

Constructing an intelligence state: the development of the colonial security services in Burma 1930 – 1942.

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Abstract:

My doctoral research focuses on the development and operation of the intelligence services in British colonial Burma during the years 1930 to 1942. This involves an examination of the causes of intelligence development, its progress throughout 1930-1942, its rationale and modus operandi, and the pressures it faced. This time period permits us to assess how intelligence development was a product of the colonial government's response to the 1930 peasant uprising which came as such a shock to colonial security and how thereafter intelligence helped prevent popular hostility to the government from taking the form of an uprising. As a result, intelligence information was increasingly used to secure colonial power during the period of parliamentary reform in Burma in 1937. The thesis further examines the stresses that riots and strikes placed on colonial security in 1938, the so-called 'year of revolution' in Burma. The thesis then proceeds to consider how intelligence operated in the final years of colonial rule before the Japanese occupation of Burma in 1942.

This study is significant not only because very little work on the colonial security services in Burma exists for the period under review, but also because it reveals that intelligence was crucial to colonial rule, underpinning the stability of the colonial state and informing its relationship with the indigenous population in what remained, in relative terms at least, a colonial backwater like Burma. The argument that intelligence was pivotal to colonial governmental stability in Burma because of its centrality to strategies of population control departs from conventional histories of Burma which have considered the colonial army to have been the predominant instrument of political control and the most significant factor in the relationship between the state and society in colonial Burma. Rather it will be argued here that the colonial state in Burma relied on a functioning intelligence bureau which collected information from local indigenous officials and informers and employed secret agents to work on its behalf. This information was collated into reports for the government which then became integral to policy formulation. The primary source base for this work includes British colonial material from government and private collections predominantly in the British library as well as government papers in the National Archives in Kew.

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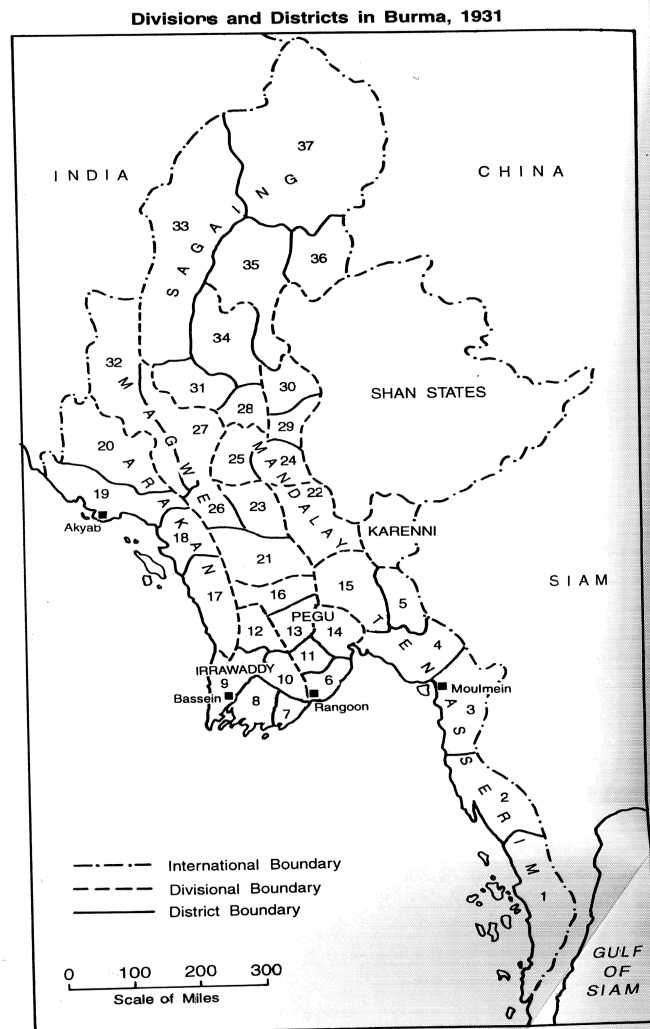
Used in text:

BDB	Burma Defence Bureau
BFB	Burma Freedom Bloc
BFF	Burma Frontier Force
BMP	Burma Military Police
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CIO	Central Intelligence Officers
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
DAA	Dobama Asi Ayon
DIB	Delhi Intelligence Bureau
DMI	Director of Military Intelligence
FECB	Far Eastern Combined Bureau
FESS	Far Eastern Security Services
GCBA	General Council of Burmese Associations
GOC	General Officer in Command

GSO	General Serving Officer
INC	Indian National Congress
IPI	Indian Political Intelligence
MI2 (a)	British Military Intelligence Section 2, a department of the Directorate of Military Intelligence, part of the War Office.

Used in footnotes

BL	British Library
CAB	Cabinet Office
CO	Colonial Office
IOR	India Office Records
IOSM	India Office Select Materials
KV	Records of the Security Service
Mss Eur	European Manuscripts
PREM	Records of the Prime Minister's Office
TNA	The National Archives
WO	War Office



9 Divisions and their districts:

- I. TENASSERIM *Districts:* 1. Mergui, 2. Tavoy, 3. Amherst, 4. Thaton, 5. Salween, 15. Toungoo
- II. PEGU *Districts:* 6. Hanthawaddy, 11. Insein, 13. Tharawaddy, 14. Pegu, 16. Prome
- III. IRRAWADDY *Districts:* 7. Pyapon, 8. Myaungmya, 9. Bassein, 10. Maubin, 12. Henzada

- IV. ARAKAN *Districts:* 17. Sandoway, 18. Kyaukpyu, 19. Akyab, 20. Arakan
- V. MAGWE *Districts:* 21. Thayetmyo, 23. Magwe, 26. Minbu, 27. Pakokku, 32. Chin Hills
- VI. MANDALAY *Districts:* 22. Yamethin, 24. Meiktila, 25. Myingyan, 29. Kyaukse, 30. Mandalay
- VII. SAGAING *Districts:* 28. Sagaing, 31. Lower Chindwin, 33. Upper Chindwin, 34. Shwebo, 35. Katha, 36. Bhamo, 37. Myitkyina
- VIII. SHAN STATES
- IX. KARENNI

Source: Based on the map from Cheng Siok Hwa, *The Rice Industry of Burma, 1852-1940*, University of Malay press, Kuala Lumpur, 1968. Reproduced from Parimal Ghosh, *Brave Men of the Hills: Resistance and Rebellion in Burma, 1825-1932*. (London: Hurst and Company, 2000).

Map 1. Colonial Burma in 1931.

Introduction

This thesis examines the history of the colonial security services in Burma from 1930 to 1942. It investigates the role that these security agencies played in sustaining state power by gathering intelligence about indigenous society in colonial Burma in the twelve years prior to Japan's invasion of the colony in January 1942. In doing so the thesis makes an original contribution to the field of intelligence studies, particularly in relation to the use of intelligence within a colonial state. It also highlights the centrality of intelligence collection and analysis, whether in terms of its success or, more often, its shortcomings, to the history of late colonial Burma. This case is made by an investigation of the bureaucratic development of the intelligence apparatus in colonial Burma and an exploration of its rationale and operation. The inability of colonial intelligence personnel to meet the security requirements of the colonial state are examined closely. Particular attention will be paid to intelligence provision as instrumental in sustaining colonial rule, an approach that requires assessment of the ways in which intelligence analysis and reportage shaped official readings of the subject population. These themes are explored in the context of the political, social and economic development of the colonial state in Burma during the 1930s especially.

The thesis aims to demonstrate that the development of a functioning intelligence apparatus to monitor popular political activity within 1930s Burma was pivotal to the colonial state's ability to function at all. While the argument rests on extensive reference to relevant government and intelligence archives from the period, the discussion is situated more broadly in the context of relevant historical and theoretical literature on colonial Burma, on intelligence studies, and on analyses of commonalities inherent to the 'late colonial state' of the early twentieth century.¹ The linkage between intelligence and the

¹ See Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation, 1918-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), W. David McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1979), Malcolm Murfett, *Naval Warfare 1919-1945: An operational history of the volatile war at sea* (London: Routledge, 2009), Chris Bell, "The 'Singapore Strategy' and the deterrence of Japan: Winston Churchill, the Admiralty and the dispatch of Force Z," *English Historical Review*, 116, no.

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enforcement of colonial rule in Burma is also framed in the context of other relevant arguments about the nature of state power in Burma. The concept of intelligence as 'force multiplier' is also central to what follows insofar as the thesis will illustrate that the gathering of intelligence was often of greater importance to the colonial state than the employment of military force to uphold control. The vast literature on the theoretical implications of colonialism, much of it pre-occupied by the definitions and ideas of what constitutes a 'colonial state', provides a context for this analysis. So, too, the literature on colonial policing and the more limited secondary work on colonial intelligence services has been used to help elucidate the central arguments of the thesis. In addition, the limitations of colonial intelligence gathering and the reasons for those limitations are examined.

At one level, the thesis demonstrates something that perhaps seems obvious: intelligence in colonial Burma functioned to ensure that the colonial state was secure in its power by preventing the outbreak of popular hostility to the government. But, at another level, this conclusion goes much further. More than any other branch of state security, such as the police, or the army and the paramilitary auxiliaries sometimes deployed in their support, intelligence provision was relied on as the first line of defence against a population always considered potentially, if not actually, hostile. This is not to suggest that intelligence alone actively suppressed the population, but it is to suggest that intelligence triggers were both what alerted the government to potential disturbance and what typically governed the form and extent of the state's coercive response. The utility of accurate intelligence was thus measured in terms of its pre-emptive power. Its use was supposed to ensure that the government could swiftly suppress trouble with the minimum of exertion. As we shall see, by 1937 the British-appointed colonial Governor of Burma made it plain that his power rested on the quality of information provided by a newly-functioning intelligence bureau. However, as the thesis makes plain, these hopes were disappointed. The intelligence received from this Burma Defence Bureau (BDB) was limited in its value by a number of factors. The prejudices

467, (2001): 604-634, for analyses of the strategic vulnerability of the British Empire during the 1930s.

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held by the colonial intelligence bureau regarding the indigenous population impeded dispassionate analysis of the events affecting that population. Information gained from within Burma's civil society was provided by local informants who proved unreliable. And the colonial state alienated the population through its repressive response to any signs of disorder, an incremental process which further hindered the capacity of its intelligence gatherers to understand a society that was increasingly closed off from them. Intelligence practices in Burma during the twelve years on which the thesis focuses - from the Saya San rebellion of 1930 to Japan's occupation of Burma in 1942 - often reflected the insecurities of colonial rule and the underlying fear of the subject population.

Intelligence gathering specifically targeted to provide information on the political activity of the subject population was a neglected and late development in colonial Burma. Christopher Bayly's history of the use of intelligence to underpin the administration of the British Raj in nineteenth century India observes that it was 'very difficult to establish an information network in Burma' on the conquest of the country in 1885.² Although some efforts were made after Burma's conquest to develop an intelligence administration along the lines of that found in sub-continental India, from which Burma was governed as a province until 1937, these efforts lagged behind the development of internal opposition to British rule in the country and were never able to anticipate or contain it. This is not to say that intelligence gathering did not exist at all prior to 1930: a Criminal Investigation Department (CID) with limited intelligence-gathering powers began operating in the province of Burma in 1891, and in 1896 anthropometric and detective branches of the police service were established in Rangoon.³ However, as the Chief Secretary to Burma's Chief Commissioner remarked to the Secretary of the Government of India when reviewing the development of criminal intelligence in Burma in 1896, colonial intelligence gathering capacity was hampered by its relatively late appearance in Burma.⁴ The obvious remedy

² C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³ British Library (BL), India Office Records (IOR), L/PJ/6/418 Creation of a Criminal Intelligence Branch in Burma 25 Mar. 1896, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*

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- a discrete intelligence bureau in Burma – was, at this stage, judged prohibitively costly. Some further police reforms were enacted, the most notable of which was the separation of the intelligence branch of the CID from its criminal investigation branch in 1926.⁵ This pointed to the increasing specialisation in the intelligence administration in colonial Burma. However, lack of money still slowed the pace. As late as 1931 the ‘creation of a central intelligence bureau was postponed on account of financial stringency’.⁶ The period of substantial bureaucratic reform to the structure and purpose of intelligence gathering in Burma occurred immediately after this, during the period discussed in this thesis, 1930-1942.

But if the bureaucratic apparatus of intelligence was slow to be erected, efforts to gather political intelligence had their origin in the early years of colonial occupation. Themes that were to dominate intelligence reports in the 1930s were already notable in intelligence reports produced in the years following Burma’s conquest. In 1888, at the end of the three-year war of pacification following Burma’s annexation to India, for instance, the territory’s detective staff had been exhorted to ‘obtain and collate information from all provinces regarding combinations and conspiracies of a political character’.⁷ In 1896 the anthropometric branch of the detective branch in Rangoon was extended to ‘identify and collect information on political movements’.⁸ And Burmans in the 1920s observed that the CID spent more time on gathering political rather than criminal intelligence.⁹ Clearly, then, political intelligence gathering existed prior to 1930; however, it was generally subordinate to intelligence administration and concerns in neighbouring India. Intelligence administration in Burma was modelled on the intelligence apparatus of India, not tailored to local requirements. The events of the 1930s were to impress on the colonial

⁵ BL IOR V/24/3242 Burma: Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1922-1933, 50.

⁶ BL IOR L/E/7/1559, File 1555 Dangerous drugs – Illicit Traffic – Creation of a Central Intelligence Bureau, 11 Feb. 1929 – 10 Jan. 1931, 74.

⁷ BL IOR L/PJ/6/418 Creation of a Criminal Intelligence Branch in Burma 25 Mar. 1896, 4.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932 Extract from the Official Report of the Burma Legislative Council Debates 20 Feb. 1931, 200.

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government the need to account for local concerns in Burma rather than continue to adapt Indian practices and Indian preoccupations to the country.

Another reason for our prime focus on intelligence developments in 1930s Burma is the fundamental sea change in the British colonial government's approach to intelligence gathering in that country at the very start of the decade. As we shall see, there was a major challenge to imperial rule in 1930 when a peasant uprising against the colonial government exposed the limitations of British authority in Burma's interior, necessitating the development of new means of population control. Antonio Gramsci's ideas of hegemony – and its limitations – are useful here. The Italian theorist observed that the ruling classes that compose the state in a society suffer a crisis of authority when the masses, the people the state governs, 'move from passivity to activity and put forward demands adding up to revolution'.¹⁰ In other words, the 'cultural hegemony' of the ruling elite, the concept perhaps most closely associated with Gramsci's ideas, broke down because the majority of the population refused to accept colonial state authority any longer. While we might question Gramsci's narrowly class-based analysis, it seems unquestionable that in Burma during 1930 the masses moved from passivity to action by staging a rebellion against colonial rule. Gramsci further noted that in such circumstances the ruling class 'changes men and programmes and, with greater speed than is achieved by the subordinate classes, reabsorbs the control that was slipping from its grasp'.¹¹ In Burma the colonial government did exactly this by enacting major reforms to the intelligence gathering apparatus to aid its restoration of control over the population. An intelligence bureau providing information on the political activity and inclinations of indigenous society was deemed the most reliable means of preventing hostile mass activity. But if the solution was identified, its implementation was slower. Immediately following the rebellion, the colonial government deliberated over the nature of the bureau that was required in colonial Burma to help prevent any recurrence of rebellion, but a functioning bureau only took shape in 1937. Named the Burma Defence Bureau, this

¹⁰ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, eds. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 210.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

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organisation began operating when Burma was constitutionally separated from the Indian administration in 1937. Its precursors, its inception, its experiences of gathering intelligence on the ground in Burma, and its role in shaping the colonial authorities' approach to the subject population form the subject matter of this thesis.

C. A. Bayly observes that the colonial state's relationship with indigenous society in British-ruled India was mediated by intelligence.¹² Colonial officials engaged with society by cultivating contacts within that society who would provide them with the requisite information required to administer safely. Albeit an early example, this phenomenon was not unique to India. Martin Thomas notes that in British and French dependencies in the Middle East during the early twentieth century, 'intelligence providers, whether dedicated security service personnel, indigenous informants, or civil administrators, advised imperial government of the day-to-day workings of the clientage system' that operated in those territories.¹³ And Georgina Sinclair's review of the duties of colonial police officers in the British Empire in the decades preceding decolonisation notes that they took on the roles of 'prison warders, soldiers, administrators, magistrates, sheriffs... many duties and responsibilities reflecting the complex administration of empire'. As she records, vital among the duties of colonial police officers was the gathering of intelligence.¹⁴

In Burma, District Commissioner of Tavoy, Arthur John Stanley White, remarked in 1930 that he had a 'large number of hats', and worked as 'customs officer, District Commissioner, District Magistrate and Post Officer'.¹⁵ It is perhaps little wonder that such a multi-faceted administrator went on to oversee intelligence reforms in the province triggered by the Saya San rebellion. David Anderson and David Killingray in their studies of colonial policing similarly observe that

¹² Bayly, *Empire and Information*.

¹³ Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial disorder after 1914* (London: University of California Press, 2008), 5.

¹⁴ Georgina Sinclair, *At the End of the Line, Colonial Police Forces and the Imperial Endgame, 1945-1980* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 1.

¹⁵ BL India Office Select Materials (IOSM) European Manuscripts (Mss Eur) E356 A. J. S. White Collection: papers of Arthur John Stanley White (b 1896), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1922-38, comprising letters, reports and memoirs FF1, 573.

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intelligence was a primary component of police work.¹⁶ In Burma, the police likewise performed this vital function by means of the information they accumulated about the territory's criminals, dissidents, non-tax payers and others that might, to borrow a well-known term, be called the 'dangerous classes'. European police officers in colonial Burma were instructed to tour frequently and record information in the villages they visited. District Commissioners liaised with village headmen, the indigenous officials generally appointed to administer their villages in accordance with colonial rule, and were 'the linchpin between the British dominated central administration and largely indigenous local government officials'.¹⁷ For its part, the colonial administration depended on the headmen to provide reliable information on events within their domain. Where the information provided was unreliable, or the ability of local officials to furnish information on local events was obstructed, the state's understanding of local society was rapidly compromised.

The nature of intelligence gathered by District Commissioners and Police Officers in colonial Burma was broad ranging, as the diaries kept by District Commissioner John Keith Stanford during one year – 1933 - in Myitkina district demonstrate: he gathered information under the headings of 'political agitation, communal disturbances, crop prices, wages, food prices, supplies of foodstuffs, shortages of cash and unemployment, labour troubles'. His other preoccupations included 'rainfall, crime...smuggling, agriculture, public health – plague, diseases of animals, animal prices'.¹⁸ As Martin Thomas observes of the data accumulated by colonial officials in the Middle East, such material was 'routinely gathered in the course of day-to-day administration' being 'predominantly "open source intelligence, or "osint"'.¹⁹ Mundane it may have been, but this information was more than the sum of its parts. As the colonial administration in Burma specialised its intelligence apparatus in the 1930s, "all source intelligence", information of all types derived from both overt and covert

¹⁶ David Killingray and David M. Anderson, introduction to *Policing and Decolonisation: Nationalism, Politics and the Police, 1917-65* eds. David Killingray and David M. Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (University of Hawaii Press: Honolulu, 1987), 80.

¹⁸ BL IOSM Mss Eur E244/2, Papers of John Keith Stanford (1892-1971), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1919-38 Correspondence and papers from the office of the Deputy Commissioner, Myitkina report to the Commissioner, 198.

