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# Burma: Through two imperialisms to independence

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## Introduction

Like all of South East Asia, Burma was subject to two occupations during the Second World War, firstly of British colonialism followed by a brief occupation by Japan, and then return to an even briefer interregnum of British rule before independence was gained in 1948. The fact that Burmese nationalists, anti-imperialists and leftists could be found on different sides of the struggle for Burma at any one time poses a thorny problem for the historian trying to reconstruct the war from below in this backward country.

Part of the forgotten history of the war in Asia, which for European historians is only of note once the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the war in Burma is rarely treated as anything other than a conquest by the barbaric Japanese, followed by a heroic reconquest by the British. The classic movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai* is one such tale of subversion and heroism by Allied forces against the Japanese.

This point of view developed from British war memoirs and finds its reverse in the post-colonial memoirs and official histories of the Burmese military regime, for which the glorious national war of liberation surged forever forward, barely stopping to consider the complicated politics of its leaders' manoeuvres between British colonialism and Japanese imperialism.

What both these trends of history have in common is that they deny the agency of the Burmese themselves in making the history of the war as they resisted both British and Japanese occupation and fought for self-determination. This chapter is a brief but necessary overview of their struggles.

## Burma from the Ancien Regime to the Age of Colonialism

Entering the 19th century as the rulers of the territory now known as Burma, much of contemporary Thailand and north eastern India, the Third

Burmese Empire ruled by the Konbaung Dynasty was ill-placed in the age of emerging western imperialism. Located right on the border between British ruled India and expanding French colonialism in Southeast Asia, the millennium-old Burmese kingdom was bound to become a component in the classic age of imperialism in one way or another.

Three wars were fought between dynastic Burma and British India during the 19th century. By the time of the second war, which ended in the 1850s, Burma was already *de facto* subjected to British rule, while the third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885 merely accomplished the formality of annexing the remnants of the Burmese kingdom. The pronouncements of the last king, Thibaw, who mobilised his army promising to defeat the British, conquer their country and convert them to the true religion of Theravada Buddhism, only served as pathetic bluster at the beginning of the road that would lead to the end of his kingdom. Promises of French aid never materialised, and Thibaw and his family ended up in exile in India while the British took over administration of their new province.[1]

Like India, Burma was a territory that was deeply divided by ethnicity and territory. If the Russian Empire had been "the prison house of nations", pre-conquest Burma could perhaps be called at least a "garden shed of nations". While the plurality of people at the centre of the country were from the dominant Bamar group,[2] the majority of the eastern half of the country come from the Karen and Shan groups. In the north and north east Burmese territory becomes a bewildering patchwork of tribes and ethnicities with their own customs and long-established ways of life.[3] Burma had always had strong trading links with China that had left a significant Chinese community in the eventual colonial centre of Rangoon/Yangon, and British rule brought with it significant numbers of Indians as administrators and coolies.

The British were prepared to use both existing divisions and those they established in order to rule Burma, which from its conquest until the 1930s was administered as a province of the Raj. Unlike India, however, Burma had a long and recent history of union, and the dominant Bamar had a recent memory of ruling over the area as a united kingdom.[4] Both the existing divisions in Burmese society and the proto-national consciousness of the Bamar are factors that must be taken into consideration as we review Burma's wartime history.

The British had gobbled Burma up in no small part because it helped to secure the Indian crown jewel against the nearby French possessions of Indochina. Just as it became politically dependent on colonised India in the form of a joint colonial administration, Burma also became

economically subordinate to India as the main provider of rice to feed the subcontinent. Hence its economy entered the modern era as a periphery to a periphery.[5] Intensive capitalist development did not take place in Burma even to the limited extent that it had started to in India. The place of the "rice bowl of India" in the global economy was decidedly marginal, and although rice production suffered a profound crisis with the Depression of the 1930s, the effects of this on countryside producers were highly varied and mitigated through a variety of strategies.[6]

The pacification of rural Burma was for the British authorities a never-ending job. Even where they would have preferred not to go, for example into the northern territory of the Wa people, known for their practice of head-hunting, their legendary filthiness and copious consumption of alcohol and opium, British forces felt they had to establish their authority to seal off the area from the influence of the French and Chinese, and because any future problems with their rule had to be dealt with pre-emptively.[7] Meanwhile, they also had to deal with the occasionally rebellious mood of the Shan states, which had been divided between Britain, France and Thailand and whose leaders constantly attempted to play one off against the other.[8]

British colonial policemen in Burma, the Indian soldiers they commanded and the eventual recruits to the British army from the Karen and other native groups constantly felt themselves on the precipice of rebellion even in the most peaceful of times. George Orwell, who served for several years as a colonial official in towns on the river deltas of lower Burma, expressed this feeling when he complained of being hated by the vast majority of the people:

> As a police officer I was an obvious target and was baited whenever it seemed safe to do so... In the end the sneering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me when I was at a safe distance, got badly on my nerves. The young Buddhist priests were the worst of all. There were several thousands of them in the town and none of them seemed to have anything to do except stand on street corners and jeer at Europeans.[9]

We should not have too much sympathy for the policeman Orwell who, as a British representative trapped by the expectations of the subject Burmese, felt himself an "absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind" him. Nevertheless, his viewpoint turned out to be prescient when the river districts he had policed rose in rebellion under a religious leader three years after he resigned his commission and

returned to England. The Saya San rebellion was only the climax of a series of rural rebellions that had taken place since the British conquest. Saya San, a traditional Buddhist healer, roused the countryside of Insein and Tharawaddy in revolt as pretender to the vacant Konbuang throne. The rebellion was commanded by a man who proclaimed himself "Glorious King of the Winged Creatures" and urged his followers into massacres armed with spears, crossbows and swords.[10] Nevertheless, it was a rebellion that took two years and thousands of Indian troops to subdue.

In the first decades of the 20th century Burma had only made halting steps in the direction of modernity. Still ruled as a province of India, it was among the most backward of British possessions. However, it was not guarded against the winds of change from the outside world, especially those of anti-colonial resistance. British rule would bring together explosive ingredients that would catapult Burma to the forefront of anti-colonial struggles, and, within the native educated elite it sought to help rule the country, it would help create the men who could lead this process.

## Early nationalism: From Buddhism to the Dobama Asiayone

The earliest expression of nationalist consciousness in British-ruled Burma took the form of associations of elite Bamars aiming to protect their culture, especially Buddhism, which they saw as being under attack by American and British missionaries who were engaged in proselytising, especially among Burma's ethnic minorities. The Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) was founded in 1906 by English-educated barrister U May Oung, who with other moderates set himself the aim of promoting and defending Buddhism and the glories of classical Bamar civilisation. Though inspiration is frequently cited in the British YMCA, this organisation was just as much the outgrowth of the monastic culture of Burma as foreign influence.[11] Like the men who had founded the Indian National Congress in 1885, the members of the YMBA had aims that were mostly non-political, and hoped merely to increase Bamar influence within the colonial administration.

But also like the Congress, the moderate, gentlemanly and pro-colonial stance of the YMBA would be challenged in ways that forced the organisation to reinvent itself in order to express its people's aspirations. It transformed itself into the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) in 1919, the year its members began to lead protests demanding that the British respect the Buddhist temples by removing their shoes

and demanding due reverence to holy images.[12] Though the GCBA was displaced in the 1930s, it would be the crucible for many cadres of the later nationalist movement.

Developments under British rule and in the rest of the world were bringing to fruition the conditions that could foster a more militant nationalism that would take its cue from the anti-colonial present rather than Burma's illustrious monarchic past. Central among these was the developing antagonism between the Bamar and Indians who had been brought to Burma by British rule. The colonial capital of Rangoon, though in the centre of the Bamar homeland, was dominated by foreigners among whom the Indians were the most conspicuous at the top as administrators, in the middle as soldiers, and at the bottom as labourers. The British relied on these Indians to run the most important functions in colonial Burma, a responsibility which was increasingly taken amiss and served to radicalise young men of the emerging middle class.

In 1930, on cue with the Saya San rebellion, race riots between Indians and Bamar rocked the capital city. The immediate cause was a labour dispute over jobs being given preferentially to Indians, a source of strife that continued throughout the 1930s. Out of this strife emerged the Dobama Asiayone (We Burmans Association). Dobama quickly grew into the vanguard of militant Bamar nationalism. Its members were largely students at Rangoon University who had sworn loyalty to the cause of the Burmese race and were known as "Thakin" (master). This was a calculated provocation to the British, who were addressed as "thakin" in Burma just as they were addressed as "sahib" in India. Two young Thakins, U Nu and Aung San, led the nationalist cause. In 1936, when they were both expelled from university for printing anti-British tracts, their supporters went on strike and won their reinstatement in addition to the firing of the chauvinist rector.[13]

Thakins led all the major disturbances against British rule during the 1930s, from boycotting the colonial elections to organising unions of Bamar workers. A number of these campaigns came together in the "1300 Revolution," in 1938, named after the year in the Burmese calendar. The Thakins were supremely confident in their ability to lead their people forward to freedom, especially after disturbances in the mid-1930s led the British to give Burma its own administration separate from that of India.

The prominent nationalists of this decade were Bamar almost to a man, and saw their own patriotism as being consonant with that of the whole territory of Burma that the old monarchy had once ruled. Their ideology developed, as with all nationalisms, in the form of a highly

eclectic mix of influences from home and abroad. Arguably the most important among these was Bamar racial pride. A Dobama song, a version of which would later become the national anthem of Burma, went:

> ...Be brave, be brave, like a true Burman,
> Burma, Burma for us Burmans.
> Act and behave like Masters,
> For Burmans are a race of Masters...
>
> For so long as the world will last,
> Burma is ours, Burma is ours.
> This is our country, this our land,
> This our country till the end.[14]

Along with racial pride, the Bamar people were influenced by a bewildering mixture of foreign ideologies. The activists who had joined the GCBA in the 1920s hoping for militant action against British rule had been fascinated with Ireland's Easter Rising in 1916, and many continued to look to Sinn Féin as a successful example of anti-colonial resistance.[15] Others found in the new government of Mustafa Kemal in Turkey an exemplar of the national strength and unity they desired. The racial pride that had been bred into early Bamar nationalism also accorded well with the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini, who seemed to some to show that nationalist revival was best accomplished through strong leadership rather than attention to the welfare of democracy.[16]

Right wing and left wing trends within Thakin thought were not so much in competition as collaboration, as both were part of the mélange of foreign ideologies that Bamar intellectuals reached out to for inspiration for the economic and political revival they felt their country desperately needed. As with all colonial peoples, the Burmese had heard of and taken inspiration from the October Revolution in Russia. Many Thakins as anti-colonial intellectuals in the 1930s looked to the Soviet Union as a model for economic transformation and revival, as they felt its experiences of being a backward country were similar to their own. Texts such as Lenin's *Imperialism* and the Comintern's documents on the Popular Front began to circulate in Burmese through the agency of the Red Dragon Club, which aimed to distribute popular Marxist pamphlets and the works of Thakins aiming to analyse Burma's conditions through a Marxist lens.[17] In 1939 the Indian communist Narendra Dutt brought together Aung San, Ba Hein, Soe Hla Pe, and others to form the first communist cell in Burma.[18]

Other influences were closer to home. Collaboration between Burmese and Indian nationalists led to Aung San and others attending the 1939 Ramgarh meeting of the Congress Party, when Subhash Chandra Bose was elected to its presidency on a militant platform of wartime resistance to British rule.[19] Ba Maw, who was elected to head the colonial ministry in Burma that year, was so impressed by Bose that he named the new party he formed with Thakin collaboration the Freedom Bloc after Bose's Forward Bloc. Indian nationalism in the forms of Gandhism, Bose's militant anti-colonialism, and Nehru's democratic socialism would be key reference points for Burma's leaders throughout the war. Like Bose and other Indian leaders, many of the Thakins were inspired by Japan's rise in the east following its defeat of Russia in 1905, though they were divided on their views of the Japanese occupation of China. The question of attitudes to Japan would obviously be a key area of contention.

