Party. In March he founded his own party, the Communist Party (Burma)—or "Red Flag" Communists, as they came to be known. The CPI promptly sent off a telegram to the Burmese leaders warning them that "the public airing of party differences must be stopped . . . both sides should strive to achieve unity."<sup>183</sup> The gesture, however, was to no avail; the division between "Red Flag" and "White Flag" Communists was final.

The troubles of the Burmese Communists did not end here. Within the "White Flag" faction—which was the most numerous and has generally been considered the orthodox branch of the movement—a further change in leadership came in July when Than Tun replaced Thein Pe Myint as Secretary; Thein Pe himself describes the charge against him as one of "weak leadership." Than Tun, meanwhile, was forced about the same time to give up his position as Secretary-General of the AFPFL due to differences with the majority, including Aung San, on the question of political activities allowable outside the AFPFL.<sup>184</sup> Thein Pe was defeated by one vote in the election of Than Tun's successor as Secretary-General and control of the AFPFL now passed wholly to the Socialists.<sup>185</sup> Relations between the BCP and the AFPFL thereafter deteriorated rapidly. Aung San offered the Communists only one seat instead of the two they demanded in the Executive Council formed after the arrival of

<sup>182</sup> The vote on the leadership question was given to the author by Thein Pe; a reference to his "confession of guilt" appears in Thein Pe's report to the Politburo in April 1946, cited above. See also *Burma and the Insurrections* (an official publication of the Burmese government), p. 2.

<sup>183</sup> The telegram, which was signed by Joshi, is quoted in Thein Pe's report to the Politburo in April.

<sup>184</sup> The exact issue forcing Than Tun's resignation is obscure but appears to have centered on the question of declaring the "Red Flag" Communists illegal—a move which Than Tun protested and Aung San upheld; see Cady, *op. cit.*, pp. 534-5 and Trager, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>185</sup> Cady, *op. cit.*, p. 535; the vote was 53 to 52 in favor of the Socialist candidate Thakin Kyaw Nyein.

the new Governor, Sir Hubert Rance; the seat moreover was offered to Thein Pe rather than to Than Tun, as the latter had expected—a maneuver presumably calculated to exacerbate rivalries within the BCP. In November 1946 the BCP was finally expelled altogether from the ruling AFPFL for having condoned strikes against the government. Thein Pe was simultaneously dropped from the Executive Council, where he had served for only three weeks; he subsequently drifted away from the party until he broke with it entirely in March 1948 on the eve of the insurrection.

Following their expulsion from the AFPFL the "White Flag" Communists appear to have steadily lost political influence, despite some gains in the labor and peasant unions.<sup>186</sup> They were now isolated from leadership of the nationalist movement and so played no part in the negotiations for independence which began in London in January 1947. At the same time they had no alternative to put before the country. "Browderism" was dead but no clear policy had been devised to replace it. There was, for instance, no all-out attack on the Aung San government comparable to that which the "Red Flag" Communists had directed against it since quitting the AFPFL in March 1946. The elections to the Constitutional Assembly in April 1947, in which the "White Flag" Communists hesitantly participated, should have removed any doubt that Communist influence had declined sharply: of the 29 seats which they contested, the Communists carried only seven, as contrasted with more than 170 won by the AFPFL.<sup>187</sup>

<sup>186</sup> The Communists had organized the All Burma Trade Union Congress as early as July 1945, some months before the Socialists had taken comparable steps in the labor field. Among wide segments of the peasantry, meanwhile, the post-war Communist slogans "no rent, no taxes," although essentially irresponsible and sharply protested by the Socialists, also gained the Communists support. According to a Burmese Communist who attended the conference of Communist parties of the British Empire in February 1947, the Communist-controlled labor unions at the end of 1946 included 35,000 workers; 300,000 peasants were in Communist-led peasant organizations; and the BCP itself (i.e., "White Flag") had 6,000 members. See Ba Thein Tin's speech at the conference in *World News and Views*, March 15, 1947, p. 103.

<sup>187</sup> See Cady, *op. cit.*, p. 551.