¹⁹ Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence*, 2.

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sources' was increasingly channelled towards the colonial government.²⁰ For the first time, regularly paid informers working with nationalist groups, organised labour or peasant movements began to provide information systematically to the intelligence services in Burma in the 1930s. Special agents working for the intelligence bureau were employed to infiltrate and undermine groups that were identified as pursuing a subversive anti-colonial agenda. In this sense, intelligence analysis developed into a specialist branch of state, no longer solely the by-product of day-to-day colonial administration in the 1930s.

Plainly, information of the nature Arthur John Stanley White collected remained vital to colonial administration, providing knowledge that could be used for the management of indigenous resources and labour, such as tax collection and manpower allocation. However, the colonial state in the 1930s increasingly relied on intelligence of a different nature to provide indications of dissent among the population so that the security forces could stave off any threats to its power akin to *Saya San*. Political intelligence informing the Governor of Burma of subversive activity in the country was used to justify more authoritarian measures such as imprisonment without trial, press censorship, or the declaration of emergency rule. Forceful measures, including military violence, applied to the population, were themselves rooted in perceptions of the population as seditious that stemmed from intelligence service readings of indigenous behaviour and intentions. As the forthcoming chapters discuss, following the challenge posed by a popular rebellion in 1930, reliable political intelligence in the 1930s became synonymous with colonial stability.

Before describing the content of individual chapters, a few words must be said about thesis methodology. This is largely empirical, the arguments developed being substantially derived from a close analysis of primary sources at the India Office records in the British Library as well as the wider British governmental records housed at the National Archives at Kew. Intelligence reports, governmental discussion of intelligence reforms in Burma, colonial government inquiries, security forces' internal papers, the diaries of colonial officers and

²⁰ *Ibid.*

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military personnel constitute the primary sources referred to here, most of which are located in the British Library. Official papers discussing the preparations for war in the Far East, and Burma's place within that, are, by contrast, located in the National Archives, particularly Colonial Office, War Office, and Committee of Imperial Defence reviews of Burma's strategic situation, its internal security conditions, and the wider strategic picture in the Far East and the Indian sub-Continent. These records have been consulted in conjunction with a wide range of secondary works, which, taken together, inform the thesis' approach to the primary sources. If the thesis is partly 'document driven', it is thus also informed by more theoretical readings of colonial power, of anti-colonial opposition, and of the behaviour of subaltern groups in colonial societies. In addition, the accounts of Burman nationalists' experiences collected after the decolonisation process provide alternative insight into the impact that British intelligence operations made on nationalist activity during the 1930s.

The thesis is also chronologically structured. Its chapters chart the evolution of colonial Burma's intelligence services from the Saya San rebellion onwards, reviewing the catalysts to the development of the intelligence bureau, the bureau's early operations and experiences and its termination on the invasion of Burma by Japan in 1942. Each chapter is organised into four subheadings with an introduction and conclusion. The four subheadings are intended to help guide the reader as to the prevailing themes within each chapter, an approach that follows Patrick Dunleavy's work on the layout of a PhD thesis.²¹

Intelligence and the colonial state in Burma

It is hoped that this thesis makes an original contribution to the field of history in the following ways. First, the development of the intelligence services in colonial Burma is a subject which has thus far attracted no attention from either historians or political scientists specialising in the field of Burma. This, it seems to me, is a major oversight, as great effort went into the construction of an intelligence bureau in 1930s Burma and the colonial authorities made it plain

²¹ Patrick Dunleavy, *Authoring a PhD: How to plan, Draft, Write and Finish a Doctoral Thesis or Dissertation*, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

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within internal correspondence, if not in public, that they relied on the bureau to maintain their rule. Thus, a study of the colonial intelligence services in Burma seems justified if only to provide a better understanding of the means by which the colonial state perpetuated its rule in the 1930s.

Second, a study of the security services in Burma contributes to the study of colonialism insofar as the intelligence services in Burma during the 1930s were an integral, if neglected, component of the colonial state. This thesis tries to explain 'how this worked' by examining the ways in which information collection was exploited by a colonial administration attempting to control the subject population by closer engagement with it. Within the wider British Empire, Burma's strategic value was essentially gauged by reference to its role as a buffer to India, intrinsically important certainly but not, it appears, important enough to ensure that the colonial government ever had more than minimal resources with which to rule the country. A study of the colonial intelligence bureau reveals much about how, with such limited means, the government managed to rule the country in the face of mounting social turmoil and nationalist agitation.

A third aspect of the thesis might be described less as originality than as engagement with wider debate about what constituted the late colonial state. Analyses of the colonial state in Burma have particularly focused on the role of the military in sustaining colonial rule and shaping the behaviour of the subject population. John Lonsdale, in a review of the nature of the colonial state in Africa, considers this view of the state as one 'seeing power in its visible exercise rather than as a many-sided relation'.²² Such a view, he notes, 'argues that external force, wielded by a dominant minority, was the only possible factor of cohesion'.²³ A 'simple coercive instrument' is considered the means employed to control the subject population and, in Burma's case, historians and political scientists have argued that the military was that instrument.²⁴ This

²² John Lonsdale, "State and Social Processes in Africa: A Historiographical Survey," *African Studies Review*, 24, no. 2/3, Social Science and Humanistic Research on Africa: An Assessment (1981): 139-225 at 151.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

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thesis takes a different view, adopting the approach of Crawford Young who argues that the state is 'not apart from and opposed to society'.²⁵ Following Philip Cerny, Young contends that the state 'in and through its own process of structuration, itself produces, or is a key factor in producing, the "society" itself rather than being a merely coercive force.'²⁶ Within this analysis, state and society overlap and interact; they do not just oppose each other antithetically. Taking Young as its guide, this thesis argues that the intelligence services in colonial Burma mediated the relationship between state and civil society, being integral to the 'process of structuration' that made the form of political authority in late colonial Burma what it was.²⁷

Put differently, the intelligence gathered about public attitudes defined the state's perspective about indigenous society. In addition, the relations colonial officials forged with indigenous representatives were based on the information those members of society provided to officials; local members of the subject population received official positions because they provided information to the state. Here we return to Gramsci, another thinker whose ideas inform the chapters that follow. Gramscian analysis postulates that 'the state is not a separate and superior entity over underlying society', and in colonial Burma, as an analysis of the history of the intelligence services in colonial Burma demonstrates, the state's presence in, and manipulation of society depended on the presence of intelligence gatherers and the control of the communication of information throughout society.²⁸

This was also a feature of colonial India; as mentioned earlier, Bayly's history of the role of intelligence gathering in the Raj in the nineteenth Century describes the means by which the colonial state made efforts to control the indigenous networks of communication in the subcontinent. The 'autonomous networks of social communicators' which transmitted information throughout the society had to be incorporated into the 'state's surveillance agencies' so that the colonial

²⁵ Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective*, (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1994), 24.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Norberto Bobbie, "Gramsci and the conception of civil society," in *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge and Paul Kegan Ltd, 1979), 24.

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state could rule securely. These communities of knowledgeable people formed an 'information order' that the state attempted to manage.²⁹ Likewise, in Burma the intelligence services made great efforts to control the communication of information throughout society to ensure that the colonial state could rule, if not unopposed, then at least unthreatened. Central to the state's efforts to maintain its rule over society in the 1930s was the creation of an intelligence bureau to monitor and, it was hoped, to control the communication of subversive ideas in society. Here we come full circle to John Lonsdale's observations cited above: in Burma the government did not solely rely on the military – on force - to repress uprisings or other agitation.

A fourth aspect to the distinctiveness of this thesis, then, is its rejection of the view propounded by J. S. Furnivall, Mary P. Callahan and Robert H. Taylor, political scientists and historians of Burma, that the state in Burma was governed by an external force, applied by an army which had no members from the majority ethnic Burman population; Indian soldiers from the sub-continent and ethnic minorities from the hill tribes of Burma manned the army. Furnivall argues in his history of colonial Burma and Netherlands India that a typical feature of colonial states was that 'autonomous society maintains order with more or less success in virtue of its inherent vitality, but a dependency is kept alive, as it were, by artificial respiration, by pressure exercised mechanically from outside and above'.³⁰

Robert H. Taylor follows this lead in his analysis of the development of the state in Burma, remarking that 'the security of the colonial state rested primarily on the army... the army upon which the colonial state depended was that of the Indian empire'.³¹ He goes as far as to dismiss the role of intelligence entirely: 'An intelligence capacity which allowed [the colonial state] to monitor the plans of anti-state and anti-British movements and individuals' was a minor component 'in the overall maintenance of the state'.³² Callahan's history of the

²⁹ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 3.

³⁰ J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 74.

³¹ Taylor, *The State in Burma*, 90.

³² *Ibid.*

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development of the military in colonial and post-colonial Burma postulates that ‘the “internal security” goal of British and Indian soldiers was to eliminate resistance to British rule. By the early twentieth century, internal security – still maintained by foreigners – gradually became equated with crime control as rising rates of violent property crimes threatened the interests of British capital’.³³ These authors contend that the military, external and alien to society, was responsible for the control of the population and defined the state’s relation to civil society. However, this thesis demonstrates that it is not where the state was alien to society, but where it overlapped with society that analysis of colonial rule must be made.

The authors above correctly observe that Burma received sparse resources, resulting in an army only effective for maintaining internal security, rather than one capable of external defence. However, as subsequent chapters will show, the conclusion that follows from this is that the intelligence services, rather than the military, were deemed the best means of managing the population given the minimal resources at the state’s disposal. As Patrick Chabal observes of colonial states in Africa, their goal was one of ‘managing the colony in the most efficient way and at the lowest possible cost’.³⁴ A functioning intelligence bureau could warn the state of potential disorder which could be put down swiftly with little effort and less expenditure of limited resources. Chabal is not alone in his arguments. Frederick Cooper’s review of approaches to colonialism observes that colonial states were ‘thin’, hidebound by major limitations on their manpower and resources, requiring the ‘legitimacy and coercive capacity of local authority to collect taxes and round up labour, and they needed local knowledge’.³⁵ The intelligence services were vital links in providing this local knowledge. And in Burma, the state stepped up its efforts to ensure a steady flow of local knowledge to the state in the 1930s by establishing an intelligence bureau.

³³ Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), 13.

³⁴ Patrick Chabal, introduction to *Political Domination in Africa: Reflections on the limits of power*, ed. Patrick Chabal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 12.

³⁵ Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge and History*, (London: University of California Press, 2005), 184.

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However, this is not to suggest that the intelligence services were an entirely reliable safeguard of colonial security. The intelligence services in colonial Burma in the 1930s were prone to prejudice and stereotyping, and were persistently prone to misconceptions when judging the subject population. Their personnel were equally vulnerable to any shortcomings in the quality of information provided to them by their informers in society. Bayly observed in India that the flow of information to the state was often frustrated by 'native informants' spies, agents, individuals who 'by their nature... could not be trusted'.³⁶ Ranajit Guha noted that the 'chicanery of agents' was often blamed for breakdowns in intelligence collection in the colonial Raj.³⁷ Guha, and Ann Stoler in a review of colonial intelligence gathering in the Dutch East Indies, observe that the colonial intelligence services tended to attribute violence and disorder by the subject population to the provocation of an organised minority of conspirators.³⁸ The colonial rulers were unwilling to acknowledge the grievances of the majority population - the peasants and workers - whom Guha referred to as the 'subaltern' groups as they were entirely excluded from the process of economic and political decision-making.³⁹ Officials preferred instead to imagine elaborate conspiracies behind uprisings and violence in the colonies.⁴⁰ Stoler observes that in the Dutch East Indies the colonial government viewed violent crime by labourers in 1929 as the result of outside provocations by communist conspirators.⁴¹ These stereotypes mirrored colonial insecurities and the state's fears of the subject population rather than being an accurate interpretation of events within that population.

Intelligence reporting in colonial Burma in the 1930s exhibited similar tendencies to those noted by Guha and Stoler; violence was externalised:

³⁶ C. A. Bayly, "Knowing the Country: Empire and information in India," *Modern Asian Studies*, 27, no. 1 special issue: How Social, Political and Cultural Information is Collected, Defined, Used and Analysed (1993): 3 – 43, at 4.

³⁷ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without hegemony: history and power in colonial India* (London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 157.

³⁸ Ann Stoler, "Perceptions of Protest: Defining the Dangerous in Colonial Sumatra", *American Ethnologist*, 12, no. 4 (1985): 642-658.

³⁹ Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in *Subaltern Studies I, Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

⁴⁰ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 186.

⁴¹ Stoler, "Perceptions of Protest", 655.

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attributed to the handiwork of a group of provocateurs. Subaltern groups were not considered capable of rising up against the government - only nationalist conspirators, agitating among the subalterns were capable of provoking rebellion. The subaltern groups were themselves viewed as a battleground for control between the colonial state and nationalists; the state had to work to counter the spread of subversive ideas throughout the subaltern groups if it was to stave off rebellion. The intelligence services were at the forefront of these efforts to provide information on political enemies of the state. However, attributing all dissent to the activities of a radical minority could not reduce hostility to colonial rule, it merely justified the suppression of feared conspirators. As Stoler observed, written rhetoric produced by colonial voices describing the activity of the indigenous population 'informed the perceptions of those in power', and justified 'the rule it described, but also possessed a more active voice, advocating action (or inaction) in certain perception ways'.⁴² Preconceived notions and stereotypes held by intelligence gatherers could only result in failure to provide accurate intelligence on events in Burma. This thesis examines the role such qualities played in intelligence failure during the 1930s.

Literature review

In addition to the works of Callahan, Taylor, Furnivall and others discussed above, a number of texts have informed the approach and content of the thesis. As mentioned briefly before, the original archival research is situated in the context of related histories of Burma, colonialism and studies of intelligence. Literature on the history of Burma provides a historical background for the primary source material studied, as well as analyses of the colonial state in Burma. Texts discussing intelligence failures, the history of the development of various intelligence bureaucracies and theoretical approaches to 'intelligence power' inform the thesis' analysis of the development, structure, limitations and rationale of intelligence gathering in Burma. And, as discussed in the preceding section, the development and modus operandi of the colonial state in Burma is also discussed with reference to examples from broader theoretical literature on

⁴² Ibid, 643.

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the colonial state which examines the themes and arguments associated with colonialism.

The thesis makes reference to histories of colonial Burma to provide a background to the primary sources discussed and to evaluate the arguments presented in those works in the light of the original research into the colonial intelligence services in Burma. In addition to the works of the authors discussed above, a number of historians of Burma who have concentrated on the rise of nationalism in the 1930s are referred to throughout the thesis. During the 1930s, a number of radical politicised groups emerged in Burma that had a major impact on political developments during the 1930s and subsequently. Prominent individuals who played a role in shaping the political future of Burma, Ba Maw, Aung San and U Nu, future premiers of Burma, first rose to prominence then. A number of historians, Michael Adas, Robert H. Taylor, U Maung Maung, Eric Sarkisyanz and Khin Yi among them, discuss the shifts in Burman nationalist identity during the 1930s.⁴³ Adas, Sarkisyanz and Parimal Ghosh examine the role that tradition and culture played in protest movements and rebellion in 1930s Burma.⁴⁴ Adas, Sarkisyanz and Taylor especially note the change in patterns of nationalism from its more traditional, conservative forms of protest to more self-consciously modern, politically sophisticated guises in the 1930s. The thesis investigates the rise of nationalism from the perspective of the colonial intelligence services, which were keenly alert to the inclinations and changing fortunes of nationalist groups, deeming those with the most influence among the population to be the greatest threat to colonial security. Understanding the inclinations and agendas of nationalist groups was of importance to the intelligence services, and the establishment and operations of the intelligence bureau in the 1930s was in large part a response to the increase in nationalist agitation at that time. The authors examining the rise of nationalism in Burma

⁴³ Michael Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion: Millenarian Protest Movements against the European Colonial Order* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979), Robert H. Taylor, "The Burmese communist Movement and Its Indian Connection: Formation and Factionalism," *Journal of South East Asia Studies*, 14, no. 1 (1983): 95 – 108, U Maung Maung, *Burmese Nationalist Movements 1940-1948* (Edinburgh, Kiscdale publishers, 1989), Erik Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* (The Hague, Nijhoff, 1965) and Khin Yi, *The Dobama Movement in Burma (1930-1938)* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988).

⁴⁴ Parimal Ghosh, *Brave Men of the Hills: Resistance and Rebellion in Burma, 1825-1932* (London: Hurst and Company, 2000).

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have not considered the colonial state's approach to nationalist organisation in society, which was mediated by the intelligence services.

Michael Adas and Ian Brown consider the role of political economy in events in 1930s Burma.⁴⁵ Both authors examine the impact of poverty, the Great Depression, immigration and land ownership on events such as the rebellion in 1930. Economic grievances fostered rebellious sentiments and hostility to the colonial state. However, similarly to the phenomenon of nationalism, the state's understanding of economic choices was mediated by the information it received on prevailing economic conditions, information gathered by the intelligence services. This thesis examines the colonial intelligence perspective on Burma's difficult economic situation. Rather than viewing economic grievances as concerns to be ameliorated, the intelligence services viewed them as potential threats to state security. While Brown and Adas explain the impact economic events had on the population of Burma, an analysis of the intelligence services provides a rather different understanding of the colonial state's reaction to the country's economic problems.

Authors examining the Japanese threat to the British Empire in the build up to war discuss Japanese subversion in Burma which gathered momentum for some years before invasion. Won Z. Yoon's thesis focuses on the activity of a Japanese-sponsored underground cell of activists in Burma which aided the invasion.⁴⁶ Richard J. Aldrich, Antony Best and Nicholas Tarling have examined the effects of Japanese subversion throughout the Far East before the war, and review British imperial intelligence readings of Japanese activity throughout the Far East, finding them to be woefully inaccurate.⁴⁷ Aldrich examines the history of the British intelligence services in Thailand prior to the war, and makes some

⁴⁵ Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: The Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier 1852- 1941*(Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974); Ian Brown *A Colonial Economy in Crisis: Burma's Rice Cultivators and the World Depression of the 1930s* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005).

⁴⁶ Won Z. Yoon. *Japan's Scheme for the Liberation of Burma: The Role of the Minami Kikan and the '30 Comrades'* (Athens, OH.: University Center for International Studies, 1973).

⁴⁷ Richard J. Aldrich, *Intelligence and the War Against Japan: Britain, America and the Politics of Secret Service* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Antony Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia 1914 – 1941* (New York: Palgrave, 2002) and Nicholas Tarling, *Britain, South East Asia and the Onset of the Pacific War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

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reference to the colonial intelligence services in Burma.⁴⁸ Building on the work of these scholars, the thesis reviews the particular experiences of Burma's colonial intelligence bureau in countering Japanese subversion within the country and the bureau's threat perceptions of Japan. As this thesis suggests, explaining the Japanese invasion of Burma is impossible without an understanding of pre-war nationalism and state repression of nationalist activity.

Robert Taylor and John Cady also evaluate the impact of separation from India and the establishment of a parliament in Burma during the 1930s.⁴⁹ Taylor observes that the Government of India retained a strong influence on policy-making in Burma after separation in 1937. Taylor and Cady consider that there was a considerable degree of independence for elected representatives in the parliament constructed on separation. Here the thesis again offers a different intelligence perspective on separation and Burma's parliamentary government, suggesting that intelligence-based decisions played a key role both in maintaining state rule on separation and in limiting the powers of Burmans in parliament.