Thus the twilight of British colonialism in Burma in the 1930s produced a generation of nationalist cadre who sought to free their country using militant methods. While drawing inspiration and ideology from a wide and contradictory array of sources, the apprenticeships they served in activism and (for some of them) government and the military would prepare them to play leading roles in the coming conflict when Britain was defeated.

## A deep breath: Burma on the edge of world war

Pre-war Rangoon was a cauldron of plots, suspicions and covert activities by the British government, Japanese agents and Bamar nationalists that could provide the stuff of a great spy novel. While labour disturbances and nationalist agitation continued apace, Ba Maw's attempts to gain the promise of Burmese autonomy in any possible war followed by a guarantee of independence ran into typical chauvinist obstruction from the British both in Rangoon and London. The leaders of ethnic minorities such as the Karen and Shan felt British rule teetering on the abyss, and a grim future of Bamar domination ahead of them. Meanwhile the Japanese were already preparing the ground for invasion. Keiji Suzuki, a colonel in the Imperial General Headquarters, had come to Burma disguised as a businessman, and arriving in Rangoon made contact with several Thakins hoping to lure them to the side of Japan, promising an independent Burma as part of the "East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere".[20] Suzuki entered the realm of a Bamar nationalism that was beginning to fracture under

the pressure of the coming war. Ba Maw, who considered his attempt to win over the British to independence pretty much failed, had resigned his ministry and travelled to London to seek an audience with Churchill in a last-ditch effort. The Thakin movement was deeply confused about the nature of the coming war. By and large the left wing Thakins were not at first inspired by the aims of either Britain's anti-fascist colonialism or Japan's militarist colonialism. Aung San expressed this later when he wrote, "the war in Europe was plainly a war between two sets of imperialists and could have no appeal of any kind. We therefore firmly resolved to conduct an anti-imperialist, anti-war campaign".[21]

But Britain's difficulty was always Ireland's, or Burma's, opportunity. The invasion of the Soviet Union by Japan's ally Germany did not resolve this question, as it did for communists and many left-leaning nationalists in other countries. Aung San, though he was general secretary of Burma's first communist cell, maintained it would be acceptable to seek aid from the "fascist" Japanese as the war in Asia had a substantially different character from that in Europe.[22] Other Thakins looked to democratic Britain as the lesser evil. Than Tun broke with Aung San while in prison in early 1941 when he drafted a document calling for unconditional support to Britain in the anti-fascist war.[23] Others among the left wing Thakins sought to use Britain's distraction as an opportunity to overthrow colonialism and then fight for independence against Britain and Japan alike.

Aung San had probably resolved by mid-1940 that seeking Japan's aid held the best prospects for his cause. Though in August he escaped arrest by slipping on board a ship bound for China claiming to be seeking the aid of the Chinese communists, when *Kempetei* agents discovered him he was perfectly amenable to going to Japan to discuss his options.[24] In Tokyo he and Suzuki hammered out a plan for achieving Burma's freedom in collaboration with Japanese forces. As the Imperial Army prepared to extend its South East Asia campaign into British territory, Aung San and his followers would foment an anti-British uprising and become recognised by the Japanese as the official government of independent Burma as soon as it gained control of the south eastern districts. This would achieve the Imperial Army's aim of cutting off the "Burma road", which was the main supply route for the Chinese resistance, and would also leave the way open to India.[25]

In March 1941 Aung San covertly arrived back in Rangoon to begin recruiting his Thakin comrades to the force of pro-Japanese rebels he aimed to establish. These are the "Thirty Comrades" of nationalist

mythology, who became the core of Burma's independent wartime armed forces.[26] They arrived at Hainan Island in China to begin a gruelling boot camp instructed by Japanese officers. To cement their loyalty to each other and Burma, the Thakins made a blood pact and adopted new names: Aung San became Bo Teza (Commander Fire) along with the honorific title *Bogyoke* (General), Tun Shein became Bo Yan Naing (Commander Vanquisher) and Shu Maung became Bo Ne Win (Commander Sun's Brilliance).[27] The Thirty Comrades then gathered their forces across the Burmese border in Siam and waited for the signal to rise.[28]

The signal came at the beginning of 1942. At the turn of the year Japanese troops swept down the Malayan peninsula on bicycles, first laying siege to and then capturing Britain's naval base at Singapore, a catastrophe for the colonial power in the Pacific theatre of the war. The colonial administration was thrown into panic, deserting Rangoon as the Fifteenth Imperial Army marched into the south east, dragging thousands of British, Indian and minority Burmese along with it overland, to eventually re-establish itself in exile at Shimla in the Indian Himalayas. The stage was set for a long Japanese occupation, which Aung San and his comrades hoped would bring the prospect of Burmese freedom for the first time in 70 years.

## Japanese occupation: A sort of independence

Like any other country that suffered occupation by the Imperial Army, the Burmese people have plenty of bad memories of the Second World War. The suppression of the native population including ferocious reprisals against members of minority groups could be recounted at some length. The fate of slave labour forced to construct the Siam-Burma railway to supply the army is particularly well known even among the other horrors of the Japanese war effort in Asia and the Pacific.

Any attempt to describe the Japanese occupation has a difficult line to walk. Burma, like any other country in the East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, was regarded by the army as territory to be conquered and secured against its enemies. At the same time the Japanese had been favoured early on by native elements in Burma who saw their presence as a stepping-stone towards independence. Behind the scenes of official Japanese conquest there was an intense struggle going on led by Bamar nationalists Aung San and Ba Maw to make Japanese-sponsored faux independence a reality for their people, one that ended in the nationalists finally breaking with Japan.

In 1942 the Japanese Fifteenth Army, in collaboration with Aung San's Burma Independence Army (BIA), successfully moved through and occupied Burma up to the Arakan frontier in the west and the tribal territories of the north. Establishing the occupation was a bloody job accomplished by both the Japanese and the BIA. In the course of establishing their autonomy the BIA often seemed to be matching the Japanese atrocity for atrocity. Immediately after crossing into Burma, Aung San himself took on the job of executing elders in a Shan village who were suspected of being in league with the British. The Shan and Karen, being the main nationalities besides the Bamar and the ones who had filled the ranks of the British forces in Burma, had the most to lose. Ian Morrison described the BIA's treatment of one Karen Catholic village. First 152 men, women and children were massacred in cold blood. When they reached the compound:

> Father Blasius, the Karen priest in charge, was sick in the clergy-house. The Burmans set fire to the house and burned him and the two men who were looking after him. They then burned down the church... The girls took refuge upstairs. The Burmans shot up through the ceiling... Four Karen lay sisters were killed. The great majority of the girls were cut down inside the mission compound, some on the road outside. The youngest victim was a baby of six months... [They] went in a mass to...the other side of the town. Here they killed another 52 people, all Karens, men, women and children... A few days later 47 Karen men were taken out and bayoneted to death.[29]

The atrocities committed early in the occupation by the Bamar are attributable to the lack of concern that the pre-war nationalists had for other Burmese nationalities, the celebratory mood that prevailed once the British had evacuated, and the profound disorder created by the power vacuum they had left. No organised force had emerged to join the 300 or so nationalist cadres of the BIA as they swept into the country on the heels of the Imperial Army, and it is doubtful that the Japanese would have encouraged or accepted one. Thus it was primarily the criminals, the outcasts and the dissatisfied of all shades that initially signed up. Maung Maung, who was Aung San's aide at the time, contemptuously referred to early BIA soldiers as "a rabble without a minimum of military training".[30]

Indeed, so many young Bamar men signed up to the BIA in the first few weeks of the occupation that its numbers skyrocketed from a few thousand when it crossed the frontier to as many as 200,000.[31] This

created a problem both for the nationalist cadre in charge of the BIA, who had none of the resources necessary to command or even at times to keep track of them, and for the Imperial Army, whose commanders with a few exceptions were not given to much trust or indulge an independent native initiative in a country they felt they had conquered.

Some scholars, in awe of Bamar nationalism during the period, have termed the BIA "a political movement in military garb".[32] This is to project matters forward to the time when Aung San had regained control of the forces he had been carried along by after allying with the Japanese and was in the process of turning against them.[33] This took several years in which they were bedevilled by Japanese intransigence and bewildered as to their next steps.

Aung San and the Thirty Comrades had expected, in accordance with Aung San's agreement with Suzuki when they first met in Japan, that Burma would be granted its independence immediately after the British had been driven back from the south east of the country. The commanders of the Imperial Army had different ideas. Akiho Ishii, colonel of the Fifteenth Army and the officer responsible for command of civilian matters in Rangoon, denied any knowledge that Burma was to become independent and insisted, with the agreement of his command, that this would have to wait until after the war.[34] A military administration was quickly established in the south east and, despite Suzuki's promises that the BIA could set up a government when Rangoon was occupied, it was extended to Rangoon.[35]

A part of the Japanese military in Burma, as elsewhere, was deeply influenced by pan-Asian ideas and believed that granting Burma its independence was the only sure way to ensure support of the Burmese for Japan. Suzuki, who has since been regarded by Bamar nationalists as their Lawrence of Arabia figure, was among them. He clashed with Ishii, demanding the formation of a nationalist administration. In January the Tojo government in Japan came down on his side.[36] The independent State of Burma was formally granted its independence in August 1943, with Ba Maw, who had returned from England via Portugal, as the *Adipati*[37] and Aung San as the minister of war in command of the BIA, renamed the Burma National Army. The institution of Burmese independence was accomplished with some fanfare, flags and other symbols of the old monarchy and a few of the fascist and militarist trappings adopted by other governments in league with the Axis powers. A declaration of independence cited Burma's history of empire, the "long bondage" Burmese had endured under the British, and its "unconquered" national

spirit as the precursors to Burma before proclaiming Burma a "fully independent nation and sovereign state...as part of a world order which will ensure justice, peace and prosperity to all peoples".[38]

But this was not to be a real independence, and every significant matter of state remained in the hands of Japan. U Nu, a prominent Thakin before the war who served as foreign minister, complained of Japanese condescension from the ambassador, who micromanaged all his ministry's business and forbade Burma from establishing diplomatic relations with other nations, on down to the lowliest Japanese soldiers. He wrote of his daily business as minister:

> From the day when independence was declared there were numerous telegrams to the Axis powers. But this was all trifling business... However, the wires were so numerous that before long the Foreign Office came to be known as the Telegraph Office. We noted down in a calendar the national days of every country and the birthdays of statesmen and that kind of thing, so as to send off our wires punctually. And we had to acknowledge the receipt of similar messages from other countries.[39]

He was not alone in his resentment of the Japanese, who even their highest collaborators began to think of as occupiers rather than liberators. Aung San certainly felt this way in mid-1943 and was confident enough to voice his feelings to Ba Maw, telling him that "the Japanese are insincere and overbearing", and that the Burmese people were needlessly suffering for what was in the end "only the Japanese version of home rule".[40]

How Aung San felt in 1943 must have been just a faint reflection of how the Burmese people in general were suffering. The elimination of Burma's export markets, including its primary one in India, had led to a drastic decline in paddy cultivation. The efforts of the Burmese government to alleviate this by purchasing excess rice ran into problems of bureaucracy and lack of resources, and by the end of the year it was broadcasting radio programmes that encouraged peasants to look to the nutritional value of grass.[41] Burmese auxiliary troops promised by the state to help maintain security were instead sent to Rangoon to labour under the Imperial Army, where most faced harsh and racist treatment.