The Burmese Communists had in the meantime extended their international contacts beyond the CPI. Reports of liaison with Communists in the British armed forces during the spring of 1945 may be exaggerated,<sup>188</sup> but once travel between Europe and Asia returned to normal, contact was established with the international movement. Two Burmese delegates, for instance, attended the conference of Communist parties of the British Empire in London in February 1947 and one of them reported on developments in Burma.<sup>189</sup> Burmese delegates also attended meetings of the WFDY and WFTU in Europe during 1947.<sup>190</sup> On these occasions they inevitably came into contact with Soviet representatives; however, there is no evidence that these early contacts with Russians abroad, or with occasional Soviet visitors to Burma,<sup>191</sup> specifically influenced Burmese Communist policies. There is also no evidence of Chinese Communist influence in Burma after the war—other than the so-called "Teng-fa letter," whose origin, we have seen, is obscure; the CCP, it may be imagined, was too preoccupied with its own affairs in North China at this juncture to give to developments in Burma the attention they were later to receive.

The Russian press, both during and after the war, provides only those very general clues to Moscow's intentions in Burma which we have discovered in the case of other Southeast countries. It is useful, however, to review these commentaries for

<sup>188</sup> U Than Maung and U Thaug Myine both mentioned such contacts to the author, during interviews in January and February 1962, but could supply no details—other than the alleged visit of Thakin Soe to India with the help of Communist officers in the RAF, referred to above.

<sup>189</sup> The two delegates were Aung Gyi (not to be confused with Brigadier Aung Gyi, later an aide of General Ne Win) and Ba Thein Tin; the latter's report to the conference, discussed below, was published in *World News and Views*, March 15, 1947, p. 103. Thakin Soe was evidently invited to attend the conference, as representative of the dissident "Red Flag" faction, but is reported to have rejected the invitation charging that the meeting was the "opening of a lunatic asylum"; interview with U Than Maung.

<sup>190</sup> U Than Maung states that he and several other Burmese Communists (or sympathizers) attended international conferences in Belgrade, Prague, and London between May and October 1947.

<sup>191</sup> A brief report on a visit to Burma by the Soviet correspondent O. Chechetkina appears in *New Times*, August 20, 1947, pp. 23-7.

what little they reveal; it is also useful, and more instructive, to review simultaneously commentaries by the CPGB and its organs, since, in the absence of a clearly perceived Soviet line, the British Communist attitude toward Burma can perhaps be taken as an authentic reflection of Moscow's.

At the outset of the war in the Far East, Soviet attention to Burma continued to focus on the question of a supply line to China now that the Burma Road was sealed off entirely by the Japanese occupation.<sup>192</sup> A few articles probed more deeply into political developments, but with little apparent grasp of Burmese realities. An article in the spring of 1942, for instance, spoke of the centuries-old ties between Burma and Siam, an assertion most historians would challenge; the author's review of the governmental structure under the 1936 Act of Burma omitted reference to the nationalist movement.<sup>193</sup> A short pamphlet by Vasil'eva at the end of 1942 was also elementary but did—evidently for the first time—take cognizance of the *Thakins*; none, however, were mentioned by name, and their activities since the beginning of the Japanese occupation were overlooked.<sup>194</sup> In 1944 an article in *War and the Working Class* on Japanese occupation policies in East Asia considered the "puppet" government of Ba Maw no better than the Roxas and Wang Ching-wei regimes in the Philippines and China; Burmese "independence," the author concluded, was "a farce."<sup>195</sup>

British Communists took more notice than Russian of the independence movement in Burma. In April 1942, for instance, *World News and Views* noted the stimulation given Burmese nationalism by the Cripps mission to India.<sup>196</sup> During the next

<sup>192</sup> Several items on this theme in *Sputnik agitatora* and *Ogonek* during 1942 and 1943 are listed in *Bibliografiia Iugo-vostochnoi Azii*, p. 75.

<sup>193</sup> N. Lazarev, "Birma," *Mirovoe khoziaistvo i mirovaia politika*, No. 1-2, January-February 1942, pp. 121-8. The author, who wrote a number of other articles for the same journal on South America, was evidently not a specialist on Burma.

<sup>194</sup> Vasil'eva, *Birma*, pp. 25ff.

<sup>195</sup> K. Popov, "Iaponiia i okkupirovannye strany Vostochnoi Azii," *Voina i rabochii klass*, No. 12, June 15, 1944, p. 18.