A number of theoretical works on the nature of the colonial state are discussed in the thesis. The colonial state in Burma exemplified a number of tendencies that Fred Cooper, Ann Stoler, Crawford Young, and James C. Scott observe to be typical of such states in their works.⁵⁰ These authors explore the means by which the colonial state exercised power and viewed its subjects while highlighting the limitations of the colonial state, especially its inability to represent the needs of the subject population or indeed to understand them. James C. Scott, in particular, describes the vertical nature of the state, noting

⁴⁸ Richard J. Aldrich, *The Key to the South: Britain, the United States and Thailand during the Approach of the Pacific War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁴⁹ John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1965).

⁵⁰ Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler eds. *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Culture in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1997), Ann Stoler, "Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia," *Comparative studies in Society and History*, 34, no. 3 (1992): 514 – 551, Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1994) and James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1998).

that the state imposes categories of description on the population it rules.⁵¹ The state organises society for its benefit, to make tasks such as taxation easier. This thesis considers Scott's observations on the state with reference to examples in colonial Burma, observing that the intelligence services were at the forefront of the task of imposing categories on society to make it easier for the colonial state to rule. Stoler discusses similar themes in her work on colonial states in the Dutch East Indies highlighting, like Scott, the limitations of elitist efforts to describe the population they ruled, while excluding that population entirely from those efforts.⁵² Stoler and Cooper argue that the colonial state's use of language, categorisation and symbolism were pivotal to the forms of population control adopted, rejecting the idea that crude use of force governed such policies.⁵³ This insight has informed the approach used here in analysing intelligence as a tool of social control in Burma, in preference to deployment of the army.

Gramscian analyses of the state and civil society have informed the thesis' discussion of the colonial state and the indigenous population in Burma. Mouffe and Sassoon discuss the means by which the state perpetuated hegemony in civil society, that is, the consent of society to the rule of the state.⁵⁴ The limitations of such a venture, especially where the state did not represent the interests of the broader population, is examined in colonial Burma, where the intelligence services worked to prevent anti-government parties from contending the state's hegemony. Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee also refer to Gramscian theory in their histories of India, considering the colonial state's institutions, such as the law courts and parliaments among them, to be 'structures of collaboration', which, for indigenous subjects who worked with them, operated to foster hegemony.⁵⁵ Guha argues that opponents of colonialism who attempted to subvert the structures of collaboration were

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Stoler, "Perceptions of protest", 655.

⁵³ Cooper and Stoler, *Tensions of Empire*, 3.

⁵⁴ Chantal Mouffe, ed. *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (London: Routledge and Paul Kegan Ltd, 1979) and Anne Showstack Sassoon, ed. *Approaches to Gramsci* (London: Workers and Readers publishing cooperative society ltd. 1982).

⁵⁵ Guha, *Dominance without hegemony*, 128 and Partha Chatterjee, *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus, The Nation and its Fragments: colonial and Post-colonial Histories* (Oxford: Open University Press, 1999).

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countering the state's hegemony. Guha and Chatterjee's notion of the subaltern is discussed with reference to such groups of people in Burma. The intelligence services in Burma drew a distinction between the majority of people - the subalterns - and the nationalist groups that hoped to win influence among the subaltern groups. The intelligence services are discussed in the thesis as a means for the state to counter nationalists' efforts to provoke the subalterns to rise against the state in rebellion.

A wide range of literature discussing the history, theory and practice of intelligence gathering informs the analysis of the development of the colonial intelligence bureau in Burma. Authors investigating the role of the intelligence services in colonies provide comparative analysis for Burma's experiences of intelligence gathering. As well as Bayly, Martin Thomas' work on the history of the colonial security services in the British and French colonies in the Middle East discusses a number of themes which this thesis examines with regard to Burma. In particular, Thomas' discussion of the importance of the intelligence services to the colonial state's stability and endurance has informed the thesis' argument regarding the importance of the intelligence services to the colonial state in Burma. The limitations of colonial intelligence apparatuses – the inability to understand the population and the top down, imposed nature of the intelligence gathering apparatuses – which Thomas observes in Middle Eastern colonies, are explored in colonial Burma.⁵⁶

Georgina Sinclair, David Arnold, David Anderson and David Killingray review the history of policing in British colonies, arguing that the police were the primary means of upholding colonial rule.⁵⁷ This bolsters the thesis' argument that the army was not solely relied on to guarantee security in colonial Burma. The authors observe that intelligence gathering was a typical duty of police in the colonies. The thesis reviews the role of the police and intelligence gathering in Burma and draws comparisons with these authors' observations, finding that

⁵⁶ Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence*, 1 – 13.

⁵⁷ Georgina Sinclair, *At the End of the Line, Colonial Police Forces and the Imperial Endgame, 1945-1980* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), David Arnold, "Police and Colonial Control in Southern India," *Social Scientist*, 4, no. 12 (1976): 3-16 and Killingray and Anderson, eds., *Policing and Decolonisation*.

the police indeed had a key role in intelligence gathering. Martin Kolinsky's history of the development of intelligence in 1930s Palestine provides a comparison for the experiences of intelligence in Burma, as Palestine underwent major disorder at the same time as Burma experienced rioting and rebellion and, like Burma, overhauled its intelligence gathering capability in response.⁵⁸ Kolinsky's review of the army in maintaining order in relation to the police in Palestine, again strengthens the thesis' argument that the army was not the primary means of maintaining order in Burma.

Michael Herman's analysis of the theory of intelligence, its purpose, definition and the structure of intelligence gathering apparatuses is referred to in the thesis especially for his definition of the intelligence cycle - the gathering, processing and acting upon of intelligence - which is used as a model for the intelligence bureau developed in Burma.⁵⁹ The thesis refers to other literature exploring intelligence failure, as a product of institutional weakness, cognitive failure on the part of intelligence gatherers or the evasiveness of intelligence targets, to understand the nature of intelligence failure in colonial Burma. Erik J. Dahl's analysis of intelligence failure in 1983 Beirut on the part of American intelligence services failure to predict a terrorist attack is particularly fruitful.⁶⁰ Dahl discusses the failure of imagination by intelligence decision makers, who may receive accurate information but be unable to imagine the outcomes of that information. This thesis argues that the ultimate intelligence failure to predict the nature of the attack on Burma in 1942 was of this kind.

As the intelligence apparatus developed in colonial Burma had the purpose of preventing rebellion, literature exploring issues of intelligence, counter-insurgencies and rebellion is discussed in the thesis. Thomas Mockaitis examines the rebellion in Burma in 1930 in his work on British colonial counter-insurgency campaigns, alongside examples from other British colonies.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Martin Kolinsky, *Law, Order and Riots in Mandatory Palestine, 1928-1935* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993).

⁵⁹ Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁶⁰ Erik J. Dahl, "Warning of terror: Explaining the Failure of Intelligence Against Terrorism," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 28, no. 1 (2005): 31-55.

⁶¹ Thomas R. Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency 1919-60* (New York: Macmillan, 1990).

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Mockaitis' argument that the rebellion was defeated by using a set of tactics that were typical of British counter-insurgency campaigns is based on a limited reading of resources on the rebellion. This thesis provides a more in depth discussion of the rebellion and the role of intelligence in colonial Burma, referring to a broader range of primary sources, especially military and civil officials' private accounts of the rebellion. The thesis determines that Mockaitis' analysis of the rebellion is limited and he misunderstands the purpose of intelligence and the role of force in the rebellion.

Authors discussing other examples of insurgency campaigns and the use of intelligence inform the analysis of the rebellion in 1930 in the thesis. Arreguin-Toft surveys counter-insurgency campaigns and his observations of the use of force and population relocation in counter-insurgencies provide an explanation for their use in Burma.⁶² Similarly, Karl Hack reviews the use of force in colonial Malaya, arguing that it played a greater role than intelligence.⁶³ This supports the thesis' argument that force had a key role in defeating the rebellion in Burma, contrary to Mockaitis' argument. Another author reviewing the insurgency in Malaya, Phillip Deery, discusses the use of terminology by the intelligence services, and the role that language played in the counter-insurgency campaign.⁶⁴ Deery considers the use of certain terms by the intelligence services to have stemmed from their understanding of the political inclinations of insurgents. However, in contrast to this, and with reference to the work of Stoler and Guha, the thesis considers the use of terminology by the intelligence services to have been a product rather of the colonial state's prejudices and insecurities about colonial rule rather than an accurate analysis of events in society.

⁶² Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁶³ Karl Hack, "British Intelligence and counter-insurgency in the era of decolonisation: The Example of Malaya," *Intelligence and National Security*, 14, no. 2 (1999): 124 – 155.

⁶⁴ Phillip Deery, "The Terminology of Terrorism: Malaya, 1948-52", *Journal of South East Asian Studies* 34, no. 2 (2003): 231 – 247.

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Stathis N. Kalyvas' work on the occurrence of violence in civil warfare remarks on the centrality of intelligence gathering to the stability of political rule.⁶⁵ Kalyvas surveys a number of incidences of violence in examples of civil war, noting that reliable informers are necessary to ensure control over a population and that a breakdown in intelligence received by the political actor in control often results in the use of arbitrary violence to reassert control. Kalyvas' observations are used to provide an explanation for the use of state violence to reassert control in colonial Burma during the 1930s and further underpins the argument that violence by the state was the product of a loss of control of the information order rather than the primary means of enforcing order.

Historians and Political Scientists discussing colonial Burma make little or no reference to the development of intelligence and its use by the colonial state. This thesis amends this oversight, and contributes to an understanding of the nature of colonial rule in Burma, its modus operandi and ability to perpetuate its rule in the 1930s. Literature exploring the nature of the colonial state and its rule of indigenous society discusses the methods by which the state ruled society and how it perceived the population. In Burma, the intelligence services were the means by which the state understood society and bridged the gap between state and society. Examining the development of intelligence provides an understanding of the colonial state's relationship to the indigenous population. Texts on the theory and practice of intelligence provide definitions and comparative examples for the history of intelligence development in Burma. These three strands of reading reflect the arguments the thesis makes regarding Burma's history, the role of the colonial state in Burma and the central functions of Burma's colonial intelligence gathering apparatus.

Investigating intelligence gathering in Burma

Burma was annexed to the British Empire in three stages: 1825, when the first war with the Burmese Kingdom gained a few provinces administered by the East India Company; 1852 when another war with the Kingdom won the British

⁶⁵ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

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control of Lower Burma, and 1886 when Upper Burma was taken in war which dethroned the King of Burma and bought the whole country under British colonial administration as a province of India.⁶⁶ A bitter war of pacification ensued for three years, although remnants of the struggle continued for a full ten years following annexation. During this struggle, the British employed counterinsurgency tactics that were to be employed in the future to subjugate the population.

The tentative reforms of Indian governance during the early twentieth century impacted on Burma. The Montagu-Chelmsford reforms of 1918 were a step towards self-government in India. They were incorporated into the Government of India Act of 1919 which exempted Burma. Widespread nationalist agitation against this move in Burma forced the colonial administration to reconsider and in 1923 the Government of Burma Act was passed, and Burma received its own Governor and a legislative council that was filled by elected indigenous representatives in what was referred to as the diarchy government. Robert H. Taylor observes that this was the first time that the British had distinguished Burma from India and recognised that a different approach to governing the country was required.⁶⁷

However, these reforms did little to assuage the rising tide of Burman nationalism in the 1920s. The General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), the leading Burmese nationalist organisation of the day, composed of educated Burmans, hotly protested the 1923 Act.⁶⁸ A particularly politicised *Pongyi* (Buddhist monk) religious movement arose, instigating anti-tax campaigns and dissent against colonial rule. A number of *Pongyis* were incarcerated during these years, to widespread condemnation. The death of one prominent nationalist, U Wisara, from a hunger strike in jail in 1929, further inflamed nationalist hostility to colonial rule. Police records during the 1920s frequently noted grass-roots hostility to the colonial administration which often

⁶⁶ See, in particular, Dorothy Woodman, *The Making of Burma* (London: Cresset Press, 1962).

⁶⁷ Taylor, *The State in Burma*, 69.

⁶⁸ Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), 103.

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became violent.⁶⁹ The Burmese population suffered increased rents and indebtedness throughout the 1920s, grievances that the colonial administration did little to alleviate. In 1929, the impact of the Great Depression was felt as rice prices fell and peasants lost their land through foreclosure.⁷⁰ Internal conditions were ripe for tumult, and the British colonial government had little understanding of a population it had only recently acknowledged as politically distinct from that of India's.

Across the Empire, in colonies such as Cyprus, Palestine, Malaya and India, the Imperial administration faced great internal upheaval and agitation by rising nationalist, labour and peasant movements against colonial rule, requiring reforms to the security apparatuses in those colonies. Burma experienced one of the most bitter and widespread revolts against colonial rule in 1930, engendering major security reforms to secure colonial control, which this thesis examines. In chapter one the uprising against the government in Burma, known as the Saya San rebellion after the *Pongyi* who had inspired it, is described in detail. It is particularly discussed with reference to the lack of any intelligence on the outbreak of disorder. The rebellion was a shock to the government and they responded in a delayed haphazard manner. The rebels had managed to organise for months beforehand while the authorities remained in ignorance. The government had no control of the indigenous information order in the way that Bayly observed the colonial government had in colonial India, and rebels freely communicated anti-state ideas throughout society; the campaign to win back control for colonial order required the government to manage the information order and ensure that subversive ideas could no longer be expressed. Chapter one describes this process, as the army demolished the rebel's infrastructure in the countryside and the civil administration entered secure areas to re-establish control. Establishing an intelligence bureau that would report on local events was paramount in these efforts. All counter-rebellion activity was directed towards gaining control of the information order by destroying the rebels' control of it, and managing it for the purpose of

⁶⁹ BL IOR V/24/3242 Burma: Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1922-1933, 38.

⁷⁰ Brown, *Colonial Economy*, 31.

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colonial control. The necessity to manage the information order in Burma was the legacy of the rebellion that impacted on all subsequent security reforms. A functioning intelligence apparatus was required for this.

Chapter two discusses the legacy of the rebellion, following its end in 1932 and the government's efforts to ensure that it never recurred by establishing an intelligence bureau, preparation for which was underway by 1935, when Burma was expected to separate from India. From a review of the correspondence between the Governors of Burma and India and their counterparts in the India Office, London, it is evident that intelligence reform was deemed of major importance to prevent a recurrence of rebellion and ensure the stability of colonial rule. The government constructed an intelligence machine that would function throughout the country, gathering information on local events for a central intelligence bureau to collate and produce in a report for the Governor of Burma and his colleagues in India and London. This planning went on at different levels, as a temporary intelligence bureau was established and officers out in the provinces of Burma began the process of collecting intelligence for the bureau. These experiences provided the government with a reference for the future permanent intelligence bureau. With a functioning intelligence bureau during 1932-1935, greater volumes of information on the subject population was coming in, particularly regarding the rising nationalist groups in the country that were agitating against colonial rule. Targets that were of great concern to the colonial administration during the 1930s came to the awareness of the intelligence services in the immediate post-rebellion years.

In chapter three, the status of intelligence gathering in Burma from 1935-1937 is examined. The separation of the colonial administration in Burma from that of India was delayed from 1935 to 1937 when a parliament with a Burmese premier was first established. On separation a political intelligence bureau devised for the sole purpose of monitoring the political activity of indigenous Burmans began operating. The colonial government ensured that indigenous representatives had no participation in the construction of the bureau, working hard to exclude the bureau from parliamentary oversight. This saw the bureau secreted in the Defence Department where Burmans remained entirely ignorant

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of its operation. The role of the new intelligence bureau is particularly discussed with regard to the colonial army in Burma and the arguments of Furnivall, Taylor and Callahan. It is argued that rather than the army being the predominant means of control of the population, as these authors maintain, control of the information order – the state's ability to receive intelligence on local events especially – was the more important tool of control. Intelligence was already targeting nationalists who were considered potential instigators of rebellion, the bureau utilising informers and agents working in radical nationalist circles on separation. This chapter also reviews the contrast between the Delhi Intelligence Bureau and the intelligence bureau in Burma, which were entirely separated in 1937. While they were structurally very similar, and formed for very similar reasons, there were differences between them, especially in their responses to nationalism and to the increasing threat of Japanese imperialism to the British Empire.

In chapter four the events of the year 1938 are discussed in great detail. Widespread riots and long running strikes greatly undermined the government and resulted in often violent clashes between the security forces and protestors. The long running economic frustrations of the subaltern groups erupted, and a number of nationalist organisations competed to win the support of the subalterns. The grievances of the population had not been assuaged by separation. Those groups with the greatest sway over the subalterns were deemed the most worrisome threat and subjected to the most severe repression. The intelligence bureau failed to predict the undercurrents of disorder among the population in 1938 but the government and the security forces in Burma continued to rely on it as the most reliable means of understanding the population and indicating areas of concern. While the army and paramilitaries were deployed frequently during 1938, this did not reflect the state's reliance on those forces as a means of social control; rather, this chapter argues that the call out of force was an indication of failure to contain disorder within manageable limits. The intelligence bureau was expected to spearhead the drive to counter nationalism. Not only was subversive nationalism an increasing threat in 1938; the opening of the Burma-Yunnan road to transport arms to anti-

Introduction

Japanese Chinese nationalists in China had provoked the Japanese to take a greater interest in the internal domestic affairs of Burma.

Chapter five is the last chapter and it examines the final years of operation of the political intelligence bureau in Burma before the Japanese invasion in 1942 and flight of the British colonial administration to India. This chapter reviews the legacy of the disorder of 1938 - the greatest disturbance to colonial rule since the rebellion - for the colonial administration. Intelligence operations were expanded, in response to the events of 1938 and to the increasing threat of Japan to Burma's borders. Surveillance of nationalists was increased along with censorship and the arrests of agitators. The impact of heightened repression on nationalists is described; greater numbers of nationalist groups were organising and all expressed hostility to the state. Agitators began to organise against the state in increasingly conspiratorial and underground ways. The intelligence services, having only been established a few years previously, had little understanding of events in Burman society. The intelligence bureau's response to anti-state covert organisation was limited by their perceptions and preconceptions of Burmans and dissident activity. Predicting the outcomes of nationalist activity was increasingly difficult in those years. The intelligence bureau's role in aiding colonial security is assessed in comparison with the army again, which was of increasing concern in the lead up to war with Japan and the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939. The extent to which the intelligence services were undermined in their work by the covert organisation of Japanese intelligence operatives is also discussed. This chapter examines limitations of the intelligence bureau in understanding society in the lead up to the collapse of the colonial administration.

The conclusion summarises the preceding chapters and their outcomes. The preceding chapters are reviewed in light of the overarching objective of demonstrating the significance of the intelligence services to maintaining colonial rule in Burma. The history of the development of political intelligence gathering from its catalyst, the rebellion in 1930, through the construction of a functioning intelligence apparatus, the BDB's experiences in practice, and the limitations of such a bureau before its ultimate termination are all revisited here.

Introduction

The purposes behind intelligence development, its importance within the state's relationship to civil society and its use as an instrument of population control are reviewed in the light of the arguments advanced in the earlier chapters. Finally, the conclusion tries to make plain the wider relevance of a study of political intelligence in 1930s Burma to the fields of Burma studies, intelligence studies and colonial history.

The Saya San rebellion and the battle for the control of the information order



Figure 1. 90 Kyat Burmese currency note from 1987 depicting Saya San.