From 1942 the Japanese had embarked on the project of building a railway from Bangkok to Rangoon in an attempt to shore up their supply lines to defend Burma and in preparation for an eventual invasion of India. This became known as the "Death Railway" and was among the most notorious of the Japanese crimes against humanity during the war.

Allied prisoners of war (POWs) from Britain, Australia and elsewhere are, of course, the best remembered of these victims. But the majority of its victims were Asian labourers from Malaya and Burma.[42] The death toll of the railway accelerated in tandem with military imperatives, as the American victory at Midway opened the Pacific and threatened the survival of all the Japanese armies in South East Asia.

British POW Jeffrey English described how the massive death toll from Japanese violence and disease came to be treated as a matter of course by the labourers:

> We burnt the bodies in the afternoon... Some men would put on some bamboo shoots or wild sweet potatoes to roast in the embers. If, on trying to recover them, you got the odd toe or wrist by mistake, you just threw it back and went on scrabbling for your potato, probably using a charred rib as a rake. Death had long since lost its dignity.[43]

The conditions for the native labourers in Burma were equivalent if not worse as they were unprotected by even the semblance of concern for the welfare of POWs. The railway upon its completion had consumed as many as 100,000 lives. But we need to draw no special conclusions about the Japanese psyche from the "Death Railway" or any of their other horrific crimes. For the Japanese were trying to catch up with the "civilised" empires of Britain and France, and in the course of this ended up competing with the death tolls they had accumulated over a much longer period of time during the few years of the war. The railway, like the Shoah in Eastern Europe, was the outcome of this process, the realisation of a dream that "projected Japanese dreams of industrial fortitude, economic robustness, and Asian domination".[44]

By the time the railway had been completed, however, the purpose for which it had been built was coming into question. The Imperial Army, with aid from the BNA and Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army, had entered north eastern India only to be ignominiously thrown back at the battle of Imphal. As the US Navy swept across the Pacific towards Japan, Britain prepared to retake Burma. The nationalists who had aided Japan would again have tough choices ahead of them.

## Colonialists, communists and nationalists in the anti-fascist war

The post-war mythology of the Burman state likes to cast Aung San and his compatriots as semi-clairvoyant political actors who knew precisely when to side with the British or Japanese, and precisely when to abandon

them when this would be to the advantage of Burma's freedom.[45] While we can certainly recognise the pragmatism of Aung San, it strains credulity given what we know of him to deny a certain naivety about the role of the Japanese when the war began. Similarly, while he clearly had thoughts of abandoning his Japanese allies as early as 1943, his actions did not match this until somewhat later.

For the Bamar nationalist leadership and the BNA to switch sides required both Japanese setbacks in the war and the growing resistance movement in Burma itself. Though the British had evacuated Burma completely, as they left their native soldiers faded into western jungles rather than surrender and abandon their arms. This was the case for the soldiers of the Burma Rifles battalion, who returned to their villages with their rifles to await the opportunity to aid in the British reconquest.[46] Other hillmen along with Indian troops followed the British to Manipur, where they would fight the Japanese and their countrymen at Imphal. But though the British loyalists were among the fiercest fighters against the Japanese occupation, another component came from the pre-war nationalist cadre, particularly those identified with communism.

In one respect it was fortunate that there had not been a well-established Communist Party in Burma (CPB) before the war, as it would have been subjected to the same pressures all Moscow-oriented parties came under to conform with the waverings of Soviet foreign policy. The Indian CP next door, for example, risked being completely discredited by standing with the British against the Quit India movement.[47] Whether due to their allegiance to the Soviet perspective or their adroitness in guessing the nature of the coming Japanese occupation, the Thakins of the CPB would play a central role in shifting the entire nationalist movement towards the side of the British.

Thein Pe was the major figure in this regard. Having been an early leftist among the Thakins and a supporter of an anti-fascist alliance between Bamar nationalists and Britain since before the war, he set out from Mandalay on foot as the Japanese advanced and reached Calcutta, offering his services to the Communist Party of India (CPI) and eventually the British government-in-exile of Burma.[48] In India and briefly in China, Thein Pe worked as a left propagandist for the Popular Front, publishing a book on the Japanese conquest of his country[49] and writing long features for *People's War*, the newspaper of the CPI. As Japanese fortunes dimmed, the British would see his use as an asset for their eventual reoccupation of Burma, and his place as a link between Britain and the Burmese communists would become particularly important.

Meanwhile in Burma other leftist Thakins operating as the CPB were laying the ground for rebellion against the Japanese within the BIA. Thakin Soe in 1943 began meeting with some of the lower-ranking BIA officers to instruct them in Marxism and recruit handfuls of guerrillas here and there to communism, relying on his and his party's reputation as a nationalist but anti-Japanese force.[50] His delicate and untiring work under conditions of hostile occupation were soon rewarded; Aung San and others in the BNA finally reached the conclusion that the time had come to sever links with the Japanese. In August 1944, at a clandestine meeting, the leaders of the CPB, the BNA and Ba Maw's People's Revolutionary Party agreed to form the Anti-Fascist Organisation that would rise against the Japanese at the opportune hour.[51] Renamed the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), this was the united nationalist coalition that would become the ruling party of independent Burma.

When the Japanese asked for the BNA to assist them in defending the crumbling frontier, it was decided that the time was right.[52] Maung Maung records that Aung San gave a rousing speech in Rangoon on 17 March in which he declared that "the time had come to go out and fight; he himself would lead; danger, hardship and perhaps death lay ahead, but they would all go forward together".[53] But he forgot to mention the name of the enemy.

## Post-war Burma: Burmese victory and colonial defeat

To expand too much into the fate of the Burmese after the end of the war would run quickly beyond the scope of this book. Nevertheless, a few brief outlines on the unstable post-war colonial settlement, as a prelude to independence and the simultaneous break-up of the nationalist communist coalition can be written in order to see the effects of the war.

The BIA, after marching from Rangoon under Japanese command, wheeled around and began attacking isolated Japanese units. The Imperial Army, under intense pressure from the British and betrayed by their only local allies, fled from Rangoon, leaving the 26th Indian Division to occupy the city unopposed just as the Imperial Army itself had done three years earlier.[54] When the war ended on 16 August, all effective resistance from this quarter ceased. For the price of one ticket's entry to the war, Burma was twice devastated by occupying armies. Before evacuating, the British set fire to all operating oil refineries near Rangoon, in addition to disabling the city's rail services and scuttling

almost all ships in the merchant fleet.[55] In turn, the Japanese before evacuating "destroyed everything from the Irish girls' school on Prome Road to the Yacht Club on Inya Lake", surely a bitter welcome for the returning Raj.[56] The devastated city was soon filled by thousands of squatters from the countryside, which had if anything received much worse treatment from both sides.

The policy of the returning British for Burma and its population was as contradictory as the Japanese policy had been. One section of the military and colonial bureaucracy saw the nationalists as traitors to be punished harshly as part of the process of turning the clock back to the 1930s. It was this sentiment that British general William Smith, the first to meet with Aung San, had expressed when he refused to recognise any authority of the AFPFL and demanded that the soldiers of the BIA be disbanded or placed under British command, a demand which Aung San acceded to in any case.[57] But to Lord Louis Mountbatten, newly created Earl of Burma and overall commander of the British forces' south eastern divisions, it was imperative to show collaboration with native forces in the climate of post-war peace and security. A cautious policy of encouraging Burmese collaboration with economic reconstruction of the country and in exchange having their political voices heard within a Governor's Council (similar to the 1935 set up) to be followed by Home Rule and eventually independence within the Commonwealth was set as British policy in the government White Paper of 1945.[58]

It was certain from the conclusion of hostilities, however, that this set up could not count on any kind of stability. The British were incapable of peacefully returning a twice-occupied country to its rule. Burma's people suffered under lingering wartime economic devastation, which the British exacerbated by declaring all Japanese currency invalid and wiping out millions of people's resources overnight.[59] The promise of new elections and expanded freedom for their country did little to appease the Thakin party led by Aung San, who had tasted independence, however briefly, and were determined to renew the struggle at the earliest opportunity.

The communist/nationalist alliance that formed the core of the AFPFL began to fracture, with Aung San's nationalists increasing in prominence and claiming political leadership of the country. In one respect this was because they could claim, with some credibility, to be more left wing and militant fighters for freedom than the CPB. The Communists, who had led the way in forming a wartime alliance with the British, had drunk deeply from the well of Popular Frontism that erased the differences between rulers and ruled in the anti-fascist war.

Thein Pe had written early on that the natural development of the war internationally would naturally eliminate "the use of violence, bloodshed, and armed uprising in a people's fight for freedom",[60] an opinion that was seconded by Than Tun as late as 1945:

> If we have to arm or rebel it will mean that our second revolution is against the masses of the world and the countries of the allied nations. Even though we say we are fighting for freedom we will in fact become the first army of the Japanese... If such a thing comes to pass the English... will ignore the world and continue to rule us cruelly.[61]

This policy was transmuted to the CPB through their close links to the CPI, especially its general secretary P C Joshi, who, in calling Churchill "more or less progressive" and foreseeing Indian independence coming about peacefully through the agency of British-Soviet collaboration, was primarily responsible for the articulation of what would be called "Browderism" in India and Burma.[62]

The CPB was expelled from the AFPFL under the personal authority of Aung San, who had been its first general secretary and briefly returned to membership at the end of the war.[63] A split in the CPI between Joshi and the hardliners led by B T Ranadive, culminating in Joshi's expulsion for Browderism, would precipitate a similar crisis in its Burmese sister party; Soe, who went to India and met with Ranadive and other CPI hardliners in September 1945, returned convinced of the errors of Browderism and determined to launch an underground struggle.[64] The CPB split into the CPB (Red Flags) led by Soe and the uncharitably named CPB (White Flags) led by Than Tun. The former would lead the uprising several years later leading to a long period of Communist insurgency.

Following the split in the AFPFL, Aung San seemed to go from success to success. A general strike maintained with AFPFL leadership allowed him to first scrap the White Paper by demanding representation for his party that equalled its popular support in the governing council, then staring the British down when he was set to be prosecuted for the execution of Karen villagers, as mentioned above. In January 1947 he sat down in London to sign an agreement with Clement Atlee that guaranteed Burma's independence within a year. He was 32 years old.