<sup>196</sup> *World News and Views*, April 25, 1942, p. 211.

two years British Communist attention to the colonial question was riveted almost exclusively on India, but late in 1944 a policy regarding Burma began gradually to emerge. In October 1944, we have noted, approval was expressed of General MacArthur's promise of independence to the Philippines and the British government criticized for being "still unable to make a statement of this kind to the people of Burma and Malaya."<sup>197</sup> In November the memorandum on the colonial question issued by the Executive Committee of the CPGB urged the government to give a firm pledge of independence to Burmese patriots rather than a promise merely to restore the 1935 constitution.<sup>198</sup> In December another article, commenting on the recent discussion of Burma in the House of Commons (which, it was observed, was the first in more than a decade), noted that there was little awareness in Parliament of Burmese "realities." The "realities," the author stated, were three. First, Burmese guerrillas were actively taking part in the struggle against the Japanese; they should accordingly be armed, as Americans were said to be arming guerrillas in the Philippines. Second, the Burmese people wanted independence and "their own representative government"; a promise of Dominion status was not enough. Third, the just desire of the Burmese for a higher standard of living could not be satisfied simply by settling accounts with Indian moneylenders; a more ambitious program of economic recovery was necessary to repay the Burmese for decades of British and Indian exploitation.<sup>199</sup> The CPGB, it should be noted, was directing its efforts through 1944 mainly at the policies of the London government; as yet there was no clear indication of an attitude toward the various factions in Burma itself, although the Communists were occasionally singled out as active in the resistance movement.

When the AFPFL launched its attack on the Japanese in March, British Communists responded immediately. At the end

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, October 28, 1944, p. 349.

<sup>198</sup> *The Colonies: The Way Forward*, p. 47.

<sup>199</sup> A.C., "Burma—Present and Future," *World News and Views*, December 23, 1944, p. 412.

of the month *World News and Views* expressed concern over the government's failure to give its blessing to the AFPFL's action.<sup>200</sup> In May, the official, if belated, recognition of the AFPFL was duly approved and the next step was said to be the establishment of local governments, and eventually a national government, made up of guerrilla leaders.<sup>201</sup> The same argument was used again in June in a sharp critique of the recently published White Paper on Burma which proposed to delay national elections and self-government for three years.<sup>202</sup> By the end of the war in the Far East, then, the CPGB appears to have adopted a relatively explicit and forthright line in Burma: the alliance between the Communists and the AFPFL was openly acknowledged; the past collaboration of certain AFPFL leaders was recognized and forgiven; and the independence of Burma under the leadership of the AFPFL was set forth as the immediate post-war objective. We can only conjecture that Moscow shared these views.

Following the Japanese surrender, British Communists continued to serve as the principal interpreters of Burmese affairs in the international movement, Soviet observers remaining silent. In September an article in *World News and Views* for the first time discussed the Burmese Communist Party, as one of the major parties constituting the AFPFL, but showed some ignorance of the origins of the party and of recent intra-party developments: the BCP was said, for instance, to have been very small at the time of the Japanese invasion and only subsequently to have grown (as we have seen, the BCP did not exist as such until late 1942 or 1943); the head of the party was said to be Thakin Soe (although, if evidence presented earlier is correct, he was removed from the leadership several months before this article appeared).<sup>203</sup> Later in September an editorial in the same

<sup>200</sup> Michael Carritt, "Burma Reconstruction," *World News and Views*, March 31, 1945, p. 103.

<sup>201</sup> *World News and Views*, May 19, 1945, p. 147.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, June 2, 1945, p. 164.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, September 15, 1945, p. 282; the article lists Than Tun and Thein Pe Myint as the chief Communist collaborators with Aung San in the AFPFL.

paper cited continuing collaboration with anti-Fascist forces in Burma as the correct policy for the new Labour government to follow, in contrast to the support given pro-Fascist elements in Indochina and Indonesia by the French and Dutch.<sup>204</sup> In November, however, the Labour government's good intentions in Burma were doubted: the rejection of what were described as the AFPFL's moderate proposals to shorten the timetable for self-government put forward in the White Paper was seen as a return to "imperialism with a vengeance."<sup>205</sup>

At this juncture there is an interruption in British Communist attention to developments in Burma, possibly because of the intra-party disputes over the post-war leadership. Whether this issue was resolved to the satisfaction of the CPGB it is impossible to say since there is no subsequent reference to it in British Communist sources known to this writer; in fact, the BCP itself attracted little attention in commentaries on Burma once they were resumed. *World News and Views* at the end of September 1946 reaffirms support of the AFPFL but makes no mention of the Communists.<sup>206</sup> In December, after the Communists were expelled from the AFPFL, their British comrades still showed no sign of withdrawing support from the AFPFL leadership. A resolution on the colonial question passed by the Executive Committee of the CPGB says of Burma, in one of the most forthright policy statements to this time: "Give real executive responsibility in all departments of government, including External Affairs, to the Executive Council [which, it will be recalled, was at this juncture entirely made up of AFPFL leaders, without Communist representation] unfettered by the Governor's special powers and vetoes. Withdraw the unpopular and undemocratic White Paper proposals for the future and permit a Constituent Assembly to be called in 1947 to decide freely, without political or economic interference, Burma's future status and constitution."<sup>207</sup>

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, September 29, 1945, p. 297.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, November 3, 1945, p. 340.