Introduction

The Saya San rebellion was a peasant uprising against British colonial rule in Burma in 1930. It constituted the greatest challenge to colonial authority in Burma in recent memory and, as Paul Kratoska observes in a history of nationalism in South East Asia during the 1930s, was 'the most spectacular if perhaps not ultimately the most significant manifestation of anti-colonial activity between 1885 and the Pacific War'.¹ However, the British should not have been surprised by the uprising as for the previous ten years anti-colonial agitation among the Burman population had been steadily increasing. The first indication of such trouble was in 1920 when the General Council of Buddhist Associations (GCBA), the foremost Burman nationalist organisation in the 1920s, had organised a widespread student strike against a University Act passed by the

¹ Paul Kratoska, "Nationalism and Modernist Reform," in *The Cambridge History of South East Asia Volume Two Part One: From c. 1800 to the 1930s* ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 286.

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colonial government which was perceived by Burmans as elitist and opposed to Burman interests.² As the introduction observes, Burma was governed as a province of India from 1885 until 1923 when the Dyarchy system of rule that had governed India since 1919 was extended to Burma and an elected Burman representative was placed at the head of a newly constituted parliament to govern the country in partnership with the British colonial governor.³ However, these reforms did nothing to appease nationalist concerns and the 1920s were punctuated by outbursts of unrest that highlighted the depth of antagonism between the British colonial government and the population of Burma.

In 1924 nationalists formed *Wunthanu Athins* (Patriotic Societies) throughout the towns and villages of Burma to provide Burmans with an alternative education to that provided by the schools run by the colonial administration. The Patriotic Societies also offered a means to organise support for impoverished peasant farmers.⁴ These associations were the focus of popular opposition to the colonial government and subjected to frequent repression by the colonial security forces during the 1920s. The *Athins* preached the ideals of autarchy, subsistence and Burman self-reliance and organised anti-tax campaigns against the government. They were also identified with vigorous anti-colonialism. Central Intelligence Department reports on the violence which had escalated throughout the 1920s noted a number of 'riots and attacks on government servants' which prompted the government to deploy '200 military police drafted into disaffected areas', a move with often violent consequences as police burned troublesome villages.⁵ When the rebellion erupted it drew on the resentment which had been simmering among the increasingly organised campaigns against government control in numerous villages throughout the Burmese interior over the previous ten years.

In 1928 the GCBA sought to present peasant grievances to government thereby applying pressure for reforms to ameliorate peasant living conditions. Their

² Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987),

³ G. E. Harvey, *British Rule in Burma, 1824-1942*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1946) 77.

⁴ Albert D. Moscotti, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Burma, 1917-1937* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1974), 33.

⁵ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 – 1932 Reports on the risings in Burma up to 03 May 1931, 665.

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central concerns were villagers' 'grievances against tax, indebtedness, government orders reserving timber areas' and the denial of 'villagers access to firewood'.⁶ To highlight these concerns, the GCBA delegated one of their members, Saya San, to investigate peasant conditions and draw up a report of his findings.⁷ However, at the end of his inquiry in 1929, the GCBA was divided into factions between those still prepared to collaborate with the colonial government and those determined to adopt a more firmly oppositional stance, and, as a result, the peasantry lost its political representation just as economic conditions declined sharply. In the following year the Great Depression saw a fall in rice prices which hurt peasant farmers severely and in 1930 there was an 'upward jump in foreclosures' and numerous tenants lost the land they had worked on for generations.⁸ Saya San's calls for rebellion found a receptive audience in such conditions and in October 1930 he called for men to take oaths and join an army to fight the government. However, it was not until late December that the first acts of violence took place when rebels attacked a Military Police post in a village in Tharawaddy Area killing a sub-divisional Police Officer.⁹ This marked the beginning of the so-called 'year of violence', which pitted vast swathes of rebel-held villages against government forces.

Final reviews of the rebellion listed '1,688 prisoners killed, 1,332 rebels, 126 rebels executed and 1,389 imprisoned'.¹⁰ So extensive was the unrest and so ruthless the repression it triggered that British Members of Parliament expressed grave concern in House of Commons debates in early March 1932 over the costs involved and the methods used to counter the rebellion.¹¹ Yet other scholars have suggested that the most remarkable aspect of the rebellion was its asymmetry and, in consequence, the remarkably long time that it took to restore imperial control. Michael Adas, for instance, notes that the colonial government 'equipped with airplanes, machine guns and other weapons of

⁶ Moscotti, *op. cit.*, 58.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁸ Ian Brown, *A Colonial Economy in Crisis: Burma's Rice Cultivators and the World Depression of the 1930s* (Oxford: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 39.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁰ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932 Letter from R. A. Butler, MP House of Commons, 29 May 1934, 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, House of Commons Question by Mr. Thomas C. Williams for 14 Mar. 1932, 113.

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modern warfare took two years to end a rebellion of several thousand', who were 'armed with spears'.¹²

To say that the rebellion had taken the colonial government by surprise might seem self-evident. However, this shock was a reflection of the colonial authorities' failure to engage with the indigenous population of Burma in order to trace the spread of opposition to British rule in the face of rapidly worsening socio-economic conditions. The failure itself was nothing new, but reflected shortcomings in British knowledge about the dependent populations of South Asia that, as Christopher Bayly notes, had been endemic since Burma's annexation to the Raj.¹³ The Great Depression of 1930 had a devastating impact on rice prices. Rice was Burma's most important export commodity and its fortunes on commercial markets affected much of the rural population. The high population density in central Burma and the concentration of land ownership in fewer hands created a large number of disaffected landless labourers increasingly aggrieved with the colonial government, whom they blamed both for their inability to work the land independently and for the decline of their real incomes as rice workers. Ian Brown's study of Burma's rice cultivators at the time of the rebellion identifies a link between the foreclosure on cultivators' land, their consequent economic insecurity and the powerful rural response to the call for rebellion.¹⁴ The state's failure to perceive the frustrations of the indigenous population left the authorities vulnerable.

Histories of Burma's development prior to the rebellion note the rising peasant anger against economic reforms introduced by colonial rule.¹⁵ Violence, anti-tax campaigns and often violent suppressions of rebellious villages had been a more or less constant feature of the preceding decade.¹⁶ The General Council of Buddhist Associations (GCBA), the leading Burman nationalist movement in the 1920s, had formed *Wunthanu Athins* (Patriotic Societies) throughout the

¹² Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: The Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), 192.

¹³ C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 126.

¹⁴ Brown, op. cit., 112.

¹⁵ Taylor, op. cit., 161.

¹⁶ see Moscotti, op. cit., 43-51.

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countryside. These peasants' associations became increasingly politicised and more strongly anti-government in sentiment as the Depression took hold of Burma's agricultural economy. Understanding little of their content or significance, the popularity of these movements none the less alarmed the British colonial authorities in Burma who took drastic steps to repress them, both by punitive policing operations and by applying the 1908 Indian Criminal Law Amendment Act to outlaw the *Athins*.¹⁷ The actions of the colonial police and paramilitaries were so severe that, in response, leading figures in the *Athins* movement delegated one of their members, Saya San (see figure 1), to inquire into the extent of police abuses in the countryside. While doing so, he made preparations for rebellion that would exploit the *Athins* as the means to concert nationwide opposition to the colonial administration. Robert H. Taylor observes that the repressive measures against the *Athins* left Burmans little outlet for the expression of political opposition other than through rebellion. Far from becoming a bridge between government and indigenous opinion, the *Athins* became the instrument by which the attempted overthrow of British rule would be attempted.¹⁸

Under the British, policy making in Burma was typically conducted with reference to Indian requirements.¹⁹ This was a matter of particular importance to the short-term origins of the Saya San uprising because, in 1929, the Simon Commission was established to examine constitutional reform in Imperial India.²⁰ The Commission advised that Burma be juridicially and administratively separated from India. Roundtable conferences held in London with Burman representatives failed to satisfy their demands for heightened autonomy within the structure of a Burma released from direct political control by the Government of India in Delhi, and Burmese spokesmen were anyway hostile towards separation. These powerful Burman sentiments were ignored. Indeed, the colony's internal stability was neglected in the rush to separation and the few institutions established to engage state with civil society were ill conceived and typically devised on an ad hoc basis. Reforms in Burma to bring the

¹⁷ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 – 1932 Reports on the risings in Burma up to 03 May 1931, 572.

¹⁸ Taylor, op. cit., 199.

¹⁹ Ibid, 69.

²⁰ Patrick French, *Liberty or Death* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 53

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trappings of representative government were thus something of an afterthought to constitutional reforms in India. More broadly, the level of protest in Burma over the greater rapidity of the reform process in India surprised the colonial authorities who made belated concessions to Burmese nationalists throughout the late 1920s.²¹ The inability of local colonial officials to forge contacts with notables, welfare organisations, and other representatives of indigenous civil society meant that violence became an increasingly frequent means of controlling dissent. Yet containing militant and well organised opposition during a full-scale rebellion proved something beyond the means of Britain's minimal military presence in Burma and necessitated the establishment of conduits to indigenous society that would alert the authorities to potential dissidence allowing the affected area to be isolated or contained with minimal resource expenditure.

In attempting to establish more intimate relations with – or, at least, to gain better knowledge of - indigenous groups in order to minimise the occurrence and scale of disorder, the authorities departed from conventional means of armed counter-insurgency and waged a political struggle for the effective dominance of indigenous society. This battle for hegemonic population control was intrinsic to the nature of colonial warfare as Gramsci observed.²² The aim of such efforts was to ensure that civil society complied with government directives regardless of any popular dislike of such policies and the key tool of this political struggle was the intelligence services. However, as we have seen, this was a battle only engaged late in the history of colonial Burma where anti-state forces had organised unnoticed amongst the population until they presented a strategic threat to the state under the leadership of Saya San in 1930. Developing a functioning security force apparatus to maintain state control thus only assumed high priority within colonial policy-making during the rebellion by which time the authorities viewed it as the optimum means of asserting – or reasserting - long-term colonial hegemony. This was in line with other imperial experiences. In Mandate Palestine in August 1929 the Jerusalem High Commission proved completely unprepared for large-scale inter-communal

²¹ Taylor, *op. cit.*, 121.

²² Antonio Gramsci in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* eds. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 229.

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violence both in the city and in other market centres such as Hebron and Ramallah, and, as Martin Kolinsky notes, the ‘ferocity of the riots came as a shock to all’ and ‘exposed the utter inadequacy of security arrangements’.²³ The so-called Wailing Wall incidents also stimulated a major review of intelligence gathering in Palestine to prevent future outbreaks of disorder.²⁴ This was soon to have ripple effects on colonial security arrangements elsewhere.

Establishing a functioning intelligence apparatus meant engaging with the local information order, in other words, with the sectors of society that possessed and communicated information among colonial subjects about everything from local politics, to changes in food prices, and rumours of dissent to planned protest. Typically it fell to the colonial police to perform this function, as studies of colonial policing note.²⁵ Acquiring information from indigenous representatives was always crucial to imperial control and security force targeting.²⁶ Those indigenous representatives embodied the most fragile nexus of colonial control and, when they were threatened or eliminated, disorder often erupted with terrifying speed.²⁷ In Burma’s case, this disorder manifested itself in the form of a peasant rebellion of a scale unseen since the late nineteenth century. The army and police force, in the main staffed by Indian recruits, were desperately unpopular and unreliable, leaving colonial rule especially vulnerable to unforeseen outbreaks of violent disorder. If Saya San was especially shocking, more minor outbreaks of rural dissent were frequent, however, and Burma already had a reputation as one of the most restive and volatile of the British Empire’s domains. The police had often proved inadequate to the task of maintaining civil order during the 1920s and, in such cases, paramilitary auxiliaries were hastily deployed to contain violent dissent. Administration

²³ Martin Kolinsky, *Law, Order and Riots in Mandatory Palestine, 1928-1935* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1993), chapters 1 to 3.

²⁴ Gad Kroizer, ‘From Dowbiggin to Tegar: revolutionary change in the colonial police in Palestine during the 1930s,’ *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 32, no. 2 (2004): 115-33.

²⁵ David Killingray and David M. Anderson, introduction to *Policing and Decolonisation: Nationalism, Politics and the Police, 1917-65*, eds. David Killingray and David M. Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 1-17.

²⁶ See Martin Thomas’ *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial disorder after 1914* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 2008) for a review of colonial states’ reliance on intelligence.

²⁷ C. A. Bayly, “Knowing the Country: Empire and information in India,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 27, no. 1 special issue: How Social, Political and Cultural Information is Collected, Defined, Used and Analysed (1993): 3 – 43 at 5.

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reports and the accounts of visitors to Burma noted the general popular hostility shown towards the police. Orwell recalled the hatred the population felt for him in his role as colonial police officer in Burma where he was 'hated by large numbers of people... As a police officer I was an obvious target and was baited whenever it seemed safe to do so'.²⁸ Given the critical role of the police in intelligence gathering, the nature of the state's engagement with indigenous society was necessarily limited. Intelligence services barely operated as an integrated institutional apparatus, nor did colonial officials regard their creation as a priority. The conscious development of specialised intelligence gathering and its role in suppressing political dissent was only to emerge in reaction to a catastrophic – if temporary - loss of colonial control over large swathes of territory that would occur in 1930.

This loss of control first manifested itself as a breakdown of what residual ties existed to the information order within Burmese civil society. Not surprisingly, a central feature of the Saya San rebellion would be the contest between the colonial authorities and rebellious factions for control of the information order. It follows that a useful measure of the state's weakness lay in its remoteness from that information order. Ranajit Guha observes of insurgencies in the British Raj that they were never 'absent minded' or spontaneous but were meticulously planned, taking 'weeks, months, for deliberations to build a consensus until the community was mobilised for action by the use of primordial networks and many different means of verbal and non-verbal communication'.²⁹ Where the state's relationship with local representatives was compromised, the state had no insight into these primordial networks and indigenous anti-state actors could organise local networks of communication through which subversive ideas permeated and seditious plans were formulated. The colonial state's greatest weakness was its sparseness here. As Frederick Cooper observes, colonial states were 'thin': officials were few in number, the rule of European law was typically compromised by some measure of surviving customary law, and political control, such as it was, had to be negotiated with local indigenous

²⁸ George Orwell, *Shooting an Elephant in The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: An Age Like This, 1920-1940*, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Penguin, 1970), 265.

²⁹ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Bombay Calcutta Madras: Oxford University Press, 1983), 9.

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representatives and often substantially delegated to them.³⁰ Set against this, networks of communication in indigenous society were manipulated by opposition groups to strengthen their ability to struggle against colonial state power. In Burma the outcome was the 1930 uprising which, for several months at least, the colonial authorities could not contain. Rebels and the state both understood the importance of the information order in managing control of society but it was the rebels that won control precisely because the state had left itself so vulnerable through its inadequate intelligence capacity. Plainly, the existing means of colonial overlordship were inadequate, so a new apparatus for the control of the information order would have to be established.

Reviews of the Saya San rebellion emphasise the government's reliance on Indian Army units to suppress rebel activity. Mary P. Callahan regards this as a typical feature of the colonial state in Burma where military dominance was crucial to control.³¹ British imperial security forces were one of two opposing blocks attempting to achieve *de facto* political supremacy. Callahan follows Robert H. Taylor who maintains that the 'great strength of the colonial state was its external sources of military power' while 'the great weakness of the colonial state was its inability to sustain support, either active or passive, from the indigenous population'.³²

Counter-insurgency methods were, of course, more complex in nature than the mere ability to conduct repressive army sweeps through dissident areas and, in the absence of overwhelming military might, the manipulation of public opinion was critical to maintain colonial authority intact. Colonial officials themselves recognised this after the outbreak of rebellion, considering intelligence to be the greatest means of monitoring, and in turn, regulating public behaviour. Forms of Burmese rebellion were, in addition, traditional insofar as they built upon a long experience of guerrilla tactics and jungle fighting. Conventional warfare conducted by large columns of troops was not the best tool to meet this. The

³⁰ Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge and History*, (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 2005), 184.

³¹ See Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2003).

³² Taylor, *op. cit.*, 98-9.

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units deployed in Burma had to adjust their counter-insurgency response accordingly. Other reviews of British imperial counterinsurgency strategy have identified intelligence gathering and minimum force responses as paramount in containing dissent. Mockaitis for one regards these principles as the key to defeating the rebellion in Burma.³³ However, where rebels had managed to present a greater strategic threat to the colonial government the application of overwhelming force did have a role. Defeating the Saya San rebellion proved to be a multi-layered affair but the colonial government emerged from the process convinced that something had to be done to restore the administration's grip over the rural interior without any repetition of such large-scale military deployments.

Breaking the rebels' hold over the information order was the first step in enabling the authorities to assert their own influence over that order. Any such project was more than just a counter-insurgency tactic: it was a long-term colonial project. Intelligence became the backbone of the day-to-day administration of colonial control, not just a political expedient to dampen down dissent. By 1931 then, more systematic use of intelligence as a tool for the control of the information order was emerging as a new feature of British colonialism in Burma. Even so, one must not go too far in this depiction. Developing an 'intelligence machine' might have been the authorities' ideal, but it was questionable how much they could achieve in a country where the occupiers had a history of ignorance of local attitudes and conditions, and consequently of bad relations with the population.³⁴

State control of the information order and subaltern frustrations in the lead up to the Saya San Rebellion

As noted above, Christopher Bayly notes the crucial role of information manipulation in colonial India, where such manipulation of indigenous social

³³ Thomas R. Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency 1919-60* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), 7.

³⁴ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 03 Feb. 1932, 129.

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networks of communication became central to imperial rule.³⁵ Manipulation was engineered through the collection of information and its regulation by the colonial state. Colonial officials worked with indigenous representatives to establish conduits of information to government. Bayly regards this as key to the entire colonial project. Writing about early to mid-nineteenth century India, Bayly suggests that efforts to meld with the indigenous information order and, ultimately, to manipulate it to colonial advantage in Burma failed. A review of post-World War One Burma demonstrates that a chronic dearth of reliable information about local opinion persisted up to the eve of the Saya San rebellion. Indeed, one might go further: the failure to establish state-directed control of the information order lay behind the outbreak of rebellion in 1930. Neglect of the control over the communication of political ideas alerted the authorities to the importance of the intelligence services as a tool of political warfare against indigenous society – but only retrospectively.

Guha considers this mobilisation of society to be the fundamental constituent of cultural - and, with it, political - hegemony.³⁶ Hegemony is here used in the sense in which Gramsci termed the consent among civil society to the worldview of a dominant social group or class.³⁷ Peasant leaders and nationalist intellectuals attempted to organise the masses to 'destroy the structures of collaboration by which colonialism had hoped to endow its dominance with hegemony'.³⁸ In Burma during the 1920s for instance, the GCBA nationalists sought to mobilise the country's subaltern groups in support of their aims. The colonial structures of collaboration were the legislative councils, the law courts, and the fiscal-military arms of the state as represented by tax collectors, district officers and army recruiters. Compliance with their demands was tantamount to the population's acceptance of colonial rule, the long-term security of which required shutting out nationalist opponents from the rural majority population.

³⁵ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 3.

³⁶ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without hegemony: history and power in colonial India* (London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 102.

³⁷ Thomas R. Bates, "Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 36, no. 2 (1975): 351 – 366, at 352.

³⁸ Guha, *op. cit.*, 128.