Barely six months later, soldiers armed with rifles burst into a meeting of the Executive Council, which Aung San headed as the last head of state prior to independence. They fired indiscriminately, killing the *Bogyoke* and six of his ministers. U Saw, the chief minister of Burma

before the Japanese occupation, was implicated in a plot involving some British officers and was quickly arrested, tried, convicted and executed.[65]

At the time of his death Aung San was to all appearances earnestly trying to settle the problem of the national minorities, breaking away from some of the chauvinist legacies of Thakin nationalism and actively soliciting Shan and Karen participation in Burma's independence set up. To them he promised a united federation "with properly regulated provisions as should be made to safeguard the rights of National Minorities" including a constitution that would ensure each ethnic unit autonomy within the union of Burma.[66] Some have concluded on this basis that had the *Bogyoke* not died so young, he might have averted independent Burma's exclusive Bamar domination and bloody record of ethnic strife. It is impossible to say, but it is likely that Burma's chronic economic underdevelopment presented such an intractable problem at independence that it would have stymied even a leader as talented as Aung San.

## Conclusion

The wartime history of Burma remains controversial. In particular, the Japanese occupation remains a source of bitter contestation. Did the Japanese defeat of the British provide a major impulse towards freedom by undermining the idea of British "invincibility"?[67] Was the occupation and the limited independence it offered a training ground that talented Burmese nationalists proved capable of passing through, with some adversity, on their way to independence?

These questions are perhaps a crude way of forcing the issue, which is that the Japanese or Axis presence in Burma seems to have a better reputation than all of the other occupations that took place under the Axis powers. Caveats about acknowledged war crimes aside, this does seem to hold up, but only because the Bamar nationalists who sided with the Japanese were by and large the same people who later led Burma to freedom against the British, and like other histories, this one, too, has been written by the victors. The occupation did, briefly, provide an interlude during which a Burmese leadership and national institutions could begin to be formed. But its role was largely one of a catalyst for forces that had been at work since before the war.

Aung San towers over these events to the point that it is hard sometimes to separate the story of the country's wartime fortunes from his personal saga.[68] Aung San became, during the course of the war, the undisputed leader of Burma's independence. Nearly seven decades after his

death his legacy remains deeply contested. To the British he was alternatively a traitor and a nationalist hero. Since Burma's independence he has been in turn an icon of the bizarre Ne Win dictatorship beginning in the 1960s, and a symbol of the pro-democracy movement led by his daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, from the 1980s. All of official Burma reveres him, and wonders what things might have been like had he lived a bit longer.

It is not necessary to attribute to Aung San any quasi-supernatural prescience or military ability enabling him to lead Burma to freedom, as some official accounts have it. His career is best understood as that of a pragmatic nationalist whose highest goal was Burma's freedom, and who found himself in a succession of fortunate circumstances in which he was able to prosecute that goal from different angles throughout the war. But even in this more realistic role, his leadership still depended on the social forces that British colonialism had unleashed. It was the hunger of the peasant, the resentment of the monk and the humiliation of the Bamar student that made Aung San who he was, much as any other great leader. He was able to understand these forces to a limited extent and drive them to the necessary, but unfinished, conclusion of independence.

As Peter Ward Fay writes of Bose and the Indian National Army (who collaborated with Aung San during the period he was an ally of the Japanese), their story is less frequently told than that of Gandhi because it demonstrates the possibility of a more radical, militant path to Indian freedom than the one that ended up being taken.[69] Similarly, the independence of India's next-door neighbour, which had once been ruled as part of India by the same colonial power, shows a militarised struggle for freedom which took place in the pressure cooker of the Second World War. Because of it Burma's road to freedom was shorter, though more violent, than India's.

The wartime history of Burma deserves to be fully integrated into the history of the Second World War precisely because it shows the fundamental ambivalence which the nationalists, contradictory yet genuine fighters for Burma's freedom, saw in both the democratic British and militarist Japanese. It shows, too, that patriots in this instance had, in order to be true to their country, to fight "on all fronts", sometimes with the British, sometimes with the Japanese, sometimes against both. That is the kind of complicated history this book exposes.

## NOTES

1 For an enchanting fictional account of the end of the Burmese kingdom and Indo-Burmese relations in the years leading up to independence, see Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (New York, Random House, 2002).
2 The dominant ethnicity of Burma, often incorrectly called "Burmese" or "Burman", are here referred to as the "Bamar". "Burmese" signifies all the country's inhabitants. The Burmese language is the language of the Bamar, and each ethnic group has its own language, typically written in the Burmese script.
3 A comprehensible but not overly simplified account of these divisions is found in chapter two of S Tucker, *Burma: The Curse of Independence* (London, Pluto, 2001).
4 This is not to give in to the post-independence revisionism of some Burmese historians who assert that Burma has always had a national identity that was simply awakened in the early 20th century—M Charney, *A Modern History of Burma* (Cambridge, University of Cambridge, 2009), p32.
5 M Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London, Zed Books, 1991), pp41-44.
6 I Brown, *A Colonial Economy in Crisis: Burma's Rice Cultivators and the World Depression of the 1930s* (London, Routledge, 2005).
7 Tucker, 2001, pp17-19.
8 A Walker, "Seditious State-Making in the Mekong Borderlands: The Shan Rebellion of 1902-1904", *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 29: 3, (November 2014), pp554-590.
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14 Khin Yi, *The Dobama Movement in Burma, 1930-1938* (Ithaca, Cornell University, 1988), p8.
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16 Tucker, 2001, p76.
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19 J Bečka, "Subhash Chandra Bose and the Burmese Freedom Movement", in Bose, Sisir K, *Netaji and India's Freedom: Proceedings of the International Netaji Seminar* (Calcutta, Netaji Research Bureau, 1975), p65.
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21 Aung San, *Burma's Challenge* (South Okkalapa, Tathetta Sapai, 1974), p17.
22 Taylor, 1984, p9.
23 B Linter, 1990, p8.
24 Smith, 1991, pp58-59.
25 Maung Maung, *Burmese Nationalist Movements, 1940-1948* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii, 1991), p27.
26 Maung Maung, *Aung San of Burma* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), pp31-53.
27 H Tinker, *The Union of Burma: A Study of the First Years of Independence* (Oxford,

University of Oxford, 1959), p8.

28 J Bečka, *The National Liberation Movement in Burma during the Japanese Occupation Period* (Prague, Oriental Institute, 1983), p76.

29 I Morrison, *Grandfather Longlegs: The Life and Gallant Death of Major H P Seagrim, GC, DSO, MBE* (London, Faber & Faber, 1947), pp186-187.

30 Maung Maung, *A Trial in Burma: The Assassination of Aung San* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), p59.

31 J Lebra, *Japanese-Trained Armies in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, Cornell University, 2010), p65.

32 D Guyot, "The Burma Independence Army: A Political Movement in Military Garb", in Silverstein, ed, *Southeast Asia in World War II* (New Haven, Yale University, 1967), pp51-57.

33 Taylor, 1980.

34 W Yoon, 'Military Expediency: A Determining Factor in the Japanese Policy regarding Burmese Independence,' in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies 9:2* (1978), pp248-267.

35 Maung Maung, 1991, p59.

36 Yoon, 1978, p263.

37 Something like a Burmese or Pali equivalent of "Führer" or "Duce".

38 Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma* (New Haven, Yale University, 1968), pp327-328.

39 U Nu, *Burma under the Japanese: Pictures and Portraits* (Oxford, Oxford University, 2012), p85.

40 Ba Maw, 1968, p335.

41 M Charney, *History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge, University of Cambridge, 2009), p56.

42 "It is generally acknowledged that approximately 60,000-64,000 POWs and over 200,000 Asian labourers were used during the construction of the railway. It is estimated that approximately 12,626 POWs and perhaps between 15,000 and 90,000 labourers died"—K Tamayama, *Railwaymen in the War: Tales by Japanese Railway Soldiers in Burma and Thailand, 1941-1947* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p8. See also generally G McCormack and H Nelson, *The Burma-Thailand Railway: Memory and History* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1993).

43 J English, *One for Every Sleeper: The Japanese Death Railway through Thailand* (London, Robert Hale, 1989).

44 W Huang, "The Death Railway: Semblances of Modernity", in *Discoveries* 6 (2005), p10.

45 See Maung Maung, 1969, for a particularly egregious example. The respected historian was here forced to paint Ne Win as the loyal protégé of Aung San when his role in Burma's freedom struggle itself was relatively minor. (This is not unlike subsequent upgrading of the role of Stalin in the Russian Revolution years after the fact.)

46 Tucker, 2001, p47.

47 For a recent account that emphasises the Indian Communist perspective, see D Gupta, *Communism and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1939-1945* (New Delhi, SAGE Publications, 2008).

48 Smith 1991, p61, also Maung Maung, 1991, p93.

49 Thein Pe, *What Happened in Burma* (Allahabad, Kitabasthan, 1943).

50 Maung Maung, 1991, pp119-121. Though communist initiative in the anti-Japanese war cannot be denied, the later claim that the CPB cost the Japanese 60 percent of total casualties (Linter, 1990, pp8-9) is probably highly exaggerated in the light of the CPB Red Flags faction's need to present itself as the most consistent nationalists in its long insurgency against the heirs of Aung San.

51 Tucker, 2001, p51.

52 Tucker declares that "the nationalists always had the option of siding against the Japanese" and criticises Aung San for opportunism in defecting so late in the day. In his haste to blame the nationalists he ignores the fact that the British command, through communications from Thein Pe to the AFPFL, had repeatedly requested them to delay the rising, probably hoping to position themselves better in post-occupation Burma—Taylor, 1984.

53 Maung Maung, *To a Soldier's Son* (Rangoon, Sarpai Beikman Press, 1974), p57.

54 Thant Myint-U, 2008, p240.
55 Charney, 2009, p58.
56 Thant Myint-U, 2008, p242.
57 Viscount William Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (London, Cassell, 1956), pp516-519.
58 "Burma: Statement of Policy by His Majesty's Government", May 1945. Archived at filestore. nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/small/cab-66-65-wp-45-290-40.pdf.
59 Charney, 2009, p59.
60 Taylor, 1984, pp23-25.
61 Ibid, pp62-63.
62 P C Joshi, *The Communist Party of India: Its Policy in the War of Liberation* (Bombay, People's Publishing House, 1941), p33. "Browderism" refers to Earl Browder, the wartime secretary of the American communist party, who, accepting American and Soviet propaganda, believed that their alliance would continue after the war and hence proposed that wartime class collaboration would continue, dissolving the CP into the Democratic Party briefly after the end of the war. While Browder was the one in the international communist movement to be officially identified with this policy, for which he was criticized by French CP leader Jacques Duclos and eventually expelled from his own party, the existence of parallel trends in European and South Asian communism suggests that this was not an isolated deviation, but a general idea flowing from some communists' understanding of the Popular Front policy.
63 Smith, 1991, pp68-69.
64 Taylor, 1983, p107.
65 Controversy surrounds Aung San's death to this day. Thant Myint-U, 2008, accepts the official narrative and states that if British officers were involved, they were certainly acting under their own initiative. Tucker, 2001, pp155-158, concludes that the case against U Saw is highly implausible and casts Ne Win, who was passed over for promotion by Aung San several times, as the most likely culprit. This long after the event and with the mist of so much official and unofficial history attached to Aung San's legacy, we are unlikely to get definitive proof either way.
66 J Silverstein, ed, *The Political Legacy of Aung San* (Ithaca, Cornell University, 1993), pp148, 153.
67 Guyot, 1967. Taylor, 1980, deals well with this and some other legends of the nationalist period that have led some historians to be soft on the Japanese.
68 The best biography of many is probably A Naw, *Aung San and the Struggle for Burma's Freedom* (Seattle, University of Washington, 2001). The judgment of official Burma may be found in Maung Maung, 1962. Most of his important speeches, letters and public statements in English are found in Silverstein, 1993.
69 P Fay, *The Forgotten Army: India's Armed Struggle for Independence, 1942-1945* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 1995).