<sup>206</sup> Geoffrey Parsons, "Last Chance in Burma," *ibid.*, September 28, 1946, p. 308.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, December 7, 1946, p. 396.

The first doubts about the AFPFL leadership openly expressed by British Communists came only at the beginning of 1947 as negotiations opened in London between the Burmese delegation led by Aung San and British colonial authorities. In accepting his post in the Executive Council without a full guarantee of demands previously put forth by the AFPFL, a British Communist writer argued, Aung San "went against the nationalist principles of the progressive independence movement." He was unsuccessful, the writer continued, "in his attempt to use a violent anti-Communist campaign as a means of diverting the attention of the Burmese people from the fact that, although their national hero was now Deputy Chairman of the Executive Council, Burma was no nearer to independence."<sup>208</sup> When a preliminary agreement was reached in London, the same author doubted that rank and file AFPFL members in Burma would accept it since one of the three conditions for undertaking the negotiations—a promise of independence by January 1948—had not been met by the British.<sup>209</sup>

It was only now that the Soviet press broke silence on Burma.<sup>210</sup> In February 1947 an item in *New Times*, on the occasion of the preliminary agreement signed between the Burmese and the British in London, took Aung San to task for his part in the negotiations. Aung San, the item recalled, had joined the anti-Fascist movement during the war only when it was evident that the Japanese would be defeated; since the war he had sought "to divide the AFPFL and to isolate and destroy the forces struggling for independence." *New Times* noted, and appeared to approve, opposition to the agreement within the Burmese

<sup>208</sup> Geoffrey Parsons, "Burma Talks," *ibid.*, January 4, 1947, p. 6.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, February 8, 1947, p. 64. The other two conditions put forward by the Burmese leaders prior to the talks—conditions which were met by the English—were: the transformation of the Executive Council into an interim government pending general elections and a pledge of elections for a constituent assembly during the spring of 1947.

<sup>210</sup> Burma had of course been touched on in a few articles appearing in the Soviet press since the war—such as a review of Alexander Campbell's *It's Your Empire* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1945) in *New Times*, No. 22, November 15, 1946, p. 28—but had been the subject of no sustained comment, insofar as this writer has been able to discover.

delegation led by U Saw (soon to be held responsible for Aung San's assassination).<sup>211</sup> An article in the following issue also criticized the agreement and mentioned the "cruel suppression" of Communists in Burma by the British and their allies in the AFPFL.<sup>212</sup> By June the Soviet view on the AFPFL leadership had stiffened perceptibly. Another article noted a "sharp and complete struggle" going on within the AFPFL, brought on by clever British strategy, and lamented the gradual elimination from the movement of all "progressive" elements.<sup>213</sup> *New Times* used less equivocal language: "The leaders of the Anti-Fascist League and the government have no intention to demand [*sic*] the country's independence"; Aung San's gesture of publishing a draft constitution which would proclaim Burma's full independence was declared "demagogic."<sup>214</sup> The country in the meantime, *New Times* went on, was sinking into chaos: guerrillas were said to be in control of extensive areas and had even established their own governmental bodies. The item does not identify the guerrillas, but since the "Red Flag" Communists of Thakin Soe were the principal group in open rebellion at this juncture it would appear that Moscow was acknowledging—and perhaps even giving inadvertent support to—this dissident faction of the Communist movement.

Aung San's assassination on July 19<sup>215</sup> led to reappraisals of

<sup>211</sup> *Temps nouveaux*, No. 6, February 7, 1947, pp. 16-7.

<sup>212</sup> N. Chitchebinovski [Shcherbinovskii], "La Birmanie," *Temps nouveaux*, No. 7, February 14, 1947, p. 30.

<sup>213</sup> I. Lemin, "Sovremennye problemy Britanskoi imperii," *Mirovoe khoziaistvo i mirovaia politika*, No. 6, June 1947, pp. 12-3.