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It would be going too far to suggest that colonial intelligence gathering did not exist at all prior to the rebellion. Tentative steps towards the specialisation of intelligence as a branch of police activity resulted in the separation of the Burma Criminal Investigation Department's (CID) intelligence and reporting branches from its criminal detection branch in 1924. In 1926 an independent intelligence branch reporting directly to government took shape.³⁹ The legislative council in Burma frequently condemned the CID thereafter for its role in political suppression rather than adhering to its nominal role as an aid to criminal policing.⁴⁰ The legislators' disquiet confirmed that intelligence was becoming a distinct means of political control in the 1920s. This developed in parallel with the rise of the *Wunthanu Athins* (peasant associations) which provided a network of communication between Burmese villages that the colonial security forces were failing to infiltrate and contain. The *Athins* were subsequently blamed for instances of collective protest that led to the callout of the Burma Military Police (BMP). A paramilitary gendarmerie designed for the rapid suppression of hostilities after the occupation of Burma, the gendarmerie remained in service, its continued existence justified as an agency dedicated to the management of organised dissent by violent suppression.

Confirming Guha's analysis mentioned above, the rebellion that broke out in 1930 was not a sudden occurrence, but had fermented among the membership of the *Athins* over several months. Histories of the rebellion observe that Saya San had been organising the *Athins* for rebellion since 1929.⁴¹ It was an extreme point on a continuous spectrum that ranged from non-violent political mobilisation to organised violence. The colonial authorities in turn utilised violence to suppress it. Hardly remarkable one might say, but, as Callahan notes, many of the colonial state's previous encounters with the indigenous Burmese also took place at the end of a gun.⁴² This was certainly true of its initial forays into Burmese territory, whether for purposes of taxation, land

³⁹ BL IOR V/24/3242 Burma: Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1922-1933, 70.

⁴⁰ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 – 1932, Extract from the Official Report of the Burma Legislative Council Debates 20 Feb. 1931, 200.

⁴¹ Erik Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1965), 160.

⁴² Callahan, *op. cit.*, 14

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settlement or population control, and the police, as the BMP demonstrates, retained a heavily militaristic character. However, this does not imply that the BMP, and other ethnic paramilitaries, should be viewed as conventional military institutions. Kalyvas regards such militias as political institutions, 'part of a strategy of local rule and state building'.⁴³ Struggle and repression always retained a political character albeit at times veering towards more violent militaristic forms. As Gramsci observed, 'political struggle always has a military substratum', and this substratum came closer to the surface during rebellions.⁴⁴

As Sir Percival Griffiths, chronicler of the Indian police noted, the police in Burma, whilst governed from India, were fundamentally different in character from their Indian cousin. The most basic function of the Burma Police was 'defence, rather than law and order'.⁴⁵ But senior police officers' conceptions of what this meant were changing. In 1924, at the very moment that the colonial government was taking its first tentative steps towards greater specialisation and professionalization in intelligence gathering, internal police administration reports described Burma as in 'a state of transition between old autocratic rule, in which lawlessness was put down with a strong hand, and democratic rule in which law and order can only be maintained chiefly by [control of] public opinion'.⁴⁶ The development of intelligence was predicated on the necessity of moulding that public opinion. Intelligence served to move the dial of control along the spectrum away from the extreme of rebellion in indigenous society towards the containment of dissent through the early allocation of resources; put simply: intelligence was political fire-fighting before the blaze became unmanageable. Civil disorder was not only anticipated, it was normalised, factored into police operational activity as something to be expected and controlled. Rebellion, however, was to be prevented outright through effective use of intelligence to keep civil disorder at smaller and more containable levels.

⁴³ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 107.

⁴⁴ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 230.

⁴⁵ Sir Percival Griffiths, *To Guard My People, the History of the Indian Police* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1971), 196.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 207.

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Gramsci observed that the nature of occupation and conflict in colonial states is complex. Conventional warfare waged against the country's army is replaced by political warfare waged against the civil society of a dependent population.⁴⁷ In fact, things were not quite so simple; the 1920s development of the intelligence branch of the Burma CID did not signify a simple substitution of militaristic forms of control with political forms of control, something that would have been more obviously in conformity with Gramsci's predictions. Certainly, the *Wunthanu Athins*, accused of engaging in 'Irish style terrorism', were severely repressed.⁴⁸ Village burnings, the forcible relocation of rural populations, and temporary occupation by BMP units of dissident regions were conducted under the Punitive Village Act, a highly coercive piece of legislation dating from the conquest period and passed by the colonial government in 1887.⁴⁹ However, in the 1920s there was mounting disquiet among officials in Rangoon about the use of such methods and a consensus emerged that other, less violent means of political control were needed. As Parimal Ghosh reminds us, the Athins' objectives were, after all, 'political, viz. to resist and break down the power of the headmen and the local officials and to take over that power themselves' with officials describing them as 'village soviets...[waiting for] a local Lenin to take command'.⁵⁰ Control of the information order became a priority when the authorities recognised the 'very rapid spread of the agitation, grown up... under a veil of secrecy'.⁵¹ This observation parallels Bayly's description of the rapid transmission of subversive ideas in colonial India that so unnerved officials there.⁵² Manipulating these currents of indigenous communication was crucial to maintaining order and the government turned more systematically to the identification and recruitment of indigenous notables to report on the activities of villagers. Until colonial authority made itself felt through such intermediaries, the population was one of 'poor but free peasants not constrained by any power domain [and] constituting powerful groupings for peasant uprisings'.⁵³

⁴⁷ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 229.

⁴⁸ BL IOR V/24/3242 Burma: Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1922-1933, 24.

⁴⁹ Taylor, op. cit., 186.

⁵⁰ Ghosh, op. cit., 130.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Bayly, "Knowing the Country: Empire and information in India", 4.

⁵³ Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars in the Twentieth Century* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971).

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Paradoxically, however, a major obstacle to the colonial administration's attempt to achieve greater control of the information order in the 1920s was the local village headmen appointed for this purpose. Already 'employed' to assist district administrators in criminal policing and rural tax collection, these traditional authority figures, classic 'indigenous auxiliaries', were often individuals much-maligned by Burmese villagers. Indeed, assassinations of headmen became increasingly commonplace as the decade progressed. To make matters worse, the *Athins* usually filled the local power vacuums that resulted, and, as a result, were well on their way to establishing an administration that paralleled the colonial government by the end of the 1920s. Political and administrative reforms enacted during this period to co-opt Burmese representatives and entrench colonial rule in indigenous society could not assuage Burmese hostility to their British overseers.

The indigenous population, then, remained something of a mystery to colonial officials, as James C. Scott observes in a review of Orwell's experiences in Burma: 'behind every anti-European act was a far more elaborate hidden transcript, an entire discourse linked to Burman culture, religion and experience of colonial rule'.⁵⁴ This transcript was not available to officials, Scott notes, 'except through spies'.⁵⁵ Without an efficient spy network or, less sensationally, without a network of reliable indigenous informants, basic information about the working lives, the political intentions, and the most pressing grievances of the poor, rural majority in Burma's society was lacking. While there were certainly paid police informants in various districts, plus the headmen who liased with touring officers, dedicated spies were less likely to come forward when doing so would make them targets of reprisal. As Stathis N. Kalyvas' study of violence in civil warfare observes, the contending power needs to assert its control of an area before informers feel secure enough to come forward. In Burma this control was lacking, leaving the government vulnerable to a loss of vital intelligence even from the partial networks that it had created thus far.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance, Hidden Transcripts* (London: Yale University Press, 1990), 15.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Kalyvas, *op. cit.*

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Throughout the British Empire, colonial police were at the vanguard of intelligence gathering, 'forced closer to the forces of nationalist politics and anti-colonial protest than any other arm of government'.⁵⁷ What, then, was to be done when the police were hated? Administrators in Burma during the 1920s observed widespread popular hostility to the police that made the construction of a reliable information order difficult.⁵⁸ Local antipathy to the police was voiced in the legislative council where Burmese members called for reductions to the police budget, only to see their requests vetoed by the Governor, Sir Charles Innes.⁵⁹ Efforts to improve efficiency in the police service backfired and led to a rise in violent crime, put down by the paramilitary BMP. Other outbreaks of disorder also occasioned BMP intervention, such as the rebellion staged by a mystic leader in Shwebo, Sagaing district in 1928, when a pretender to the throne rallied Burmans in a call to rebellion, only to be swiftly suppressed by the BMP when few others joined his ranks.⁶⁰

As these examples imply, the political intelligence branch of the CID that existed prior to the rebellion was ill prepared to take the lead in advising on the means necessary to restore political control in the Burmese interior. Burmese and Indian police officers staffed its branches. Typical duties included note-taking at nationalist meetings and conferences. A running complaint throughout police administration reports at this time was the understaffing of the intelligence branches and the onerous, monotonous nature of the work done.⁶¹ Immediately prior to the start of the 1930 rebellion, the CID was largely pre-occupied with efforts to contain Indian and Burmese nationalist activity, particularly that of the GCBA.⁶² This continued until the intelligence branch was overwhelmed by the outbreak of a riot in Rangoon. Local clashes between Indian and Burmese

⁵⁷ Anderson and Killingray, *Policing and Decolonisation*, 1.

⁵⁸ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 – 1932 CID report on Burma, causes of the Tharrawaddy rebellion, attached by Chief Secretary to the Governor of Burma in a letter to the Secretary of the Government of India Home Department 31 Mar. 1931, 665.

⁵⁹ Ibid, Extract from the Official Report of the Burma Legislative Council Debates 20 Feb. 1931, 202.

⁶⁰ John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1965), 261.

⁶¹ BL IOR V/24/3242 Burma: Police Department, Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1922-1933, 51.

⁶² BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 – 1932 CID report on Burma, causes of the Tharrawaddy rebellion, attached by Chief Secretary to the Governor of Burma in a letter to the Secretary of the Government of India Home Department 31 Mar. 1931, 671.

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dockworkers spiralled out of control into a race riot. It took two days to end the rioting by which time even official accounts admitted that 'several hundreds' had been killed.⁶³ Apparently disconnected from the established nationalist threat, the riot caught the intelligence branch unprepared and they immediately requested extra staff from other branches of the CID.

While the rebellion forced the government to innovate in the domain of intelligence gathering to assist the counter-insurgency, the riot was likewise an 'expression of colonial hostility'. As Michael Adas observes, the rioters targeted Indians who were considered to benefit from favourable colonial treatment.⁶⁴ This was true in rural Burma as well as urban areas. The Indian 'Chettyar' class, for instance, a group of mainly South Indian bankers and money lenders, dominated the rural credit market, lending money to Burmese tenants to farm the land. When the Depression broke tenants were unable to keep up debt repayments to their *Chettyar* creditors and so received no further advances. Frequently, peasant smallholders lost the land originally leased to them.⁶⁵ The rebellion and the riot were responses to these pressures. Brown observes that nowhere else in South East Asia was the population as burdened by debts to a moneylending elite like the *Chettyars*.⁶⁶ This made them more likely to respond to the call for rebellion and also made Indians a particular target for violence, as several local colonial officials noted.⁶⁷ Accurately foreshadowing the bloody riot between Burmans and Indians, in 1938 Brigadier Cummings, head of the armed forces in Burma during the rebellion, remarked immediately after the uprising that the 'communal tension' between Burmans and Indians, was 'the next greatest danger' to colonial authority aside from the nationalist challenge.⁶⁸ Evidently, the two were becoming more closely inter-linked. Maurice Collis, a colonial official living in Rangoon during the riots of 1930 considered the 'massacre an aspect of insurgent nationalism' and Khin Yi's history of Burman

⁶³ Cady, *op. cit.*, 303.

⁶⁴ Adas, *The Burma Delta*, 199.

⁶⁵ Brown, *op. cit.*, 118.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁶⁷ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 – 1932 Report on the rebellion in Burma up to 03 May 1931, presented by the Secretary of State for India to Parliament in June 1931, 409.

⁶⁸ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862, War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932, Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 03 Feb. 1932, 101.

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nationalism notes that the rising nationalist 'Thakins' (Masters) exploited inter-communal frictions, making Burmans' economic grievances a political cause.⁶⁹

It was too much for the CID to cope with. Foremost among their other responsibilities in the same year was tracking the activities of the Bengal Revolutionary Party whose members were operating underground in Burma having fled from India.⁷⁰ This pointed to a deeper jurisdictional problem. The government of India, themselves faced with a long-term Bengali insurgency, often prescribed intelligence priorities in Burma. And the Indian administration was desperate for information about the activities of the Bengali revolutionaries in exile and so required the Burmese intelligence branch's assistance. Overburdened, understaffed and encumbered with unwelcome responsibilities to its parent administration in India, Burma's security service bureaucracy suffered from the paucity of its intelligence contacts closer to home within indigenous society.

If this explains why the CID failed to prevent the Rangoon rioting, it does not entirely explain what inspired the clashes themselves. Barriers to administrative advancement were certainly part of the explanation. The Burmese were displaced by educated Indian immigrants who formed a more privileged administrative class and were favoured by the colonial government as junior clerks.⁷¹ There is a parallel to be drawn here with John Lonsdale and Bruce Berman's analysis of the late colonial state in Kenya. They note that the colonial government 'was not a disinterested arbiter between conflicting interests of civil society'; instead, it favoured one sector of society over another in a divide and rule strategy that was integral to colonial governance.⁷² This seems to have been the case in Burma where, in addition to the exclusion of young, educated Burmans from clerical positions in the junior ranks of government, rural

⁶⁹ Maurice Collis, *Trials in Burma* (London: Faber and Faber, 1938), 157; Khin Yi, *The Dobama Movement in Burma (1930-1938)* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 4.

⁷⁰ BL IOR V/24/3242 Burma: Police Department, Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1922-1933, 51.

⁷¹ Taylor, *op. cit.*, 111.

⁷² John Lonsdale and Bruce Berman, "Coping with the Contradictions: The Development of the Colonial State in Kenya," *Journal of African History*, 20, no. 4 (1977): 487-505 at 504.

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frustrations over the immigration of Indian labourers in Burma mounted as the Depression increased the competition for work among landless labourers.

It was the combination of these two factors that produced the 1930 riots. Burmans were also barred from membership of the armed forces and the security forces, each of which were composed instead of Indians and favoured members of Burma's ethnic minority groups. Put simply, the Burmese were alienated from the institutions of their country. Even so, the intelligence services failed to anticipate the outbreak of civil unrest, demonstrating remarkably little awareness of Burmese political concerns. Maurice F. Collis, a judge in colonial Burma during the riots, observed that the CID's attention was at the time fixed elsewhere: on Indian nationalist speakers visiting Rangoon.⁷³ As suggested by the example of Bengali revolutionary exiles mentioned above, Indian security concerns overrode all others. Collis provided other insights into the colonial state's failure to engage civil society and learn about its activity. Marketplace rumours of looming disorder, though widespread, were ignored, Collis observed.⁷⁴ And Collis, like Orwell, remarked on the authorities' ignorance of Burmese culture. During a pageant in central Burma held by the Burmans in August in 1930, prior to the outbreak of rebellion, a call for war was declared. Police officers who observed the event were unsure whether these rallying cries were merely part of the pageant.⁷⁵ Burmese radicals and nationalists employed their cultural heritage and theology to obscure their political motives and plans from the authorities. Without understanding Burmese culture and religion the intelligence services remained blind to Burmese plans for rebellion. Burmese cultural practices and religious metaphors made up a large part of the 'hidden transcript' utilised by the ruled to communicate clandestinely. The Burmese used mythical and religious symbols and allusions the powerful symbolism of which was completely lost on the colonial security services.

As we have seen, the intelligence services in 1930 were not well placed to aid the struggle for colonial hegemony in Burma. Parimal Ghosh notes that

⁷³ Collis, *op. cit.*, 91.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 161.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 209.

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outbreaks of resistance to colonial rule prior to the rebellion were local in nature, manifesting themselves in criminal activity, attacks on headmen, cattle rustling and other low level criminal behaviour before unifying through the *Wunthanu Athins* to become manifest in rebellion against the government.⁷⁶ The majority of the population were perhaps not such willing collaborators with the rebels, as intelligence at the time suggested or as Brown's review of the causes of the rebellion considers.⁷⁷ However, thanks to the *Thakins*, what had previously been isolated acts of anti-colonial violence were supplanted in 1930 by unprecedented coordination of otherwise disparate local disorder.⁷⁸

A challenge to state power: rebel control of the information order in central Burma

It was on 21 December 1930 that the focal point of dissent moved from isolated but widespread acts of violence to fully-fledged rebellion and the establishment of a parallel rebel administration. Following a long line of pretenders to the throne since the annexation of Burma and the exile of the King in 1885, Saya San had already proclaimed himself Burma's monarch on 28 October 1930. The GCBA, still outwardly the mainstream, moderate voice of elite Burmese opinion had by this point divided over the issue of compromise with the colonial authorities and was a spent force.⁷⁹ The widespread Burman antagonism to the likely terms of separation as emerging from the early deliberations of the Simon Commission added to the temptation of more extreme political alternatives.⁸⁰ There is some debate over the role of taxation in exacerbating the rebellion, but it is enough here to note that the decision to take up arms against the British was ordered by prominent rebel leader Myat Aung after a petition against taxes was ignored by the authorities.⁸¹ All the preparations and networks of communication developed in previous years were now utilised, as trained

⁷⁶ Ghosh, *op. cit.*, 14.

⁷⁷ BL IOR L/MIL/7/19659 Report on Operations in connection with the rebellion, Brigadier Peter Cummings, Commander in Chief 26 Dec. 1930 – 25 Mar. 1932, 2; Brown, *op. cit.*, 112.

⁷⁸ Kalyvas, *op. cit.*, 22.

⁷⁹ Moscotti, *op. cit.*, 35.

⁸⁰ Collis, *op. cit.*, 161.

⁸¹ Brown, *op. cit.*, 73, 118; and BL IOR/L/PJ/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 – 1932 Origin and Causes of Burma Rebellion, Dec. 1930, 25.

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cadres took up arms. Villages were raided for arms and ammunition and telegraphy stations were destroyed.⁸²

Key to the rebels' successful uprising was their control of the information order. Rebel leaders communicated their ideas and instructions throughout rural society whilst, at the same time, disrupting the government's communication links. The rebellion was a rare moment in colonial rule when, to quote James C. Scott, 'the often hidden transcript [of popular resistance] is spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power'.⁸³ From the perspective of government security agencies, the rebellion appeared to have erupted from nowhere. Yet in the background was a complex tapestry of ideas and social networks of communication about which the colonial authorities had no insight. Governor Sir Charles Innes wrote to the Government of India Home Department observing that 'whether the District Police should have received information of the outbreak is a matter which will form the subject of a subsequent enquiry'.⁸⁴ Brigadier Cummings, meanwhile, described the situation in the interior as one where 'in the disaffected districts of Burma the authorities were not confronted with ordinary civil commotion. They were dealing with the armed insurgents in entire rebellion against the government'.⁸⁵ The colonial authorities at best maintained a minimal presence in the day-to-day lives of the Burmese villagers and had relied on the fleeting, if repressive, presence of the army and paramilitaries to crack down on pre-rebellion dissent. Evidently, this was not enough. The colonial state's 'thinness' had allowed a number of gaps to open up where opponents could mobilise unnoticed.

Cooper observes that as a result of this administrative weakness, local village elders, chiefs, or others who the authorities considered influential, were relied on to maintain a veneer of colonial rule at local level.⁸⁶ Colonial administrative

⁸² Griffiths, *op. cit.*, 52.

⁸³ James C. Scott *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (London: Yale University Press, 1990), xiii.

⁸⁴ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 – 1932 Letter from the Governor of Burma Sir Charles Innes to the Government of India, Home Department, 02 Mar. 1931, 766.