9

# China: Revolution and war

Donny Gluckstein

China's Second World War lasted from 1937 to 1945 in the form of the Sino-Japanese conflict. Millions perished on the battlefield and on the home front, many succumbing to war-related famine and disease. The themes developed in this book regarding the character of the global conflict applied with full force to China. But here, unlike in other countries, they were superimposed upon a pre-existing social revolution.

From the 1839 Opium War onwards this economically backward territory suffered encroachment by states enjoying the military advantages conferred by industrialisation. In the 19th century its vast size and location at the intersection of many different spheres of influence meant no single foreign power could claim sovereignty and so formal colonisation was limited. However, China was subject to "unequal treaties" with Britain, France, Germany, Japan, Portugal, Russia and the USA granting rights to exploit China's people and resources. Thus the country became a field for inter-imperialist rivalry.

The Chinese government's authority was undermined, although the piecemeal character of the damage meant it did not collapse immediately. Nonetheless, long-established internal social structures were disrupted and new forces unleashed. In 1911 what little remained of Chinese imperial authority was overthrown. But the movement that toppled the last dynasty was too weak to break free of imperialism or even to hold the country together. Regional warlords quickly filled the institutional vacuum. Thereafter China was also a field for internal rivalry between those seeking to claim authority within the country.

There was only one way to overcome these twin problems. For the revolution to succeed and for China to regain independence, to defeat warlordism and to progress, the masses had to throw their weight behind the process. The Kuomintang Party (KMT) founded by Sun Yat-sen claimed it could achieve this objective. But rallying the population was by no means straightforward. Sun Yat-sen's brief presidency ended when he was driven out of power, despite the KMT's success in

elections. The KMT then retreated to the south where it was tolerated by local warlords.

The peasantry made up the vast majority of the Chinese population. As one writer puts it, most "never moved outside their immediate home patch, and there was no education or media to spread the idea of national government." Any party purporting to represent the entire population confronted a fundamental social and economic reality—the landlord class owned three quarters of the land and took at least half of peasant income as rent, leaving two thirds of the population living below subsistence level.[1]

The KMT was dominated by privileged groups and, as Isaacs points out, "the gulf which separated them from the great mass of the people was far wider and less bridgeable than the antagonism between them and the foreigners. From the foreigners they could and would try to exact concessions, to demand and secure a larger share of the spoils. But they could not hope to satisfy the masses of the people without undermining themselves... This fundamental and inescapable fact predetermined the limits to which the propertied classes of China would go".[2]

These contradictions would later cripple the KMT's resistance to Japan during the Second World War, but they were evident much earlier. The KMT initially turned to Soviet Russia, then a symbol of anti-imperialism, as a counterweight to the colonialists.[3] It followed logically that the KMT and the newly formed Chinese Communist Party (CCP) should cooperate locally.

Sun Yat-sen died in 1925 and was replaced by the KMT's military leader, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. Bolstered by Russian advisers and assistance, he announced a Northern Expedition to "overthrow all warlords and wipe out reactionary power...and complete the National Revolution".[4] This would be the largest military campaign to occur between the two world wars. In 1927, as the Nationalist Army approached Shanghai, a city largely controlled by foreign "Concessions" and home to half of China's industrial workforce,[5] massive strikes erupted around the slogans "Support the Northern Expeditionary Army" and "Hail Chiang Kai-shek".[6]

The authorities responded by beheading strike leaders and parading their heads on bamboo poles. The stoppages then escalated to embrace over half a million people. When, after some deliberate delay, Chiang's army arrived he did not thank his supporters. Instead:

> machine gunners...opened fire without warning. Lead spouted into the thick crowd from both sides of the street. Men, women, and children

> dropped screaming into the mud. The crowd broke into a mad flight. The soldiers kept firing into the backs of the fleeing demonstrators.[7]

The KMT had made its choice. Overcoming warlords and imperialists was secondary to exploiting and controlling the masses. With very little to offer the population, Chiang's government became elitist and dictatorial. Between January and August 1928 at least 28,000 people were executed.[8] During the Second World War Chiang claimed to support Sun Yat-sen's three principles: national independence, democracy and rising living standards for the masses. But the last two had to wait: "When victory comes at the end of this war, we shall have fully achieved national independence, but will yet have far to go to attain our other two objectives." In the meantime the population must "restrict consumption and intensify production".[9]

The chief obstacle to the native ruling class and its dictatorial ambitions was the organised working class and its most important political party—the CCP. Chiang launched successive "extermination drives" against it. Driven from the cities, the CCP established rural "red bases", but he smashed these too. In 1934-1935 the CCP was compelled to undertake the perilous 7,000-mile "Long March" to Yenan in the remote north west. Despite this retreat, the KMT focus on the CCP did not diminish when Japan began its conquest of China.

Japan established an important foothold in Manchuria (a region north east of the Great Wall) in 1931 and launched a major expansion southwards after 1937. Chiang did not collaborate, unlike Wang Jingwei, his rival for KMT leadership and founder of a puppet state in 1940. But he was thoroughly equivocal about inspiring resistance either by speech or action, declaring: "Japan is not qualified to be our enemy; our present enemy is the red bandits" who represented a "disease of the vital organs".[10] Chiang had a clear order of priority: "first internal pacification, then external resistance".[11] So rather than fight the 1931 incursion into Manchuria, Chiang appealed to the League of Nations, which was impotent.

Such passivity was rejected by the volunteer armies that sprang up to resist but the KMT refused them all assistance.[12] When a local KMT commander fought Japan's attack on Shanghai in 1932, Chiang put on a belated show of opposition but quickly sought a truce. Demands for resistance from a "National Salvation Movement" were ignored[13] and by 1935 Chiang was offering a "fundamental readjustment" of Sino-Japanese relations through direct talks with Tokyo.[14] During the "Xi'an Incident" in December 1936 he was kidnapped by the former warlord of Manchuria.

Chiang was only released after agreeing to a second united front with the Communists to resist Japan.

Chiang's commitment to this should have been reinforced when fighting at the Marco Polo Bridge near Beijing in July 1937 unleashed a full-scale Japanese offensive. But Chiang soon reverted to type, adopting a policy of "trading space for time".[15] While claiming all the while to be fighting for the nation his forces would consistently "fall back into the interior". As a consequence the Nationalist capital was moved successively further south west—from Nanjing to Wuhan and finally Chongqing.[16]

Any lingering doubts about the KMT's attitude to joint action were dispelled in 1941. According to the terms of the united front, the Red Army was integrated into Nationalist forces under the titles of Eighth Route Army and New Fourth Army. In January of that year the latter, comprising some 9,000 troops, was attacked by 80,000 of Chiang's soldiers.

While suppressing the CCP Chiang planned to avoid any single imperialist power dominating China by exploiting their rivalries. In the early 1920s Russia was the favoured partner, until domestic working class discontent made that alliance inconvenient. After Hitler's accession to power in 1933 Germany became "the KMT's major supplier of military hardware and expertise".[17] When Hitler adopted Japan as his key Asian ally Chiang turned once again to Russia. Diplomatic relations, broken off in 1927, were now restored. Ironically, this led to Russian munitions being used against CCP positions.[18]

New avenues for Chiang to enlist foreign support appeared after Japan struck Pearl Harbor in December 1941. The US had merrily armed both China and Japan in the 1930s.[19] But now, like the Russians, President Roosevelt hoped to use China to absorb Japanese aggression, leaving the US free to concentrate on Europe.[20] Chiang happily received supplies and indeed regularly complained that these were insufficient. But observers eventually realised that his "principal aim was to acquire [US] military equipment and weapons for a post-war conflict with the Chinese Communists".[21]

This suspicion was confirmed by Chiang's day-to-day policies. Whenever Stilwell, the US general assigned to the Nationalists, urged the army towards vigorous action against the Japanese he was blocked. A frustrated President Roosevelt wrote to Chiang: "I have urged time and again in recent months that you take drastic action to resist the disaster which has been moving closer to China and to you." He demanded "immediate action" including granting Stilwell "unrestricted command of all your forces".[22] But Chiang was immovable and on his insistence Stilwell was recalled.[23]

In late 1944, when the Japanese were making major advances during Operation Ichigo, Stilwell's replacement told Chiang: "It is considered essential that all available Chinese troops be organised immediately".[24] This would have meant utilising Chinese Communist troops alongside Nationalist ones; the idea was rejected outright. Washington even considered assassinating Chiang more than once but held back as there was no obvious replacement.

Since the army's role was to suppress the Chinese population rather than combat foreign aggressors, it had to be run on strictly authoritarian lines as an obedient tool of the authorities. Officers embezzled soldiers' pay and, as Chiang admitted, indulged in gambling, smuggling and opium trading. Disease, starvation and desertion destroyed entire units and when someone died:

> his death is not reported, he continues to be a source of income, increased by the fact that he has ceased to consume. His rice and his pay become a long lasting token of memory in the pocket of his commanding officer.[25]

While the rich avoided the draft, conscripted soldiers were tied together and force-marched hundreds of miles, many dying in the process. As one US commander wrote, military service "comes to the Chinese peasant like famine and flood, only more regularly".[26]

Even if the will to resist Japan had been strong, not without reason did Chiang conclude that although 3 million Nationalist troops confronted 680,000 Japanese "if we merely compare the military strength of China and Japan, we are certainly inferior".[27] This judgement conveniently provided an alibi for inaction and a pretext for demanding Allied aid against the Axis. The only alternative would have been to turn to the masses, as US journalist Edgar Snow observed at the time:

> It was clear that the Chinese command could not hope to outmatch Japan in any supreme struggle of arms for vital points and lines. Somewhere it had to find a strategic asset to reinforce the main effort of the regular troops. This asset could only lie...among the millions of people...[28]

But after repressing its own people the Nationalist Army could not engender enthusiasm. To ordinary citizens it appeared as a parasitic body feeding off them. This was literally the case. A US journalist described attending sumptuous banquets provided by Nationalist generals:

> while peasants were scraping the fields...for tops and wild grass to stuff into their griping stomachs. But I was more than ashamed—I was overcome with

> a feeling of loathing when I learned that these same generals and the KMT officials were buying up land from starving farmers for arrears in taxes...[29]

Summing up the situation in Nationalist China during 1943, Fenby writes: "Corruption and speculation soared... Across the Nationalist areas, a quarter of the inhabitants were estimated to be refugees or homeless. Drought hit the South, killing more than a million people; yet troops sold food to the Japanese as starving people perished around them".[30]

In places like France, Italy and Greece Allied governments harnessed mass resistance movements during the Second World War, even if their motivation was cynical self-interest. Although the former were fighting for imperialist hegemony and the latter for freedom and democracy, each side shared a common enemy in the Axis. It was only at the end of the war that these partnerships of convenience finally fell apart. The KMT did not get that far.

The Nationalist leadership may have been unwilling to mobilise wartime resistance and by 1944 tens of millions were subject to Japan's rule. Its most notorious atrocity was the "rape of Nanjing" in 1937 during which 200,000 men were killed and some 20,000 women were raped.[31] Rape was a policy systematically used by the invader.[32] In Communist-controlled areas Japanese general Okamura Yasuki introduced a policy called the "three alls"—"kill all, burn all, loot all".[33] Tokyo also promoted large-scale colonial settlement policies and enforced labour conscription.[34] By 1945 tens of millions of Chinese soldiers and civilians were dead compared to 400,000 Japanese troops.