<sup>214</sup> *New Times*, No. 24, June 13, 1947, pp. 24-5. It is of some interest that Aung San, despite the negative view of him in the Soviet press, still held the counsel of world Communist leaders in high regard where revolutionary strategy was concerned; in a speech delivered in Rangoon on May 23, he defended AFPFL moderation on the grounds that precisely such a course was recommended in the teachings of Stalin and Mao Tse-tung. "Taking these lessons to heart," he asserted, "one realizes that only as a part of a general revolutionary movement all over Southeast Asia can the revolution in Burma have a fair chance of complete success"; Aung San, "Burma's Challenge," p. 30 (loaned to the author by Professor John H. Badgley).

<sup>215</sup> Aung San and six close associates in the AFPFL were murdered in Rangoon by gunmen allegedly hired by the pre-war politician (and former premier) U Saw.

the Burmese scene by both British and Russian Communists. The British were the first to respond. A week after the assassination, *World News and Views*, while noting the decline of the AFPFL under Aung San's leadership, argued that since the April elections a "campaign for unity" had progressed in Burma which had led to new conversations between Communist and AFPFL leaders; Aung San's last public speech a week before the assassination, it was recalled, had shown a tendency to move closer to the Communists' position regarding full independence.<sup>216</sup> The implication of the commentary, although the identity of the assassins had not yet been revealed, was that the British had arranged Aung San's murder to forestall a reunification of the "White Flag" Communists and the AFPFL. Soviet comment, a few days later, also suggested British complicity in the assassination but emphasized fear of Aung San's rejection of the January agreement rather than of a Communist-AFPFL rapprochement as the principal reason for it. "We are not thinking of dominion status," Aung San is quoted as having said on July 13. "All that is mere speculation in the press and the malicious talk spread by enemies of the Freedom League." In marked contrast to this view, the Soviet comment remarked, was the outlook of Thakin Nu who was said to have reported enthusiastically on the "large measure of agreement" reached in his current negotiations with the British in London; it was implied that the prompt appointment of Thakin Nu as Aung San's successor was designed "to make Burma's colonial status permanent."<sup>217</sup>

Of the two slightly different explanations of the episode at the time, the British—with its stress on the approaching reunification of Communists and AFPFL—has become the more generally accepted one in Communist literature. This interpretation has made it possible for Communists to argue in later years that but for

U Saw's attempted coup—if such it was—was frustrated by the prompt naming of Thakin Nu as Aung San's successor and the formation of a new cabinet; U Saw and his accomplices were tried and executed later in the year.

<sup>216</sup> *World News and Views*, July 26, 1947, p. 336.

<sup>217</sup> "The Burma Murders," *New Times*, No. 31, July 30, 1947, pp. 13-4; see also I. A. Vasil'eva, "Polozhenie v Birme," *Mirovoe khoziaistvo i mirovaia politika*, No. 9, September 1947, pp. 111-24.

British treachery in July 1947 the long drawn-out civil war in Burma might never have occurred: Aung San's assassination removed the last good chance for a Communist-AFPFL rapprochement, which alone could stabilize the country and guarantee independence.<sup>218</sup>

There is some evidence that the views of British and Russian Communists influenced the attitudes and formulations of Burmese Communists, especially during 1947. The Burmese delegate who spoke at the Commonwealth conference of Communist parties in February 1947, for instance, reflected views about Aung San and the January agreement which were then current in Soviet and British Communist journals. He held Aung San responsible, in retrospect, for having agreed to disband the armed forces in 1945—a decision which meant that "the mass upsurge released by the anti-Fascist rising was temporarily decimated." (It apparently made no difference to the Burmese delegate that the decision, if evidence presented above is accurate, was pressed upon Aung San by the Communists themselves.) The January agreement, meanwhile, was considered a "national humiliation" because it fell so far short of the minimum conditions previously set by the AFPFL, when the Communists had still been in it.<sup>219</sup> There is also some correlation between Burmese Communist policies proclaimed after Aung San's assassination and the views expressed at this juncture by Russian and British Communists, especially in the more markedly hostile attitude toward England. A resolution adopted by the Burmese Central Committee on July 30 read in part:

The form of power which imperialism was compelled to concede to the national movement, if correctly implemented, offers us greater opportunity today for greater mobilization of our country to prepare for a national war against British imperialism. Under the circumstances, the existing Provisional Government and the Constituent Assembly become strategic weapons in the hands of the national united front [with which] to implement its program. At the same time the Provisional Government can be made to play a progressive role in

<sup>218</sup> See, for instance, *Birmanskii soiuz* (1958), p. 111.