⁸⁵ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932, Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 26 Jun. 1931, 50.

⁸⁶ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 184.

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manpower was too minimal to provide this authority alone. Not surprisingly, once the rebellion broke out, it was exactly these individuals – already much resented as we have seen - who were attacked by the rebels. Orders were given to kill the headmen and the ten house gaungs (local policemen) as well as government informers.⁸⁷ The rebels, it seemed, were better apprised of the government's 'thinness' and worked to strip away its presence entirely.⁸⁸ Police reports noted that headmen were subject to numerous attacks in the first days and weeks of the uprising and district officials recorded that many headmen simply abandoned their posts instantly once the violence erupted, preferring to cooperate with the rebels.⁸⁹ In sum, the most crucial vestiges of colonial rule were quickly destroyed on the outbreak of rebellion.

The rebels further demonstrated their awareness of the crucial role of the information order in either sustaining or undermining colonial rule by ordering the assassination of government spies and informers. Cummings reported that the 'rebels had spies amongst the villagers who gave information regarding the movements of military and civil forces'.⁹⁰ And Arthur John Stanley White, District Commissioner of Thayetmyo, observed from Mindon in the heart of rebel-held territory that 'information is difficult to get partly because villagers can move about with a Galon (rebel) pass' and that in Allanmyo sub division, 'rebels deal regularly and without mercy with informers'.⁹¹ Denying the colonial state access to, and therefore knowledge of, its dependent population denied it power.

The colonial state's management of the information order was entirely inadequate as the vulnerability of local headmen and other officials demonstrated. Within the legislative council, members stated that the 'police

⁸⁷ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932, Burma situation report for week ending 28 Aug. 1931 338.

⁸⁸ Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, 92.

⁸⁹ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932, Origin and Causes of Burma Rebellion 1930-1932, Government of Burma, 1934, CID in Burma on the causes of the rebellion 26 Mar. 1931, 662 and BL IOSM Mss Eur E244/2, Papers of John Keith Stanford (1892-1971), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1919-38 Correspondence and papers from the office of the Deputy Commissioner, Myitkina report to the Commissioner, 22 Aug. 1933, 127.

⁹⁰ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932, Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 09-14 Sep. 1931, 311.

⁹¹ BL IOSM Mss Eur E356 A. J. S. White Collection: papers of Arthur John Stanley White (b 1896), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1922-38, comprising letters, reports and memoirs FF1, 1.

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intelligence department has broken down and the government must do something in the future... township officers, village headmen, ten house gaungs should have been able to find the information but could not'.⁹² Here the legislative council members delineated the individuals expected to provide the state with the information required to prevent rebellion. Burma's standing military forces were also inadequate to the task of suppressing the rebellion, which required the deployment of two further brigades from India. The fight-back began when the 2/15th Punjabis were brought in to work alongside the Burma Rifle Brigades (largely composed of Indian troops) and irregular forces (paramilitary formations made up of ethnic minority groups) to attack the rebel bases at Alaungtang shortly after the outbreak of rebellion.⁹³

This counter-insurgency never developed into a struggle resembling conventional warfare between two opposing armies. Indeed, Myat Aung quickly ordered the rebels to adopt guerrilla tactics on their defeat in the open field as a standing army.⁹⁴ The rebels avoided anything like direct military confrontation thereafter. Faced with an increasingly invisible enemy, the Army and administrative officials argued over how to counter the rebels; 'relations between the military and civil authorities [were] strained due to their policy of dissipating forces [which was] favoured by the civil authorities whereas the military preferred concentration and offensive' tactics.⁹⁵ Keith Jeffery characterises such debates as typical factors at the beginning of a counter-insurgency campaign, the military looking to apply force at vulnerable points, the police seeking to collect data on dangerous individuals and ensure a measured response within the framework of existing criminal codes and without recourse to martial law.⁹⁶ During the rebellion, District Commissioner White worked with the Brigadier of Forces from India whom he referred to as 'a nice

⁹² BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932 Extract from the Official Report of the Burma Legislative Council Debates 20 Feb. 1931, 200.

⁹³ Ghosh, *op. cit.*, 152.

⁹⁴ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932, Origin and Causes of the Burma Rebellion, 1934, 25.

⁹⁵ BL IOSM Mss Eur F161/61 Indian Police Collection: Papers illustrating the work and history of the Indian Police. Mr. E. H. F. Beadon, Inspector of Police, Burma: Papers relating to the Police force; suggestions for tackling dacoit/rebel activity, 1943.

⁹⁶ Keith Jeffery, "Intelligence and Counterinsurgency operations: some reflection on the British experience," *Intelligence and National Security*, 2, no. 1 (1987): 118-149.

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man, but stupid'.⁹⁷ Conversely, Cummings' war diaries reflect similar contempt for other district administrators in Burma. These frictions remind us that the counter-insurgency effort did not evolve along the lines of conventional military confrontation, contrary to what Callahan's review of colonial Burma suggests.⁹⁸ District officials with a greater knowledge of Burma than the army aimed to apply force at troubled points which they selected, in contrast to the army's desire to organise large scale drives through troubled terrains confronting rebels in a head on conflict.⁹⁹ Inspector of Police E. H. F. Beadon noted that the latter tactic failed when employed in Thayetmyo. It was 'difficult to bring the rebels to fight' Beadon reported, the rebels preferring 'small hit and run' tactics, making the campaign against them more complex.¹⁰⁰

Rather than simply viewing the police/military debate as a hallmark of counter-insurgency campaigning, it might also be reinterpreted in terms of Gramsci's analysis of the complex nature of colonial warfare. Gramsci described this conflict as one in which the state attempts to impose hegemony on civil society. Rebels within society organise resistance against the state by different means, such as political protest and popular rebellion against the state.¹⁰¹ This politicises the struggle as it becomes a contest to control public opinion and ensure the population's compliance. In his way foreshadowing ideas of 'hearts and minds', Gramsci considered that colonial battles were waged between the colonial occupiers and the occupied population over political allegiance rather than terrain.¹⁰² This view helps explain why, in Burma, the police or District Administrators with a policing role who were in closer proximity to the networks of communication within civil society through which the rebels moved, conflicted with military forces that were entirely new to the country. As White noted, the military had little experience of jungle warfare or Burma's distinct political

⁹⁷ BL IOSM Mss Eur E356 A. J. S. White Collection: papers of Arthur John Stanley White (b 1896), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1922-38, comprising letters, reports and memoirs - FF1 - 123 Weekly reports by DC Thayetmyo on rebellion 1931 - 1932, 657.

⁹⁸ Callahan, op. cit.

⁹⁹ BL IOSM Mss Eur F161/61 Indian Police Collection: Papers illustrating the work and history of the Indian Police, Mr. E. H. F. Beadon, Inspector of Police, Burma: Papers relating to the Police force; suggestions for tackling dacoit/rebel activity, 1943.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Gramsci, op. cit., 229.

¹⁰² Ibid, 230.

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culture.¹⁰³ Disputes were inevitable and accounts of the early stages of the rebellion record the increasingly sour relations between the police and military.

Cummings, voicing the sentiments of the military forces in Burma, described the beginning of the counter-rebellion campaign as a time when 'all the principles of war were being violated' as the police performed military style operations with the military acting as relief.¹⁰⁴ So grave was the social disruption occasioned by these police operations that he suggested that power be taken from the hands of the police allowing the military to take charge.¹⁰⁵ White, on the part of the civil administration, countered this, expressing the widely-held view among colonial officials in Burma that the military was not capable of leading a counter-insurgency campaign.¹⁰⁶ The initial stages of the counter-rebellion campaign went badly for the government, perhaps unsurprising given these conflicting views. Mockaitis, summing up the views of the military, states that there was 'no cut and dried policy laid down by civil authorities as to what troops are required to do' in troubled areas with the result that a 'piecemeal operation has taken place which is disheartening to troops'.¹⁰⁷ Without a clear counter-insurgency strategy to guide them, the brigades detached to Burma from India proved ineffective for the task of containing disorder. Sir Percival Griffiths' official history of the colonial Police in India reviews the experience of officers in Burma during the rebellion and remarks that the troops from India knew nothing of Burma. Army units were forced to rely on the police in Burma who had more intimate knowledge of the local terrain and culture.¹⁰⁸ Only in the light of bitter experience did the Government of Burma finally settle on the strategy of employing troops in a supporting role to assist the police in reasserting the supremacy of the civil administration in troubled areas. Only then did the

¹⁰³ BL IOSM Mss Eur E356 A. J. S. White Collection: papers of Arthur John Stanley White (b 1896), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1922-38, comprising letters, reports and memoirs - FF1 - 123 Weekly reports by DC Thayetmyo on rebellion 1931 - 1932, 641.

¹⁰⁴ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. date: December 1930-March 1932, War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier, Vol VI War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier, 28 Jun. 31, 53.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 54.

¹⁰⁶ BL IOSM Mss Eur E356 A. J. S. White Collection, papers of Arthur John Stanley White (b 1896), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1922-38, comprising letters, reports and memoirs - FF1 - 123 Weekly reports by DC Thayetmyo on rebellion 1931 - 1932, 641.

¹⁰⁷ Mockaitis, op. cit., 81.

¹⁰⁸ Sir Percival Griffiths, *To Guard My People, the History of the Indian Police* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1971), 209.

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security forces, the army, the paramilitaries and the frontier forces, achieve their overall aim of breaking the monopoly of power the rebels enjoyed in troubled districts.

The army began to roll back rebel control of troubled districts in August 1931. Cummings recorded the discovery of rebel camps in which stockades had been built, with barricades erected and large boulders 'collected to roll down hills'.¹⁰⁹ Intelligence was gleaned from letters discovered at the camps and 'brought back for examination by the CID'.¹¹⁰ These letters and interrogation reports on rebels captured by the security forces revealed a highly sophisticated organisation that attached enormous importance to the protection of its own informational networks. Rebels frequently cut telegraph lines to frustrate colonial communication and anticipated the movement of colonial forces through the use of informers in the villages who would warn insurgent commanders of the colonial troops' approach while, at the same time, circulating rumours to mislead the government.¹¹¹ The military officer in Prome recorded in January 1932 that:

every village in Nawin Chaung valley [Prome] has a rebel chairman and assistant chairman. The Chairman gives rebels food and shelter and leads the village's rebels in attacks on government forces. The assistant's duty was to warn the next villages of the arrival of government forces; every village is under the influence of rebels and nearly all have subscribed to rebel institutions.¹¹²

This indicates the sophisticated level of administration that the rebels had established, to the extent that villagers spoke of there being two governments throughout central Burma in July 1931, with insurgents issuing visas and

¹⁰⁹ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. date: December 1930-March 1932, War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier Vol XII War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 11 Aug. 1931, 7.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 5.

¹¹¹ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. date: December 1930-March 1932, War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier Vol VI War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 9-14 Sep. 1931, 311.

¹¹² BL IOR L/MIL/5/869 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Prome North Military Area 09 Jan. 1932, 16.

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permits for work within rebel-held zones.¹¹³ Destroying this control was a formidable task for the colonial government to confront. Together, Saya San and the rebels who supported him represented an alternative administration to the colonial government and through sympathy, fear and the lack of credible governmental authority peasants increasingly sided with the rebels.

Philip Deery's review of British intelligence during the later counter-insurgency campaign in Malaya in 1948-1952 describes the difference between banditry and guerrilla warfare, remarking that 'guerrillas are not bandits', as bandits have a link with criminality whereas guerrillas represent a 'modern social movement'.¹¹⁴ This observation was mirrored by the Government of Burma eighteen years earlier, which, albeit begrudgingly, also recognised that the rebels were not mere bandits, but were a social movement. As such, Governor Innes refused to pronounce martial law, considering that the government was conducting a campaign against a politically motivated uprising.¹¹⁵ This distinction, between perceiving the rebels as bandits fighting on the basis of economic grievances on the one hand, and as political agitators with the intent of replacing the colonial state on the other, framed the government's understanding of the causes of the rebellion, something that is evident from intelligence reports produced during the uprising.

The intelligence branch of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) produced an interim report in March 1931 on the causes of the rebellion and reported that political agitation by subversive nationalists had played the greatest role in provoking the disturbances.¹¹⁶ The report examined the role of the GCBA which had been agitating in Tharrawaddy and organising anti-tax campaigns dating back to 1920. The CID reported that 'Headmen and villagers who paid taxes were subjected to outrages' such as assault and even murder

¹¹³ BL IOSM Mss Eur E356 A. J. S. White Collection, papers of Arthur John Stanley White (b 1896), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1922-38, comprising letters, reports and memoirs - FF1 - 123 Weekly reports by DC Thayetmyo on rebellion 1931 - 1932, 30 Jul. 1931, 1.

¹¹⁴ Philip Deery, "The Terminology of Terrorism: Malaya 1948-1952," *Journal of South East Asian Studies*, 34, no. 2 (2003): 231-247 at 238.

¹¹⁵ BL IOR M/3/165 Release of prisoners convicted in connection with the Burma rebellion of 1931-1932, 4.

¹¹⁶ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932 Origin and Causes of Burma Rebellion 1930-1932 Government of Burma, 1934 CID in Burma on the causes of the rebellion 26 Mar. 1931, 662.

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as a result of the agitation of the GCBA.¹¹⁷ Collusion between nationalists and rebels was behind the uprising and the CID reported that Saya San had prepared for rebellion with the GCBA 'fully cognisant of this plan'.¹¹⁸ Brigadier Cummings, in the same vein, reported in his appraisal of operations conducted in connection with the rebellion that the causes of the rebellion were 'political'; a 'definite attempt to overthrow the government' had been made.¹¹⁹ Any economic grievances the rebels may have had were dismissed by the CID report which instead concentrated on the role of conspiratorial political nationalists, the GCBA, in fomenting the uprising. This was typical of colonial counter-insurgency campaigns in the Raj, Guha observes, noting that British counter-insurgency reports frequently imputed political aims to rebels: 'comment in reports on insurgency outweighs reports' which were never 'neutral in their attitude to events witnessed'. Guha notes in a review of British colonial intelligence reports on insurgencies that 'conspirators are assumed to be members of a rural elite group on the simple assumption that the peasant has no initiative of his own and is a mere instrument of his master'.¹²⁰ Michael Aung-Thwin's review of the rebellion records that the prosecution of Saya San 'wanted to show that the uprising was not a "spontaneous" popular expression of peasant unrest, but rather the result of a well-planned conspiracy'.¹²¹ The state secured its political dominance and justified the suppression of peasant discontent by attributing the uprising to the work of a political conspiracy.

The military and police forces recognised that management of the information order by an intelligence bureau was crucial to the reassertion of political control, and decried the lack of an adequate intelligence system in Burma, stressing to all members of the police and military the importance of intelligence.¹²²

Cummings recorded that 'irregulars were used to collect information' on rebel

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ BL IOR L/MIL/7/19659 Report on Operations in connection with the rebellion, Brigadier Peter Cummings, Commander in Chief 26 Dec. 1930 – 25 Mar. 1932, 1.

¹²⁰ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant insurgency in Colonial India* (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1983), 80.

¹²¹ Michael Aung-Thwin, "Genealogy of a rebellion narrative: Law, Ethnology and Culture in Colonial Burma," *Journal of South East Asian Studies*, 34, no. 3 (2003): 393-419 at 401.

¹²² BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932, Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 06 Jun. 1931, 23.

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camps in September 1931.¹²³ Irregular forces were composed of ethnic minorities from the frontier regions of Burma, particularly the Chin, Kachin and Karen, who supported the government against the rebels - they understood the terrain better than regular forces and were thus better able to collect intelligence. In January 1932 in Hlandin Township, once spies had located a rebel gang, irregulars moved in to confront the rebels.¹²⁴ Breaking the rebels' control of networks of communication was no simple task however. Even in February 1932, after the rebellion's decline, Cummings observed that Saya San's second in command, Myat Aung, was the head of an 'able intelligence network'.¹²⁵ White had noted in September 1931 that information was not flowing towards the authorities 'due mainly to our inability to give the rebels a good knock in this neighbourhood', Thayetmyo.¹²⁶

To ensure that information would begin to flow from Burmese villages to the government, a demonstration of the superiority of colonial force was necessary. Stathis Kalyvas' analysis of the struggle for control against insurgents in a civil war observes that the incumbent power must be able to demonstrate its ability to provide security for agents and informers, or the territory over which the struggle is conducted will slip into insurgent hands.¹²⁷ By demonstrating their ability to impose overwhelming force in a troubled area the security forces ensured that informers could come forwards without fear of reprisals. Lieutenant-Colonel James Chancellor De Vine of the Burma Police force confirmed as much when emphasising the importance of the establishment of intelligence when the army had occupied a territory. The army's role was first to give the rebels the 'knock on the head' desired, after which the Police would examine the civil administration in the troubled region and go about establishing intelligence links.¹²⁸ Control of the information order was backed up by the threat of violence. However this threat alone did ensure stability of

¹²³ Ibid, 09-14 Sep. 1931, 281.

¹²⁴ Ibid, Vol XII War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 12 Jan. 1932, 153.

¹²⁵ Ibid, Vol IX War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 15 Feb. 1932, 149.

¹²⁶ BL IOSM Mss Eur E356 A. J. S. White Collection, papers of Arthur John Stanley White (b 1896), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1922-38, comprising letters, reports and memoirs - FF1 - 123 Weekly reports by DC Thayetmyo on rebellion 1931 - 1932, 8.

¹²⁷ Kalyvas, op. cit., 211.

¹²⁸ BL IOSM Mss Eur F246/4 Papers, diaries and photographs of Lieutenant-Colonel James Chancellor De Vine The Rebel and his Questioning, 4.

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governmental control – this necessitated the establishing of links with the indigenous information order, of which White was well aware, bemoaning the lack of informers on the ground.¹²⁹

Michael Herman observes that gathering intelligence from human beings (HUMINT) is of a highly political nature as intelligence gatherers must understand the intentions and desires of those people from whom they gather information.¹³⁰ HUMINT gathering was a matter of necessity for the maintenance of colonial hegemony as there was no other means of gathering information on the population in pre-war Burma. The colonial government embarked on the task of understanding the political ideas and aspirations of the population of Burma by developing contacts within the local population who could provide information to colonial Police officers and District Commissioners. To do this however, the state first had to undermine the strength of the rebellion – a task that required the military to apply often severe force to rebel held areas.

Re-establishing order: tactics employed to break the rebel's hold on the information order

The 'best solution to the rebellion' District Commissioner of Tavoy Arthur John Stanley White considered, would consist of 'no orthodox solution... no orthodox military operation would be relevant'.¹³¹ This was all very well but, in the absence of precise proposals, civil and military officials struggled to create a plan of counter-rebellion. One thing was clear – restoration of authority demanded effective population control. But if manipulation of public opinion was crucial in such a non-orthodox campaign, an essential prerequisite was to create a security apparatus capable of discerning public attitudes. Only then could opinion be shaped. To aid this process, an intelligence bureau was

¹²⁹ BL IOSM Mss Eur E356 A. J. S. White Collection, papers of Arthur John Stanley White (b 1896), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1922-38, comprising letters, reports and memoirs - FF1 - 123 Weekly reports by DC Thayetmyo on rebellion 1931 – 1932, 12.

¹³⁰ Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 82.

¹³¹ BL IOR IOSM Mss Eur E356 A. J. S. White Collection, papers of Arthur John Stanley White (b 1896), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1922-38, comprising letters, reports and memoirs - FF1 - 123 Weekly reports by DC Thayetmyo on rebellion 1931 – 1932, 640.