This was the context in which the CCP was able to rise from near annihilation to undisputed ruler of all mainland China in 1949 by espousing the people's war. Mao Tse-tung, the CCP leader, explained:

> two lines have co-existed in China for a long time: the Kuomintang government's line of oppressing the Chinese people and carrying on a passive resistance, and the Chinese people's line of becoming awakened and united to wage a people's war.[35]

## The Chinese Communists

The CCP's path to that war was convoluted and shaped by its relationship with Russia and its social position within Chinese society.

In the mid-1920s the needs of Russia's rising state capitalist ruling class were displacing the internationalism of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Having suffered defeat by Japan in 1904, Moscow's priority was that

Japanese forces be drawn away southwards.[36] This meant strengthening links with Nationalist China. The CCP and its working class supporters were ordered to submerge themselves into the KMT. This contributed directly to the massacre of workers by Chiang's forces in Shanghai in April 1927. Afterwards Comintern policy was reversed and the CCP was encouraged to achieve "the immediate establishment of soviets of workers, peasants and soldiers".[37]

So in September Mao led the "Autumn Harvest" uprising in Hunan province, in south-central China. Its failure saw CCP membership there plummet from 20,000 to 5,000.[38] A few months later he wrote how in many areas the CCP "is entirely a peasant party".[39] Together the rightward policy of liquidating the CCP into the KMT and its ultra-left opposite seriously damaged the link between the CCP and the Chinese working class. In 1926 two thirds of Communists had been workers. By September 1930 the figure was 1.6 percent.[40]

Having lost their urban base and faced with Chiang's extermination campaigns, the Communists channelled their efforts into a rural civil war. The intention was that the Red Army would create "red bases" free from Nationalist control and these would be sustained by a local peasantry grateful for the land reforms delivered. But the KMT could draw on much larger resources and outnumbered the Red Army by ten to one.[41] After the successive Nationalist offensives the CCP's bases had been reduced to just 2.5 percent of the Chinese population.[42] Survival, for the time being at least, depended on the desperate retreat to Yenan, an area described by the Communist military commander Chu Teh as "the most backward economically in the whole country".[43] It was precisely its remoteness from centres of economic life (and opportunities for exploitation) that meant the Nationalists lacked a local presence and so were too weak to deliver the death blow.

It is important to note that, notwithstanding professions of loyalty to Russia, the CCP did not always slavishly follow Soviet demands. This became apparent in the mid-1930s when the Comintern abandoned its ultra-left position and adopted the "popular front" tactic, which meant renewed collaboration with the KMT. If the CCP had uncritically accepted that it would have meant subordination to Chiang (and his passivity towards Tokyo) at a time when the CCP's very survival depended on fighting him.

Therefore Mao's version of the united front was made dependent on signs of real national resistance coming from the KMT. A frustrated Comintern official assigned to the CCP wrote:

> In 1935 the CCP was pursuing two independent and contradictory lines. One of them, favouring continued civil war, was directed by Mao Tse-tung and approved by the Central Committee and Politburo members in the Red Army. The other...strove for a national united front against Japan...[44]

Such relative independence from imperialism (in this case Russian) was an important factor in making the Chinese people's war possible.

The CCP's removal from the cities and direct physical confrontation with the state changed it from being a conventional political organisation. While retaining the ideological features of a party, it acquired the characteristics of a military formation. This inevitably affected the people's war. This term says little about internal dynamics. "People" are a heterogeneous group, yet warfare, even of the populist kind, requires a level of definite, organised leadership. Whether decisions are shaped and controlled from below or determined by those acting "on behalf of" the people is an important consideration. In the case of China, it was very much the latter. There were social and organisational reasons for this.

Workers have the greatest potential for collaborative, democratic, action because production brings them together in comparatively large units. Individual family production is the norm for peasants. Agriculture is geographically dispersed, reinforcing obstacles to sustained collective control and representative decision-making. Mao hinted at this in 1928 when he complained that: "Once the land has been divided up, they have all gone to till it".[45] Although often called a peasant revolutionary, Mao was therefore dismissive of the ability of the peasantry to run affairs, stating that: "given the various kinds of deep-rooted feudal relationships in the countryside...this will definitely require that the Communist Party and the Soviet Government" play the leading role.[46]

With working class presence now minimal and peasants the main source of recruitment, it is clear the rank and file could hardly control the people's war, despite providing the vast bulk of the foot soldiers and it being in their interests.

What of the CCP leadership? Unaccountable to either the working class or the peasants, it consisted of professional revolutionaries and soldiers whom both Johnson and Selden, historians with very different views, call an "elite group".[47] In practice many were drawn from the Chinese intelligentsia and Mao himself used the term "déclassé" to describe them.[48] The character of this section has been described as follows: "as the only non-specialised section of society, the intelligentsia is

the obvious source of a 'professional revolutionary elite' which appears to represent the interests of the 'nation' as against conflicting sectional and class interests".[49]

If the social composition of the CCP circumscribed its internal regime, the CCP's Stalinism also left little room for rival organisations. Potential alternatives such as the various Sacrifice Leagues and Anti-Japanese Associations emerged in the 1930s but were caught between the repression of Chiang's regime and intolerance of the Communists. They were either crushed by the former or absorbed by the latter.[50] As a consequence the history of people's war in China came to be dominated by the CCP.

## From civil war to people's war

In an influential book Chalmers Johnson points out that the CCP made little headway in the early 1930s because policies like eliminating the landlords and total land redistribution "failed to obtain mass support". But after the Marco Polo Bridge incident:

> war presented the peasantry with a challenge to its security of such immediacy that the peasants could not ignore it. Pre-war pressures on the peasantry—such as economic exploitation, Communist ideology, warlord wars, and natural calamities—had never been sufficiently widespread or sufficiently intense to give rise to a peasant-based mass movement. But after July 7, 1937, the peasants spontaneously created resistance organisations in many areas of China; and they felt a heightened sensitivity to proposals for defensive organisation throughout the entire occupied area. People's war had "a new kind of political appeal—namely, the defence of the fatherland".[51]

Selden, who is more sympathetic to Maoism, argues that while Johnson:

> focuses correctly on relationship between the Communists and peasants as the critical factor in people's war, in attempting to define that bond exclusively in terms of nationalism, however, it ignores central features of the wartime resistance movement... [Patriotic] appeals were effective in securing active peasant support only when linked to a program focused on rural problems... In the resistance war a peasant revolution was transformed into a national revolution, and a people's war was directed simultaneously against Japanese imperialism and the root problems of rural society.[52]

The blend of social radicalism and resistance to imperialism that would make a people's war was summed up by the banner that greeted Edgar Snow on his arrival in Communist territory during 1936:

> Down with the landlords who eat our flesh!
> Down with the militarists who drink our blood!
> Down with the traitors who sell China to Japan!
> Welcome to the United Front with all anti-Japanese armies!
> Long live the Chinese Revolution!
> Long live the Chinese Red Army![53]

The balance between the two factors was not constant, however. For example the CCP modified its initial policy of total land redistribution during the 1930s. There were several reasons for this. One was pressure from the Comintern for compromise with the KMT. Another was that for the slogan of a united front to be credible confiscation of the land of rich or middling peasants was difficult to sustain. Therefore, by the Second World War Mao had altered policy overall:

> We see to it that, on the one hand, rent and interest are reduced so that the peasants may have food to eat, and on the other hand, rent and interest at the reduced rate is paid to the landlords...we on the one hand help the workers so that they may get employment and food, and on the other pursue a policy of developing industries so that the capitalists may reap some profit. In all this our aim is to unite the people throughout the country...[54]

A reduction of land rents by 25 percent was a retreat from land redistribution but was still very different from the situation in Nationalist areas. The same was true of taxation. In one Communist district the share of income taken during 1943 was as follows: poor peasants 0.3 percent; middle 26.4 percent, rich 42.2 percent, landlords 222.3 percent.[55] In another, peasants found to have repaid in interest more than twice their original loan had the debt cancelled and land given away as security returned.[56]

Surveys of CCP members showed how attractive such policies were. In one typical sample, of 16 CCP members questioned: "Most of them stated that they joined the party in order to oppose the old rulers of the village. Three or four said that they joined in the hope that the party would help reduce their tax burden... One said that the War of Resistance against Japan motivated him to join".[57] Other progressive Communist policies in the base areas included a ban on arranged marriages, and

the buying or selling of women. Marriage and divorce were by consent and free.[58]

For many a CCP-led people's war behind enemy lines meant practical liberation from the occupier. By 1945:

> In every one of the provinces occupied by the Japanese, which covered an area three times the size of France, partisans had set up village and country councils... These behind-the-lines regimes performed nearly all the functions of normal administration. They had their own postal system and radio communications. They published their own newspapers, magazines and books. They maintained an extensive system of schools and enforced a reformed legal code recognising sex equality and adult suffrage. They regulated rents, collected taxes, controlled trade and issued currency, operated industries, maintained experimental farms [and] a grain-rationing system.[59]

If such radical social content explains civilian support for the people's war, it also shows why the Red Army survived "against vastly superior military combinations [despite] lacking any industrial base, big cannon, gas, airplanes, money, and the modern techniques".[60] In the late 1930s Snow interviewed a soldier who explained:

> Here we are all equals; in the White Army the soldier masses are oppressed. Here we fight for ourselves and the masses. The White [Nationalist] Army fights for the gentry and the landlords. Officers and men live the same in the Red Army. In the White Army the soldiers are treated like slaves.[61]

Snow himself observed that: "From the highest commander down to the rank and file these men ate and dressed alike...there was even an equal sharing of the delicacies available..."[62] This lack of hierarchy translated into battle conditions with officers fighting alongside their men and suffering their fate.[63]

He found that "the Reds had no highly paid and squeezing officials and generals, who in other Chinese armies absorbed most of the military funds".[64] It was frequently the case that neither Red commanders nor ordinary soldiers received conventional salaries. Instead they and their families were given land to farm.[65] This reflected the poverty of the Red bases but had the political advantage of reducing demands on the local population.[66] To the extent that the Red Army did make local demands, the better-off were expected to contribute the greater amount in taxation.[67]

Compare that to the KMT army which drew on assistance from imperialist supporters. Russia, for example, sent US$250 million in 1928,[68] a figure much greater than the paltry US$15,000 per month spent on its Comintern operations across the Orient.[69] The USA subsidised Chiang from 1933.[70] Even before Pearl Harbor it provided the "Flying Tigers" air squadron plus many millions of dollars in additional military aid.[71] Consequently KMT officers lived in luxury though their troops earned very little at a time when inflation stood at 243 percent.[72] Yet, notwithstanding the generosity of its foreign backers, Chiang's army still took 60 percent of the Nationalist budget.