<sup>219</sup> Speech by Ba Thein Tin in *World News and Views*, March 15, 1947, p. 103.

alliance with other progressive forces of the world against the menace of American imperialism and its junior partner, British imperialism.<sup>220</sup>

The July 30 resolution, however, parallels British and Russian Communist views only in part inasmuch as it clearly continues the effort at reconciliation with the AFPFL at a time when Communist opinion abroad indicated misgivings about the direction of League policies under Thakin Nu. Possibly the Burmese Communists felt they knew better than the British and Russians the prospects for collaboration with Thakin Nu;<sup>221</sup> at any event, it is unlikely that they could have received specific instructions from abroad during the short interval between the assassination and the July 30 resolution, and so they simply continued the policy of reconciliation in force since April. The time had not yet come, the White Flag leadership appears to have felt, for a complete break with the AFPFL. This would not occur for another eight months and less as a consequence of advice from Moscow or from the CPGB than as a consequence of advice once again from the Indians.

MYSTERIOUS WAYS OF COMMUNISM IN SIAM

Our occasional focus on Siamese Communism and on Soviet policy toward it may be considered an exercise in speculation since

<sup>220</sup> Quoted from Ba Tin [Ghoshal], "On the Present Political Situation in Burma and our Tasks" (January 1948), p. 11; a translation of this document, known as the Ghoshal Thesis, was given to the author by U Thaug Myine.

<sup>221</sup> Contrary to the impression British and especially Russian Communists had of Thakin Nu at this juncture, he appears not to have been hostile to a reconciliation with the Communists. In November 1946, for instance, at the time of the Communists' expulsion from the AFPFL, he is quoted as having said: "May the real Communist movement in Burma be successful and may the leadership by unscrupulous people who are misusing the name of Communism . . . be quickly destroyed"; from the pamphlet *Who is Right, the AFPFL or the Communist Party?* quoted in Trager, *op. cit.*, p. 33. The remark is, to be sure, ambiguous, especially as it might apply to the White Flag leadership, but indicates Thakin Nu's tolerant attitude toward Communism per se. In a speech delivered in November 1947 Thakin Nu stated that White Flag leaders had met with him immediately after Aung San's assassination to discuss the possibility of a reconciliation; *Towards Peace and Democracy* (Rangoon, 1947), p. 20, cited in Johnstone, *Burma's Foreign Policy*, p. 31.

next to nothing is known of either—at least in comparison with the relatively abundant, if uneven, sources of information on Communism and Soviet policies elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The effort to set forth what can be discovered, however, is not wasted if it sheds light on Moscow's resourcefulness, or lack of it, in devising revolutionary strategies under conditions very different from those in surrounding colonies.

During the dozen years reviewed in the present chapter (1935-1947) there appears to have been little stirring by Siamese Communists. The 1933 act banning Communism remained in force through the war and its enforcement was evidently vigorous enough to discourage any significant activity by organizations willing to admit to being Communist or pro-Communist. There was no anti-Fascist front in the latter part of the 1930's, as in most other Southeast Asian countries; nor was there a native guerrilla movement in Siam during the war.

Siam was not, however, more ignored by the Soviet and international Communist press than other Southeast Asian countries. The long survey of Siamese politics and economics in *Tikhii okean* in 1935 (see p. 199) was followed by other discussion of Siamese affairs. In the pre-war years the principal topic of interest in these commentaries was the growing Japanese penetration of the country. In July 1936, for instance, an American Communist asserted: "There can be no doubt that when in the opinion of the Japanese military specialists the Siamese military base is sufficiently prepared, a new 'Manchurian incident' will break out . . . it will have more serious consequences than in 1931-32."<sup>222</sup> The governments of the late 1930's are seen as increasingly receptive to Japan's role in Siam, despite some restraining influence by Pridi Phanomyong; Pridi is treated sympathetically in most accounts, but not as a Communist.<sup>223</sup>

<sup>222</sup> J. Berry, "The Southern Direction of Japanese Aggression," *Communist International* (US), No. 7, July 1936, p. 876.

<sup>223</sup> E.g., E. Alin, "Siam - novyi platsdarm iaponskogo imperializma," *Tikhii okean*, No. 1, 1937, pp. 157-9; W. Damnus, "Reaction in Siam," *Inprecor*, July 10, 1937, p. 656; "Siam i derzhavy," *Tikhii okean*, No. 1, 1938, pp. 118-9; "Iaponiia i Siam," *Mirovoe khoziaistvo i mirovaia politika*, No. 8, August 1938, p. 125.