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created.¹³² Greater reliance on political intelligence thus originated as a complementary tactic in the counter-rebellion campaign, vital to regaining control of the information order. Whereas Mockaitis contends that the principles of minimum force, winning hearts and minds, and the key role of intelligence were key innovations in countering the Saya San rebellion, closer examination reveals that colonial officials in Burma held a different notion of successful counter-rebellion strategy.¹³³ Throughout discussions and in memoranda submitted during the rebellion, the 1885 – 1888 pacification campaign had been the standard point of reference for campaigns against rebellion in Burma.¹³⁴ The creation of armed units in loyalist villages, the superior display of force by regular troops, and forcible population relocation were the key features of this earlier campaign, and were employed once more with great success during the Saya San rebellion, becoming the first steps in breaking the rebels' control of information.

Walter Booth-Gravelly, former commissioner of the Pegu Division, became Special Commissioner of the rebellion with the mission of coordinating all departments involved in the rebellion.¹³⁵ Booth-Gravelly's appointment as Special Commissioner was a divisive choice. Maurice Collis records in his account of colonial Burma that Booth-Gravelly was a widely despised figure among the Burmese. On the outbreak of the rebellion, the rebels called for Booth-Gravelly's head.¹³⁶ Booth-Gravelly was charged with destroying the influence of the rebels over public opinion by reasserting state control of the information order.

A Civil Intelligence Officer (CIO), responsible for the collection and coordination of intelligence in disturbed areas was appointed to serve Booth-Gravelly, taking office in June 1931, a time described as the worst phase of the rebellion.¹³⁷ The

¹³² BL IOR IOSM Mss Eur F246/4 Papers, diaries and photographs of Lieutenant-Colonel James Chancellor De Vine, *The principles of war as applied to rebellion*.

¹³³ Mockaitis, *op. cit.*, 36.

¹³⁴ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932, Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 9-14 Sep. 1931, 277.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 27 Sep. 1931 45.

¹³⁶ Collis, *op. cit.*, 210.

¹³⁷ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932 Confidential Report on the Rebellion in Burma, Apr. 1931-Mar. 1932, 59.

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CIO headed a staff of one deputy superintendent of police, an inspector of the police, six sub-inspectors of the police, 'most obtained from CID branches'.¹³⁸ They issued 'daily reports in connection with the rebellion'; there was an increase in the volume of information on the Burmese and efforts to increase the speed at which that information could be communicated through official channels.¹³⁹ Booth-Gravelly's directive was to oversee the employment of military force in the troubled areas.¹⁴⁰ He targeted the use of force against areas in which he would then put the intelligence officer and propaganda officer to work. Military force applied locally paved the way for Booth-Gravelly to take hold of the information order.

Alongside an intelligence officer, an officer in charge of propaganda was also appointed.¹⁴¹ His role was to provide the only channel of information to the press thereby closing off all 'noxious matter'. In addition, it fell to this appointee to begin a counter-propaganda campaign through the distribution of handbills and leaflets.¹⁴² The communication of ideas between rebels was targeted through this combination of intelligence gathering and propaganda. Immediately before the appointment of the Special Commissioner and his colleagues, the government had been embarrassed by the publication of controversial photos taken during the rebellion. A mixed police/army detachment had killed over a hundred rebels in Wetto and cut their heads off, displaying the decapitated heads outside their headquarters. Cummings' war diaries provide two reasons for the decapitations. One was that, in his words, the beheadings would have a 'tremendous moral effect' on the rebels who had previously been convinced of their invulnerability.¹⁴³ This was not the only time officials had noted with approval the impact of demonstrative violence on public opinion; when a party of Punjabi soldiers attacked a concentration of rebels, '300 strong' at Wetto and killed 'one third of this large gang' with the Lewis gun and rifle fire, it was

¹³⁸ BL IOR V/24/3242 Burma: Police Department, Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1922-1933, 51.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932, Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier, 15 Jun. 1931, 45.

¹⁴¹ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932 Confidential Report on the Rebellion in Burma, Apr. 1931-Mar. 1932, 62.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932, Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 06 Jun. 1931, 20.

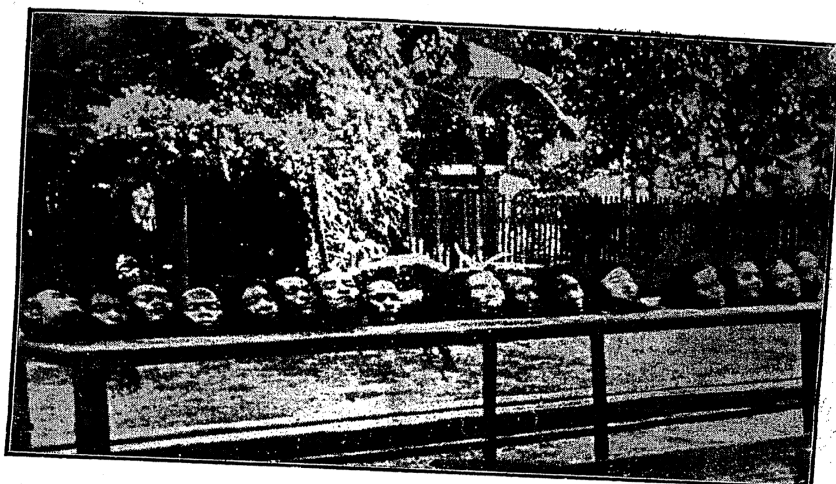
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observed that the 'spectacular slaughter of rebels at Wetto undoubtedly had a widespread moral effect'.¹⁴⁴ The second justification advanced for these beheadings was, in its way, equally grotesque: the heads were required for identification purposes, as the police did not take a camera with them to the site of the conflict. The display of heads outside headquarters was photographed and the pictures sold to 'The Thuriya' (The Sun), a nationalist vernacular newspaper. These were then circulated among other newspapers and were noted in Parliament in London (see figure 2 for a reproduction of the picture).¹⁴⁵ This was a major propaganda embarrassment and a stimulus for the appointment of a propaganda officer. Burman radicals had such a monopoly of the information order that they distributed the photos easily.

¹⁴⁴ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932 Confidential Report on the Rebellion in Burma, Apr. 1931-Mar. 1932, 59.

¹⁴⁵ Mockaitis, *op. cit.*, 39.

“Not Plaster Dolls—But Human Heads.”



**THE
BURMESE SITUATION
1930-31-**

A Letter

to

**The Right Hon'ble William Wedgwood Benn, M.P.,
Secretary of State for India.**

From

U Saw, M.L.C. (for Tharrawaddy South), (Burma).

RANGOON:

**THE BURMA GUARDIAN PRESS
1931.**

Figure 2. Taken from a letter on human rights abuses during the Saya San rebellion compiled by U Saw in 1931.

BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 – 1932, The Burmese Situation 1930-31 – A Letter to The Right Hon'ble William Wedgwood Benn, M. P., Secretary of State for India from U Saw. Rangoon, The Burma Guardian Press, 1931.

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Cummings' observation that the display of violence was instrumental in cowing the population and breaking rebel resolve belies Mockaitis' contention that the heads were displayed 'unwittingly' and only for the purposes of identification.¹⁴⁶ Reports in the media of British atrocities were muted after that as the propaganda officer moved to curb negatively slanted reporting. Propaganda was one means to disturb the information order and influence the ideas communicated therein. Intelligence reforms ensured that the information order could be manipulated to the government's ends. District Commissioners and Military Officials sought to deny the rebels control of the flow of information. With the appointment of the CIO there was a marked increase in the flow of information to the authorities. Under the CIO contacts with the indigenous population were established and effective management of the information order began. District Commissioner White described the process by which intelligence was re-established after the rebels' systematic purge of government informers and spies on the outset of rebellion. Intelligence officers headed spy gaung (local Burman policemen) departments, and the gaungs were rewarded with a liberal supply of cash for information.¹⁴⁷

Patrol leaders were British officials who were expected to spend all day 'following up [the officials] information and nights machinating with his spies', but White noted 'a good Burman would relieve him [the official] of the latter'.¹⁴⁸ Asserting control of the information order went hand in hand with establishing links with indigenous society. Forging relations with Burman representatives was crucial. Cummings notes the vital role of headmen who 'gave a great deal of information during the war on rebels' alongside other 'spies sent to the villages to gather information'.¹⁴⁹ Of course, this meant ensuring that security for informers/spies could be provided, and this was where the military force deployed from India had its purpose. When the Punjabis were stationed at Tharrawaddy it was 'hoped that a force of this kind in a small area would create

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 39.

¹⁴⁷ BL IOSM Mss Eur E356 A. J. S. White Collection, Indian Civil Service, Burma 1922-38, comprising letters, reports and memoirs - FF1 - 123 Weekly reports by DC Thayetmyo on rebellion 1931 - 1932, 02 Aug. 1931, 144.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. date: December 1930-March 1932, War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier Vol XII War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 15/08/1931 11.

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confidence in villagers that they would assist the government with information' and 'some success in this' had been reported.¹⁵⁰ The military acted to enable the police and civil administrations' functioning. The Brigadier was to assist the Special Commissioner, who determined which areas required the attention of the military.¹⁵¹ The military expanded the parameters for the civil administration to operate in security, and by doing so enabled the administration to engage with the indigenous information order.

Lieutenant-Colonel De Vine, an Indian Police Officer serving in Mandalay District during the rebellion, left notes on the use of intelligence as a counter-rebellion tactic. De Vine emphasised the importance of surveillance staff maintaining close contact with 'headmen and villagers' and recorded that under the Criminal Procedure Code the authorities could 'search for suspect matter' in posted items.¹⁵² The government escalated its efforts to intercept the communication of ideas in society and De Vine observed that intelligence was crucial to ensuring the authority of civil administration. The

aim of punitive measures [was] to rest on the powers of civil government as vested in the Magistrates. Police officers etc. must not antagonise the majority population. For this reason it is imperative that before the movements of troops take place which are likely to disturb public confidence in any way the most effective possible system of intelligence must be established.¹⁵³

These measures were crucial to winning the campaign against the rebels because the government was not fighting 'an extra territorial enemy' but a domestic one whose attitude to the government had to be changed.¹⁵⁴ Improved

¹⁵⁰ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932 450.

¹⁵¹ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. date: December 1930-March 1932, War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 27/09/1931 45.

¹⁵² BL IOSM Mss Eur F246/4 Papers, diaries and photographs of Lieutenant-Colonel James Chancellor De Vine, Intelligence, 3.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 8.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 8.

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intelligence measures enabled the government to manipulate public opinion by preventing the spread of anti-government ideas through society.

Likewise, Brigadier Cummings observed that improving the flow of intelligence and changing public opinion were linked concerns; 'good information' depended on 'improved public confidence', which 'improved the information being received'.¹⁵⁵ The role of military force was to ensure that intelligence could be collected easily, which was the 'first step to forming sound counter-espionage which will keep track of rebel movements'.¹⁵⁶ Setting up an intelligence organisation in an area strange to the military required the careful examination of 'civil administration for, in it will be found ready to hand all essentials of intelligence' - this meant making relations with headmen and other village officials.¹⁵⁷

Brigadier Cummings further noted that:

unreliable information has been the stumbling block to the complete success of operations generally throughout the rebellion. The civil police must therefore improve their functioning powers in this direction, as while the civil authorities are reasserting themselves, reliable information must be forthcoming, if the troops are to pull their weight. It must be impressed on each detective superintendent of police that the obtaining of information is quite distinctly his function and not under existing conditions that of hunting these robbers and murderers.¹⁵⁸

In his report on operations employed during the rebellion Cummings noted that the attitude of the peasantry impacted on the provision of information on rebel activities. A 'large proportion of the peasantry, while not in revolt against the

¹⁵⁵ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. date: December 1930-March 1932 War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 11 Dec. 1931, 529.

¹⁵⁶ BL IOSM Mss Eur F246/4 Papers, diaries and photographs of Lieutenant-Colonel James Chancellor De Vine, Cooperation of all forces, 8.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. date: December 1930-March 1932 War diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 05 Sep. 1931, 266.

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government, sympathised nevertheless with the rebels, while the majority of the remainder was too frightened to tell what they knew'.¹⁵⁹ The military had to ensure that the population perceived the colonial government as the dominant authority so that they would be encouraged to provide information. Stathis N. Kalyvas' study of civil warfare considers that 'political actors seek the exclusive and complete collaboration of all civilians' when making efforts to maintain power.¹⁶⁰ In Burma this collaboration was achieved by the use of military force to demonstrate the superiority of the colonial government.

A government communiqué issued in April 1931 discussed the role of force under the heading of 'restoring confidence'. The report observed that 'one of the main difficulties has been obtaining information – dacoits attacked headmen and other village officers and anyone who gave information was in danger of being murdered – partly for this and partly because villagers in league with dacoits, information was almost impossible to obtain'. Thus, 'the force's duties are to engage with bands and locate their own intelligence system' in the area. The report reassured government that 'severe action will be taken against villagers known to have given information to gangs'.¹⁶¹ Force and intelligence had a complementary relationship – when force imposed order on a troubled area intelligence gathering operations were subsequently established there. Severe force was applied on the outset to regain control - White observed that both the authorities and surrendering rebels considered the burning of houses as a primary cause of the rebellion's collapse.¹⁶² E. H. F. Beadon, a member of the Indian Police in Burma observed that it 'paid to burn a village here and there when there was definite information they were furnishing food supplies to rebel gangs hiding in jungles and villages'.¹⁶³ Village burning was banned in

¹⁵⁹ BL IOR L/MIL/7/19659 Report on Operations in connection with the rebellion, Brigadier Peter Cummings, Commander in Chief 26 Dec. 1930 – 25 Mar. 1932, 2.

¹⁶⁰ Kalyvas, *op. cit.*, 104.

¹⁶¹ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 – 1932 Government of Burma communiqué on the Burma rebellion, issued on 02 Apr. 1931, 692.

¹⁶² BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. date: December 1930-March 1932, War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier Vol XII War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 11 Aug. 1931 16.

¹⁶³ BL IOSM Mss Eur F161/61 Indian Police Collection: Papers illustrating the work and history of the Indian Police. Burma: Papers relating to the Police force; suggestions for tackling dacoit/rebel activity, 1943 Suggestions for tackling probable dacoit – cum – rebel problems expected in Burma Conditions of police in Burma 1931, 5.

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September 1931, only ten days after White credited it with having turned the tide in the authorities' favour against the rebels.¹⁶⁴ Cummings considered the rebellion more or less over by September 1931, when 'an aftermath to the rebellion in the form of robbery and murder by small packets of former rebels' was experienced.¹⁶⁵ Mockaitis argues that village burning was banned because the principle of minimum force was more effective; however, it was only banned when its effectiveness had been exhausted.¹⁶⁶

Population relocation, which Hack considers to have played a leading role in the Malaya counterinsurgency of the 1950s, was likewise used twenty years earlier to great effect in countering the Saya San rebellion. Hack argues that the use of intelligence played a lesser role than population control in defeating the insurgency.¹⁶⁷ In Burma in 1930 however, population control had a complementary role to intelligence gathering in winning control of the information order for the government. Relocating the population denied the rebels their base of support and sources of information. It was as important to 'close the enemy's sources of intelligence as it was to develop one's own', guidelines for containing rebellion noted.¹⁶⁸ De Vine noted that 'rebel encampments were the heart of the jungle – near water – [their] supplies commandeered from nearby villages by day'.¹⁶⁹ The solution to this, De Vine remarked was a 'blockade of areas, combing out villages' and the 'concentration of families' while 'watching all supply sources' and 'haranguing of rebel bands by small mobile columns from fixed points'.¹⁷⁰ White recorded one such campaign in Thayetmyo in August 1931 when the houses of rebels and their sympathisers were burnt down and they were relocated to concentration

¹⁶⁴ BL IOR L/MIL/5/863 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. date: Dec 1930-Mar.1932 58.

¹⁶⁵ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. date: December 1930-March 1932 War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 05 Sep. 1931, 267.

¹⁶⁶ Mockaitis, op. cit., 40.

¹⁶⁷ Karl Hack, "British Intelligence and counter-insurgency in the era of decolonisation: The Example of Malaya," *Intelligence and National Security*, 14, no. 2 (1999): 124 – 155, at 126.

¹⁶⁸ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 – 1932, Hints for guidance of civil officers in the event of outbreak of disturbances in Burma by G.S. Carey, Commissioner in Sagaing Division, 581.

¹⁶⁹ BL IOR IOSM Mss Eur F246/4 Papers, diaries and photographs of Lieutenant-Colonel James Chancellor De Vine, *The Principles of War as Applied to Rebellion*, 6.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 8.

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camps, where they were said to be 'happy'.¹⁷¹ Over six hundred people 'deported from rebel areas' were situated at Allamyo.¹⁷² Relatives of the rebels were interrogated for information.¹⁷³ Arreguin-Toft's analysis of asymmetrical conflicts, in which a superior military wages war against a weaker under-armed and ill-equipped opponent, observes that concentration camps are an effective means of disrupting networks of support for insurgents.¹⁷⁴ The Special Commissioner, CIO and propaganda officer were able to reorganise civil administration in the troubled areas and engage in the task of managing the information order once the military had secured the areas for them to operate in by applying overwhelming force and destroying rebel infrastructure.

On the appointment of Booth-Gravely as Special Commissioner, civil and military officials at last had a satisfactory functioning intelligence system that aided the counter-rebellion campaign. Booth-Gravely collated the civil intelligence officer's summaries and provided the army with its information on the rebels.¹⁷⁵ The government began to regain its confidence and considered the rebellion to have peaked, with the situation under control and in their favour. Although violence continued into 1933, the worst of the strife was over by September 1931. Breaking the rebels' control of the information order had ended the rebellion and military force was no longer required.

The aftermath of rebellion: the future of intelligence in colonial Burma

The rebellion's impact was felt wide and far as members of parliament discussed it in Whitehall. The House of Commons asked for a report on the

¹⁷¹ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932 450.

¹⁷² BL IOSM Mss Eur E356 A. J. S. White Collection: papers of Arthur John Stanley White (b 1896), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1922-38, comprising letters, reports and memoirs 120.

¹⁷³ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. date: December 1930-March 1932, War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier Vol XII War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 11/08/1931 16.

¹⁷⁴ Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 31.

¹⁷⁵ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. date: December 1930-March 1932, War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier Vol V. War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 23 Oct. 1931, 426.

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rebellion in February 1932.¹⁷⁶ Mr. Thomas C. Williams, MP in the House of Commons questioned whether 'as the rebellion is due to economic conditions couldn't a more humane way be found of solving problems than executing people'.¹⁷⁷ In similar fashion, elected Burman officials in the Legislative Council condemned the 'harsh measures adopted by the government which made villagers desperate, causing unrest to spread... many innocent lives and much property had been unnecessarily lost due to indiscriminate shooting and burning by government forces... police and military excesses [went] unpunished'.¹⁷⁸ Evidently, indigenous representatives did not consider the counter-rebellion tactics a success. Moreover, hostilities were far from ended - sporadic acts of violence by armed gangs in Burma persisted into 1933, even though the arrests of leaders of the rebellion, Saya San and Myat Aung, and amnesties in 1932 for a number of lesser offenders marked the end of major disorder. Callahan observes that the colonial state in Burma's relationship with the population 'did not remain rigid and static throughout the colonial period'.¹⁷⁹ A truism perhaps, but what she does not indicate is that new methods of control were developed to contain dissent. The colonial authorities in Burma began reviewing the optimum means of preventing any recurrence of such disorder in the future and, conscious of the limited funds available for any heightened military or police presence, intelligence reforms were at the centre of these discussions.