Mao claimed that "there are two totally different states in the territory of China. One is the so-called Republic of China, which is a tool of imperialism... The other is the Chinese Soviet republic, the state of the broad masses of exploited and oppressed workers, peasants, soldiers and toilers".[73]

It would be a mistake to idealise the role of the CCP, however. The Communists were ideologically tied to Stalinism (if strategically wary of Russian foreign policy demands) and were ready to accept aid from imperialism if it was on offer. In late 1944 and early 1945 there were serious negotiations between the CCP and the USA.[74] A recent account suggests that "the picture of the 'revolutionary holy land'" given by Snow and others was "too rosy...the view from the archives reveals a greater importance for local military superiority, a far greater role for coercion, and a smaller role for popular participation".[75]

There are, for example, serious question marks about how genuine the 1940 "New Democracy" policy[76] really was as there was only one party inside the Red bases. The so-called "three thirds" system of that year assigned just one third of official positions to CCP members but was largely a sham.[77] Although the CCP provided a channel for a popular movement against foreign occupation and domestic exploitation, the broad masses did not and could not control it.

The move to united front propaganda and moderation of land policy also led to the CCP taking a more conservative attitude towards women than previously. By 1942 "the CCP abandoned any attempt to mobilise women behind appeals to emancipation and gender equality".[78] Women's economic participation was encouraged but political involvement was discouraged. Nevertheless, the people's war had a dynamic of its own so that over the course of the conflict:

> women [were] mobilised by the climate of social change in which they lived. This was a climate for which the CCP was partly—particularly

through its call for gender equality and women's emancipation at the start of the war—but only partly, responsible.[79]

Criticisms need to be seen in the context of the situation of the KMT and Japanese occupation and, while recognising the limitations, the achievements of the people's war under CCP leadership should not be underestimated. Stalinism in Russia reflected a new exploiting class but in Yenan there was little surplus available and survival depended on Spartan equality and strong ideological commitment.

## Two types of warfare against Japan

People's war and inter-imperialist war employed contrasting strategies. Chiang prioritised defeating the Red Army over fighting the invader but after 1937 he had no choice but to mount resistance. Tokyo's highly efficient conventional army had limited numbers of personnel so it directed its chief blows against the Nationalist government, hoping to rapidly annihilate it. There were therefore some major set-piece battles such as the struggle over Wuhan (June to October 1938) during which a million Chinese soldiers were wounded or died.[80]

Chiang's troops were successful on occasion. Victory in 1938 in the Battle of Taierzhuang, "the Chinese Stalingrad",[81] destroyed the myth of Tokyo's invincibility. To the extent that the Nationalist government survived, "trading space for time" did not fail entirely. But it was costly and inefficient and did not take into consideration the consequences for civilians. For example, in 1938 dykes on the Yellow River were breached to create a temporary watery barrier to Japanese troops of up to 20 miles wide. But 6 million people were displaced and an estimated 800,000 died.[82]

The alternative was to employ guerrilla tactics. A commentator wrote in 1940 that "the question on the Chinese side can be reduced to this: How effectively can all of China's military forces employ the method of fighting used by the Chinese Communists between 1930 and 1936?"[83] Such methods required popular backing, to feed and hide partisans after hit and run operations and provide enthusiastic fighters capable of local initiative rather than depending on orders from a hierarchy, as well as belief in a cause rather than obedience under the whip. Such attributes were entirely lacking on the Nationalist side and cursory attempts at partisan warfare were abandoned.[84]

For the CCP such methods came naturally[85] and were indeed a necessity. Firstly, they lacked the arms to fight prolonged conventional battles.

Their own weapons production was minimal so arms had to be seized from the enemy. During the civil war period, for example, 80 percent of guns and 70 percent of ammunition were taken from the KMT[86] and Japanese supplies played the same role later.[87] It was not sheer bravado for Mao to ask: "Should we fear...the fact that [the enemy] has weapons? We can find a way to seize his weapons".[88] Secondly, the CCP's Red bases were behind Japanese lines. Once again the Red Army was surrounded by an enemy that was far superior in firepower and guerrilla tactics were again applicable. The situation was summed up by this slogan: "The enemy advances, we retreat. The enemy camps, we harass. The enemy tires, we attack. The enemy retreats, we pursue".[89]

Even so, conditions were difficult. In addition to the "three alls", the Japanese adopted the KMT tactic of installing troops into a string of blockhouses at regular intervals across the countryside. This was designed to intimidate the population and smash resistance. At the lowest point the population of the Red bases fell from 44 to 25 million and troop numbers declined by a quarter.[90] Yet the people's war proved resilient. A study of one CCP-controlled area shows how hatred of occupation and privileged Chinese elements was a factor:

> Villages during the war were like small boats drifting on a vast ocean, tossed about and threatened with being swallowed by mounting waves. The villages in Licheng county during the war suffered tremendously from the repeated mopping-up operations of the Japanese army. Villagers had their houses burned, were deprived of their domestic animals, and lost family members. In order to resist the Japanese forces, the leaders of the villages organised guerrilla corps. Villagers were held responsible for providing guerrilla soldiers with food. Given the Communist Party of China's policy of making the "distribution of burdens more reasonable and equitable", better-off families must have been forced to take on heavier burdens in providing food for the guerrillas. Some of the well-off families who were displeased with such an arrangement sometimes opted to defend the village by collaborating with the Japanese Army but ended up being executed as "collaborators".[91]

Partisan warfare effaces the division between soldiers and civilians. In Red areas large numbers were involved in bodies such as the "Youth National Salvation Association", "Women's Association" and "Peasants' Association".[92] Snow estimates that in 1943 the Red Army was backed by a militia of 7 million with another 12 million in anti-Japanese associations.[93] Liu Shao-ch'i, an army political commissar during the war, wrote:

"Who will fight Japan? Too many think it should be done by specialists, summed up as 'Let the Eighth Army do it.' Wrong. The army must indeed fight the enemy, but the people—every single Chinese citizen—also ought to be armed and ought to fight the enemy".[94]

Mao's partisan strategy generally involved avoidance of frontal attacks. This has led some to suggest he was no more committed to fighting Japan than Chiang, both leaders being intent on marshalling resources to fight each other after the war. A Comintern representative within Red territory itself made this criticism,[95] and the Nationalist press claimed the Red Army devoted twice as much effort to the civil war as Japan: "the 'move and hit' style of Communist guerrillas, much lauded by Mao, was in fact mostly moving, and very little hitting".[96] Perhaps such accusations spurred the Eighth Route Army to launch the "Hundred Regiments" anti-Japanese offensive in 1940. It proved costly and led directly to Okamura's "three alls" policy.

However, a simplistic comparison of Communist and Nationalist contributions in the fight against Japan is unfounded. Chiang had Allied backing, a large-scale state and over 4 million troops. The Communists began with around 50,000 soldiers, though this had grown to 500,000 by the end.[97] Another way of considering the issue is to observe that, excluding Manchuria, half of the Japanese army was involved in fighting the Chongqing government while the other half (with puppet troops) spent their time confronting the Communist threat behind its lines.[98]

Ultimately neither the Nationalist nor Communist war strategies succeeded. By 1944 Japan was close to victory in China. It was the combined pressure of US bombing (including the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 and 9 August 1945) and the Russian invasion of Japanese-occupied Manchuria (on 9 August 1945) that led to the formal ending of war on "Victory over Japan" Day (V-J Day) on 14 August 1945.

## Manchuria after 1945

In 1937 China prefigured the Second World War in the way it interwove massive domestic social struggles and inter-imperialist war. It continued to reflect these characteristics even after peace was concluded. It was at that moment that the question of what the fighting had been for arose. Would the end of occupation bring improvements for ordinary people or just the victory of one imperialist gang over another? The answer to that question would have far-reaching consequences. Fenby describes what

the return of Nationalist government meant: "Peasants who had taken part in [Communist] land reform were publicly executed. Farmers who had campaigned for rent reductions were buried alive, sometimes together with their families".[99]

The key post-war events took place in the north east province of Manchuria: "Nearly one sixth the size of the United States, with a population of about 45,000,000, Manchuria in 1945 was the richest single region of East Asia in natural resources, developed and potential power sources, industry, transport facilities, and agricultural production".[100] For this reason the Nationalist government's slogan was: "China will survive or perish with the Northeast",[101] believing its fate depended on preventing a Communist takeover there.

A simple chronology demonstrates how quickly imperialism showed its hand. Even before V-J Day the former enemies—Russia, the USA and Japan—came together behind Chiang Kai-shek. Having "traded space for time", the KMT government's writ only ran in the south west. So, on 10 August 1945 Washington pledged to help the Nationalists retake the north: in addition to 60,000 US troops already deployed south of the Great Wall, 53,000 Marines and half a million Nationalist soldiers were to be shipped or flown into Manchuria.[102] The same day Stalin warned the Nationalist foreign minister that "the Chinese Communists would get into Manchuria first"[103] unless the Soviet Union also played its part in preventing that eventuality. Moscow therefore approved a treaty granting Chiang "full authority" as soon as military operations were concluded.[104] The following day Chiang incorporated the 1 million or so puppet troops who had been collaborating with Tokyo into his own forces. He asserted they had been an "underground army" for the KMT all along.[105]

Only Japan was missing here. But rumours abounded of a secret agreement between the Nationalists and the Japanese military[106] and three days after Tokyo's surrender General MacArthur's Order Number One ordered Japan to "hold intact and in good condition" all its conquests "pending further instructions".[107] These came from Chiang who openly negotiated with General Okamura, notorious author of Japan's "three alls" policy and forced prostitution. The latter formally agreed to "surrender unconditionally...to the forces specified by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, all arms, ammunition, equipment, supplies, records, information and other assets of any kind belonging to the Japanese forces".[108] Privately he promised to "assist the National Government" and "resolutely chastise" the Communists.[109] As a consequence:

> for the better part of a year after the war was over, much of the Japanese Army remained in China, most of it fully armed and frequently still in charge of rail zones, cities, and even many towns in North China...there were in eastern and north western Manchuria eighty thousand Japanese troops as late as 30 January, 1947, completely equipped and operating under the command of Chiang Kai-shek's headquarters. Such troops were being issued rations that were at least twice as generous as those given to Nationalist soldiers...some Japanese comprised a part of Chiang's officer corps. Chiang's efforts to make use of the defeated Japanese were dwarfed, however, by those of his ally, the warlord Yen Hsi-shan. Yen not only employed Japanese officers but also was determined to use the entire Japanese army stationed in his north western province of Shansi against the Communists, which he succeeded in doing for nearly four years after the war's end.[110]

Fighting between Japanese and Reds continued. In Shanghai Japanese bayonets helped smash a strike of 50,000 workers in support of the Communists. When Okamura was at last convicted of being a war criminal, the Nationalist government stepped in not only to protect him from punishment but to employ him as an adviser![111]

There were Japanese soldiers fighting on the side of the Communists but they had defected to join the fight against imperialism, seeing their real enemies as:

> Japanese officers and other members of Japan's ruling class... After all, the vast majority of them came from the farming and labouring classes in Japan, with a small admixture of students and merchants. Few had been treated with respect in Japan and, especially, in the Japanese Army, where there existed a rigid hierarchy in which inferiors, meaning those who came from the poor and had little education, were often treated with considerable brutality by their superiors. Inevitably, such men were profoundly impressed by the egalitarianism that was perhaps the most important characteristic of the Chinese Communist armies.[112]

The unholy coalition of imperialist powers was short-lived as hostile brothers are bound to fall out. As long as Stalin believed the invasion of Manchuria by 630,000 of his troops guaranteed Russia strong influence, and aided the prospect of occupying Japan, the Nationalists were courted as allies. He therefore committed Russian forces to leaving Manchuria within three months.[113] But the advantages conferred on the US by the atom bomb and the swift peace Tokyo concluded with the US alone dashed these prospects.

Now that the KMT would be a client state of the US, Russian withdrawal was delayed so that, under the pretext that nine days of conflict with Japan justified seizure of "war booty", Manchuria could be plundered on an astonishing scale. A contemporary report said:

> In addition to taking stockpiles and certain complete industrial installations, the Soviets took by far the larger part of all functioning power generating and transforming equipment, electric motors, experimental plants, laboratories and hospitals. In machine tools, they took only the newest and best, leaving antiquated tools behind... By the end Manchuria's electric power capacity was reduced by 71 percent, its metalworking by 80 percent and textiles by 75 percent.[114]

The new Russian policy was one of malevolent neutrality. Treaty obligations meant they handed Manchuria's cities to Chiang[115] but with the Cold War developing they did not want the Nationalists to be too strong. Therefore Moscow did not oppose the advance of Communist troops in the countryside and left behind captured Japanese stockpiles amounting to 700,000 rifles, 14,000 machine guns and hundreds of vehicles including tanks.[116]

There has been debate about how calculated an act this was. Some see it as a Communist conspiracy hatched by Stalin and Mao. But according to one historian, although the Russians did not prevent CCP infiltration "it is by no means certain that they could have done so even if they had wanted to, for the guerrillas were innumerable, omnipresent and indistinguishable from the peasantry".[117] Whatever the reason, the Manchurian windfall was a godsend to the CCP, which had popular support but always lacked the military hardware to make this effective.

Between 1946 and 1949 Mao's forces went on to defeat Chiang's Nationalist government and his US backers in what Schramm describes as "unquestionably one of the most striking examples in history of the victory of a smaller but dedicated and well-organised force enjoying popular support over a larger but unpopular force with poor morale and incompetent leadership".[118] The Second World War with its combination of inter-imperialist rivalries and struggles against oppression and exploitation made a huge contribution to that outcome.

## The place of China in an understanding of the Second World War

The Second World War encompassed two overlapping processes that exist within capitalist society at all times—the competitive struggle

between the capitalists themselves and class/social struggles between the capitalists and other sections of society. The usual sequence of events between 1939 and 1945 was that the struggle between capitalists (imperialist war) opened the way for powerful movements from below to develop. China provides an interesting variation to this. A prolonged revolutionary process had begun before the Second World War and the imperialist Sino-Japanese War was overlaid upon it.

A Marxist analysis of the Chinese Revolution needs to take account of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. The argument is that the world progression of capitalism generates forces within economically backward countries which drive them to develop this social system domestically. To do so they need to break through limits imposed by archaic social and state structures.

Initially this led to bourgeois revolutions such as occurred in England in the 1640s and in France starting in 1789. Here, as capitalists were a relatively small minority in society, their political representatives (like Cromwell and Robespierre) had to mobilise the masses to overcome the feudal state. The New Model Army and the London mob, Jacobinism and the Parisian *sans-culottes* tore down the old regimes and established capitalist state power.

However, even in these early revolutions reliance on the activity of lower sections was potentially risky as they could begin to impose their own needs. In England egalitarian currents like the Levellers and Diggers emerged. In France the *enragés* stepped forward on numerous occasions to provoke radical changes threatening capitalist interests. Once state power was secured for capitalism, such popular movements were cut down. England's monarchy was restored (though constitutionally hedged in). In France, Robespierre and the Jacobin leadership were executed in the so-called Thermidorian Reaction.

With the passage of time and the development of industry the gulf between rich and poor grew greater and the working class became more organised and conscious of its own interests. During the European revolutions of 1848, Marx already noticed that the developing German bourgeoisie feared those below it more than the feudal state:

> at the moment when it menacingly confronted feudalism and absolutism, it saw...pitted against itself the proletariat and all sections of the middle class whose interests and ideas were related to those of the proletariat... Unlike the French bourgeoisie of 1789...it was inclined to betray the people and to compromise with the crowned representatives of the old society...[119]

Conversely, there could be moments when bourgeois revolutionary demands, such as national independence, were championed by other classes. As Trotsky wrote of the 1871 Paris Commune:

> The Parisian workers took power...because they were compelled to do so by the bourgeoisie's betrayal of national defence... It was only possible to defend Paris and the rest of France by arming the proletariat. But the revolutionary proletariat was a threat to the bourgeoisie, and an armed proletariat was an armed threat.[120]

At the beginning of the 20th century Trotsky related this understanding to the Russian situation to develop a fully rounded theory of permanent revolution whose validity was confirmed in 1917. The Russian bourgeoisie would not initiate or even support a bourgeois revolution and in their absence another section would take the lead. For reasons discussed above the peasantry could not fulfil this role but the working class could. That class, in accomplishing the tasks of the bourgeois revolution, would also impose its own demands and thus the bourgeois revolution would grow into socialist revolution—and so be "permanent". This is what happened in Russia in 1917.

At its start the Chinese Revolution seemed to fit Russia's pattern. Its bourgeoisie faced the obstacle of foreign imperialism and backward internal social relations such as warlordism. Like its Russian equivalent, fear of mobilising the masses outweighed the determination to overcome these barriers. This was graphically demonstrated in the KMT's massacre of Shanghai's workers in 1927. At that point China diverged from Russia's pattern. Such was the scale of repression that the workers' ability to champion the revolution was destroyed in the long term. Its leadership, the CCP, not only lost its link with the proletariat but was ideologically distorted by Stalinism.

The CCP leadership was, in class terms, independent of both workers and peasants. In future this grouping would form the embryo of a new ruling class set on achieving the tasks of the bourgeois revolution –independence, national unity and economic growth—using the tools of state power. For this reason Cliff described the rise of Mao to power as an example of "deflected permanent revolution" because it was not the working class but "the intelligentsia as the leader and unifier of the nation, and above all as manipulator of the masses" who shaped the process.[121]

During the Sino-Japanese War in poverty-stricken Yenan the CCP leadership had little property to protect from those beneath it and therefore lacked the constraints on mass mobilisation experienced by

bourgeoisies ever since 1848. However, the result was ambiguous. This was not socialism but it cleared away much of the "muck of ages"[122] and at the same time established a new, state capitalist ruling class.

This experience illuminates the forces at work during the Second World War in an unusual way, because it demonstrates the relevance of the theory of permanemt revolution to the war generally.

1. The theory of permanent revolution is usually applied when Third World countries struggle against imperialist oppression and various social forces are unleashed in the process. The onslaught of Germany in Europe aimed to shackle weaker countries to (Axis) imperialism, though in this case the intended victims were developed capitalist formations. So despite the massive economic contrast between China and France, for example, the issue of what forces might be unleashed at a national level to counter the imperialist threat was posed in a similar way.

2. Each bourgeoisie had to consider the degree to which it was prepared to work with, or indeed encourage, mass mobilisation from below in order to ward off the imperialist threat to its future, or collaborate with the enemy to avoid a domestic threat.

3. Movements from below varied from place to place. They were shaped by the character of the leadership and this determined the degree to which they merely mirrored the bourgeois revolutionary demand of national sovereignty or went beyond this to begin to express their own independent interests (and threaten "permanent revolution"). However, the dominance of Stalinism meant that nowhere did the working class step forward as an independent force capable of completing the process in the direction of socialism.

It would be going too far to suggest that all the people's war and resistance movements of the Second World War were examples of "deflected permanent revolution"; but it is clear that the basic elements operating in China were not unrelated to global currents. There was (excuse the pun), no Chinese wall between events in undeveloped countries and the war as a whole.

## NOTES

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4 Quoted in Fenby, 2003, p114.
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7 Isaacs, 1961, p179.
8 Isaacs, 1961, p295.
9 *The Voice of China. Speeches of Generalissimo and Madame Chiang Kai-shek* (London, 1943), pp 20, 50, 25.
10 Quoted in So Wai Chor, "The Making of the Guomindang's Japan Policy, 1932-1937: The Roles of Chiang Kai-Shek and Wang Jingwei", *Modern China*, vol 28, no 2 (April 2002), p231. See also M Schaller, *The US Crusade in China 1938-1945* (New York, 1979), p42, who quotes Chiang in similar terms: "It is not the Japanese army that we fear, because our army is able to deal with it, but the defiant Communists."
11 So Wai Chor, 2002, p213. See also Hu Pu-yu, *A Brief History of Sino-Japanese War* (Taipei, 1974), p7.
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23 See Miller, April 1979.
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26 Quoted in Schaller, 1979, p105; Spector, 2011, p475.
27 Chang Jui-te, "The Nationalist Army on the Eve of War" in M Peattie, E Drea and H van de Ven (eds), *The Battle for China* (Stanford, 2011), p104.
28 Snow, 1941, Part 1, p48.
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31 See I Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, Penguin USA, 1998 (Paper).

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33 C A Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1962), p56.
34 Chalmers Johnson, for example, notes that in 1944 there were ten times as many Japanese nationals living in China as in 1937 (Johnson, 1962, p44).
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38 Schramm, 1967, p112.
39 Quoted in N Knight, "Mao Zedong and the Peasants: Class and Power in the Formation of a Revolutionary Strategy", in *China Report* 2004, no 40, p63.
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46 N Knight, "Mao Zedong and the Peasants: Class and Power in the Formation of a Revolutionary Strategy," in *China Report* 2004, no 40, p73.
47 Johnson, 1962, p157; Selden, 1971, p142.
48 Selden, 1971, p73. See also Schramm, 1967, p115.
49 T Cliff, 1963.
50 See, for example, D S Goodman, "The Licheng Rebellion of 1941: Class, Gender and Leadership in the Sino-Japanese War, *Modern China*, vol 23, no 2 (April 1997), pp216-245; P M Coble, "Chiang Kai-shek and the Anti-Japanese Movement in China: Zou Tao-fen and the National Salvation Association, 1931-1937", *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol 44, no 2, February 1985, pp293-310; and Donglan Huang, "Revolution, War, and Villages: A Case Study on Villages of Licheng County, Shanxi Province during the War of Resistance Against Japan", *Frontiers of History in China*, 2011, no 6(1), p106.
51 Johnson, 1962, p2.
52 Selden, 1971, pp119-120.
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55 J Esherick, "Revolution in a "Feudal Fortress", Feng Chongyi, D Goodman (eds), *North China at War* (Lanham, Maryland, 2000), p69.
56 Huang, 2011, p106.
57 Huang, 2011, p109. This is confirmed by another example given by Selden: "Third Township provides unique local data illustrating relationship between land revolution and political participation... The majority of the 134 who had become party members by 39 joined because they believed in the Communists' commitment to redistribute land, improve standards of living, and abolish oppression... On one point the report is unequivocal. As late as 1939, after three years in which the united front was reiterated as a fundamental principle, only one person out of the total of 134 had joined the party primarily to resist Japan, and that was in 1937 long after Communist control and land revolution had been consolidated." Selden, 1971, p110.
58 Snow, 1972, p261.
59 Snow, 1972, p469.
60 See Snow, 1972, p47.

61 Snow, 1972, p330.
62 Snow, 1972, p299.
63 Snow, 1972, p296.
64 Snow, 1972, p300.
65 Snow, 1972, p296.
66 Selden, 1971, p254.
67 Huang, 2011, p115.
68 Fenby, 2003, p322.
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71 SeeTai-Chun Kuo, "A Strong Diplomat in a Weak Polity: T V Soong and wartime US-China relations, 1940-1943", *Journal of Contemporary China*, no 18, March 2009, pp219-231.
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91 Huang, 2011, p115
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