With the decision of the Simon Commission to proceed with separation from India in 1935 officials acted to consolidate their success in repressing the rebellion and to ensure their future dominance over indigenous society.¹⁸⁰ The intelligence apparatus would be critical in sustaining political control in separate Burma. In early 1932, as Indian troops prepared to return to India, military and

¹⁷⁶ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932 Confidential Report on the Rebellion in Burma, Apr. 1931-Mar. 1932, 50.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, House of Commons Question by Mr. Thomas C. Williams for 14 Mar. 1932, 113.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, Kyawdin Chairman Burmese leaders conference to Secretary of State for India, telegram, 08 Jun. 1931, 533.

¹⁷⁹ Callahan, op. cit., 22.

¹⁸⁰ BL IOR L/PJ/12/480 Activities of Indians in Japan and Japanese Propaganda in India, Special Branch report Sep. 1931, 8.

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police officials met at Government House in Tharrawaddy and discussed the nature of future threats to colonial security in Burma.¹⁸¹

As we have seen, Brigadier Peter Cummings was an especially severe critic of the inadequacy of intelligence in Burma. He spoke of the vital importance of an intelligence bureau, 'the efficiency and thoroughness of which must be such that it is impossible for uprisings, plots, secret societies and other destructive elements to be hatched'.¹⁸² 'I am considerably perturbed about the possible future developments in Lower Burma in view of the total failure of the civil intelligence department to produce information in connection with the recent incipient raising in the Zigon subdivision from which it appears that the violators of law and order had been organising a rebellion under our noses'.¹⁸³

Cummings emphasised that this was a long-term project that would take years to develop. He had been an early and vocal critic regarding the paucity of an intelligence apparatus in Burma, saying it would 'be better to beg or borrow money as required to establish an efficient spy organisation capable of handling so serious a problem'.¹⁸⁴ An 'efficient spy organisation capable of handling so serious a problem' could 'place us in the powerful position of preventing the seed of rebellion being sown'.¹⁸⁵ Intelligence was a preventative measure to ensure order. This was similar to Mandate Palestine, where the 'aim of police reorganisation was to anticipate violence' in response to the riots of 1929.¹⁸⁶ Popplewell observes that the key determinant here, as elsewhere in the British imperial world where insurgency remained a pressing danger, was that colonial government subsisted on a shoestring budget.¹⁸⁷ Constructing an intelligence gathering apparatus was the cheapest means of ensuring control as it provided the state with advance warning of where trouble occurred so that police and paramilitaries could be rapidly deployed to suppress disorder. This ensured that

¹⁸¹ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. date: December 1930-March 1932, War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 03 Feb. 1932, 129.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 159.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 129.

¹⁸⁶ Kolinsky, op. cit., 224.

¹⁸⁷ Richard J. Popplewell, "Recent Approaches to British Counter-Insurgency," *Journal of Intelligence and National Security*, 10, no. 2 (1995): 336 – 352 at 337.

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there was no need for an expensive military deployment that would be necessary to confront a fully-fledged rebellion.

At the meeting in Tharrawaddy the colonial government and the heads of the military forces in Burma agreed to construct a 'civil intelligence machine, which can and will find out what is going on, both politically and otherwise throughout the country' as a result of which 'secret societies and other mischievous bodies will always be found out long before they can become active and create trouble'.¹⁸⁸ Martin Thomas observes that intelligence was the backbone of the state in French and British Middle Eastern and North African colonies and mandates – imperial states relied on intelligence to govern.¹⁸⁹ In Burma, the colonial state was coming to the same conclusion as it developed an intelligence bureau to ensure that the government could continue to rule unthreatened by popular disorder such as had erupted in the rebellion. With this purpose in mind, District Commissioners and police officers contacted local representatives in Burmese villages who could provide them with intelligence. District commissioners were instructed to look out for villagers interested in the power and influence they would gain from government appointments and then recruit them as informers.¹⁹⁰ 'All such persons are known to district officers and there should be no difficulty in organising an admirable local intelligence department'.¹⁹¹ An 'intelligence scheme should be organised by sub-divisional officers, township officers and police under the supervision of the deputy commissioner' the aim being to 'be friendly with those who stand to lose if the country is disturbed'.¹⁹² Property owners and others who benefited from colonial rule were the informers the state hoped to utilise. In essence intelligence was an imposed institution originating from within the hierarchy of colonial rule. This was in keeping with the approach to government in Burma, which, as historians

¹⁸⁸ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. date: December 1930-March 1932, War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier volume VIX 03 Feb. 1932, 185.

¹⁸⁹ Thomas, *op. cit.*, 303.

¹⁹⁰ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932 Hints for guidance of civil officers in the event of outbreak of disturbances in Burma by G.S. Carey, Commissioner in Sagaing Division, 582.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

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of Burma note, imposed an administration that entirely ignored existing norms of local rule.¹⁹³

Experienced commissioners considered the *Ahpwes*, secret societies, to be the greatest danger in Burma, and deliberated over the nature of intelligence bureau that was required to quell their activities.¹⁹⁴ The Detective Superintendent of Police in Henzada asked at the meeting in Tharrawaddy if it 'would be possible for us to establish some sort of spy organisation and through this send spies into villages to get information and shadow the political situation', however the response was that this was 'dangerous and unlikely'.¹⁹⁵ Yet in the outcome of the meeting, Booth-Gravely agreed with Cummings and other officials to establish a spy organisation that would worm its way into the villages through agents expressing anti-government views thus gaining villagers' confidence, and that it would be ready to operate within a few years following the rebellion.¹⁹⁶ The experience of the rebellion was borne in mind when considering the future of Burma and especially the crucial role intelligence would play. Intelligence was required to prevent the population from threatening state rule – the Burman population was regarded as a hostile 'other' likely to mobilise in rebellion again.

This is evident from a review of official appraisals of the rebellion: the Delhi Intelligence Bureau (DIB), the central agency directing intelligence gathering in Burma during its period of annexation to the Raj, was quick to apply stereotypes to the population when discussing the causes of rebellion, particularly based on the Indian government's fears of communism. In 1931, Indian intelligence officials described the rebellion with reference to international communism. Communism was a great concern for Imperial governments due to the rise of the United Soviet Socialist Republic and the Chinese Communist Party. Indian intelligence officials described the rise of the Marxist-Leninist Third International

¹⁹³ see Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, 91 and Taylor, *The State in Burma*, 71.

¹⁹⁴ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. date: December 1930-March 1932, War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier volume VIX 03 Feb. 1932, 129.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

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as ‘the greatest danger to the civilisation of the modern world’.¹⁹⁷ The DIB considered Burma a weak link in the imperial security chain due to its vulnerability to communism. Burma was of strategic significance to Chinese communism and to the British Empire’s defence against communism, acting as a buffer zone for the Indian Empire.¹⁹⁸ These movements propagated an anti-imperialist ideology among rising anti-nationalists in the colonies who became a threat to imperial security.¹⁹⁹ The rebellion was considered a demonstration of Burma’s ripeness for communist revolution - the rebellion ‘revealed the existence of all elements necessary for first class revolution if Communist organisation is allowed to make considerable headway’.²⁰⁰ The Indian Government’s fear of communism made the DIB quick to perceive the hand of international communism in instigating the rebellion. Indian intelligence analysts noted that a Burmese communist known as Saklatva had been in London during the rebellion establishing connections with the League Against Imperialism, a mass anti-imperialist movement affiliated with international communism. The Indian Intelligence Bureau referred to Saklatva as a ‘leader of one of the organisations responsible for the Burmese rebellion’, probably referring to the GCBA.²⁰¹ Similarly Oo Kyaw, another Burmese communist in London, was under surveillance by Special Branch which recorded his pro-rebellion statements and shared them with Indian Intelligence, noting that an ‘anti-imperialist group manifesto’ in London pledged its ‘support of rebels who are struggling against British Imperialism’.²⁰² However, as local intelligence reports during the rebellion and historical reviews of the rebellion make plain, international communism played no role in fomenting the rebellion. It is hard to see how impoverished activists in London would have been able to play much of a role in instigating a peasant rebellion on the other side of the world. The DIB betrayed a readiness to blame communist provocation for rebellion similar to that Ann Stoler observes of the government in Dutch Colonial Sumatra where, in 1929, violence in colonial plantations by indigenous labourers was attributed

¹⁹⁷ BL IOR V/27/262/5 India. Intelligence Bureau, India and communism. Reprint, 1935. Simla, 1935, vii.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 68.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 71.

²⁰² BL IOR L/PJ/12/480 Activities of Indians in Japan and Japanese Propaganda in India, Special Branch report Sep. 1931, 22.

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to outside agitators – communists.²⁰³ Strife was attributed to conspirators who were manipulating the grass-roots population.

The rebellion ended with the rebels grip on the information order in central Burma destroyed, even if the authorities' own management of that information order was not yet assured. The rebellion had not been a military operation - martial law was not imposed on Burma. The rebels had taken up arms with a view to replace the colonial state, and had managed to win control over vast sectors of the population. Where military force had been used during the rebellion, as it was quite severely, it had been done to enable policing and intelligence activity to operate. The special commissioner, Booth-Gravelly, and his intelligence and propaganda officers' activities were wound up in early 1932; they had been a useful ad hoc measure in the thick of the rebellion, but serious planning was undertaken to construct an improved intelligence bureau that was best suited to Burma's circumstances.²⁰⁴ This was not an overnight operation, the time invested in it evidence of a hope that the bureau would be a major aid to state rule.

Conclusion

The rebellion provoked major concern in the colonial government with the state of intelligence gathering in Burma. The only way to counter the rebellion was to establish some sort of hold on the indigenous information order. Indigenous society organised and established parallel state institutions, the breadth and scope of which were unknown to officials until rebellion broke out. This was a grave challenge to the legitimacy of the colonial state. When the rebellion did break out, colonial officials were flabbergasted and took uncertain and faltering steps to contain it. The police had been a minimal presence in Burmese society with paramilitaries functioning to repress dissent with violence. The rebellion made plain to colonial government that the Indian Intelligence apparatus alone could not manage intelligence gathering in Burma. The provincial intelligence

²⁰³ Ann Stoler, "Perceptions of Protest: Defining the Dangerous in Colonial Sumatra", *American Ethnologist*, 12, no. 4, (1985): 642-658, at 655.

²⁰⁴ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932 Confidential Report on the Rebellion in Burma, Apr. 1931-Mar. 1932, 62.

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branch of the Delhi Intelligence Bureau in Burma was neglected prior to the rebellion, under-funded and understaffed and with an unclear remit. To succeed in the struggle for control of the information order a major revamp of intelligence gathering in Burma was required.

The rebellion was a violent conflict that took a grievous toll on the population. However, key to all efforts to control the population, by either the state or the rebels, was control of the information order. The rebels controlled the information order of indigenous society on the outbreak of rebellion. They achieved this unity through their control of the networks of communication that had been neglected by the colonial state. It was their control of the information order that the authorities would have to break to ensure victory. The relevance of the information order to both sides was apparent in the violent attacks on key intermediaries in the authorities' channels of communication with indigenous information orders, that is, headmen and other low level officials. The rebels burnt the bridges of communication between indigenous society and the colonial state to seal themselves into their zone of control and they employed their own intelligence network of local informers as a buffer against government activity. The response from government to the rebellion was badly managed, as the military called in from India had no clear role in Burma. Conventional military tactics would not suffice in a conflict that was beyond conventional warfare and had a large political element.

The military was better deployed under a Special Commissioner for the rebellion working for the civilian administration. Tactics employed to ensure strategic success were grounded in the post annexation pacification campaign of 1885. Village burning, concentration camps and the use of village militias were reliable means of ensuring success. These tactics served to break the rebel's hold on the information order and ruin their networks of communication. The military served to widen the parameters of security for civil administration to reassert itself and establish its own information order. Intelligence did not lead the counter-rebellion; it followed the application of force to break the rebels' own intelligence administration. The authorities moved to gain control of the information order by appointing a propaganda officer and an intelligence officer

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to counter the rebels' distribution of information and gain knowledge of Burman society. At a lower level officers liaised with local spies and established an intelligence apparatus which was overseen by the temporary intelligence bureau developed for the rebellion. There was a centralised state managed effort to manage the information order in Burma.

The rebellion was over when the rebels' control of the information order had been broken. Swamping troubled areas with the constant presence of force enabled civil administration to function. The authorities considered the long-term lessons the rebellion had taught them. During the rebellion, failures to anticipate its outbreak and the paucity of intelligence gathering had been roundly condemned. The authorities aimed to create nodes of communication with the indigenous population to initiate a one-way flow of information going up to government. The tours of district commissioners and other colonial officials meeting local informers and indigenous representatives of colonial rule were a constant and daily feature of colonial occupation. After the rebellion, officials aimed to create a more reliable intelligence apparatus in Burma than had functioned previously.

However, the intelligence machine that the authorities envisioned was hidebound at the outset by a number of handicaps. The authorities had an overly politicised view of indigenous activity, attributing the rebellion to political conspiracies. Intelligence authorities viewed Burman activity through the prism of prejudices about Burmans and strategic threats to the British Empire, particularly from Soviet Russia. Whilst the intelligence services were considered the best tool to enable the security of state rule, they were a flawed project. The top down imposition of institutions on society could not enable the state to understand grass roots social activity.

Callahan notes that the military was the first resort of the authorities when their rule was challenged, and indeed, a massive callout of force from India took place on the outbreak of rebellion. However, the military was badly employed at the outset of the rebellion. Conceived only as a military force it was inadequate for the repression of an outbreak that was more complicated than a

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conventional military conflict. More important than military force was the establishment of links with the indigenous information order. Only when charged with breaking the rebels' hold on the indigenous information order and securing troubled areas for the police to establish links with local society did the military have any real function. District commissioners observed that the rebellion was not a military conflict. The state required some sort of relationship to function between itself and the indigenous society and this was the responsibility of the intelligence bureau. External force alone was not a suitable 'factor of cohesion'.²⁰⁵ State rule of the population became enmeshed with intelligence. However, the intelligence collected was not neutrally reported information but reflected the colonial state's political concerns. These themes were to predominate intelligence development in colonial Burma in the years that followed.

²⁰⁵ John Lonsdale "State and Social Processes in Africa: A Historiographical Survey," *African Studies Review*, 24, no. 2/3 Social Science and Humanistic Research on Africa: An Assessment (1981): 139-225, at 151.

Building the foundations of a political intelligence bureau in Burma: 1933-1935

Introduction

Organised insurgent action against the colonial government ended by late 1932. The security forces had, by that point, restored regional control and the rebellion's force was spent. But the cessation of guerrilla warfare against the colonial authorities did not mean the end of popular dissent. Although substantially disarmed and, to a degree, disorganised by state repression, underlying rural opposition to colonial rule had not diminished. In May 1934 the colonial Government of Burma produced its official report into the causes of the rebellion, which made plain that more of the same was expected.¹ This report was produced at the same time as a major review of the future of intelligence administration in Burma was proceeding between the Governors of India and Burma and the Under Secretary of State for Burma. These discussions made plain that the intelligence services had to act where the gap between hostile intent and violent action existed. If dissentient sectors of society retained their animus against the colonial state, the function of the intelligence services was to prevent them from acting on that intent. This meant anticipating the actions of potential rebels in society before they could organise for guerrilla warfare at which point the state would be forced to resort to military operations against them. In immediate post-rebellion Burma the civil administration set about constructing an intelligence 'machine' for just this purpose. James C. Scott observes that the state attempts to 'make society legible' by arranging society 'in a way that simplified classic state functions of... prevention of rebellion'.² The intelligence services were constructed to simplify society in such a manner.

The intelligence 'machine' is, in some ways, analogous to the intelligence 'cycle', a model for understanding intelligence administration used by contemporary

¹ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 – 1932, Origin and Causes of Burma Rebellion 1930-1932, Government of Burma, 1934.

² James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (London: Yale University Press, 1998), 222.

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analysts of intelligence.³ The cycle is composed of intelligence users, managers and gatherers. Intelligence users state their requirements for the type of intelligence they desire from the intelligence managers who direct the intelligence gatherers as to the nature of intelligence that they must collect. When this information, once gathered, is fed to its users in the form of reports, the users then act upon their analysis of the intelligence provided in order to work out their new requirements and the cycle begins again. The colonial government made efforts to establish an intelligence cycle of this sort in post-rebellion Burma. At all levels of administration from intelligence users down to gatherers, concerted efforts were made to consolidate the provision of specialist intelligence reports and to ensure that such information was systematically integrated into policy-making processes in colonial Burma. The cyclical representation of intelligence collection, analysis, and action provides a useful rough guide to understanding the development and function of intelligence as an aid to material political power. Using the intelligence cycle as a model for understanding security policing in Burma provides a clearer understanding of the functioning of all levels of colonial intelligence gathering as will be demonstrated below.

The final session of the legislative council between 1932 and 1936 marked the end of Burma's status as a province of India. This formally terminated the diarchy system of rule, under which Burma and India had retained a single overarching colonial administration but two distinct governments. The final years of the diarchy are considered unremarkable by historians. Most have characterised these years as a period of immobilism in which the colony of Burma remained in the 'political doldrums' and during which 'the only thing of any significance was 'the rise of the *Thakin* party'.⁴ The '*Thakins*' (Masters) were educated, radical young Burmese nationalists. Their emergence as a strong oppositional force suggests that the years 1932 – 1936 in which the political and constitutional groundwork for separation took place, and during which the colonial authorities attempted to re-establish order and heightened control over Burmese society, were less placid than might be imagined.

³ Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 285.

⁴ John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1965), 356.

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However, the *Thakins* were not the only radical nationalists to start organising during these years. Political nationalism of the type considered to have caused the rebellion was also increasing at this time. Against this background of incipient indigenous political organization, the colonial authorities considered these years an experimental phase in which new strategies of social control could be tested, refined and put in place before separation from India. With the departure of the Indian military that had aided the government during the rebellion, developing a functioning intelligence system that enabled the state to operate with minimal resources became paramount. In these years the security of the state and effective political intelligence gathering became virtually synonymous. Safeguards to ensure the dominance of the colonial state were developed in the form of more far-reaching intelligence services.

The intelligence services were necessarily concerned with the intent of indigenous actors. This was less a search for the identification of individual seditionists capable of mounting armed attacks than a broader quest to identify popular grievances that might be capable of catalysing mass support for any call to rebellion, and preventing nationalists and other radical agitators from mobilising that support. The intelligence services therefore concentrated on the ideas that the Burmese expressed and the ways in which such views were articulated. In order to understand and control this process, the security services both intercepted and censored letters and other reading material that the Burmese circulated amongst themselves. As a result, the intelligence services were at the forefront of the state's efforts to regulate the communication of ideas within indigenous society. Establishing an intelligence cycle went hand in hand with imposing state control over the information order; in other words, it fell to the security services to uncover, understand, and regulate the communication of political ideas within Burmese civil society. The security services first systematically attempted to counter the expression of hostile political views amongst known representatives of Burmese civil society in the years following rebellion. Further refinements took place in the years preceding separation from India. One consequence was that, in the eyes of colonial officials, Burmese society was reordered – standardised and classified in new ways – during the 1930s. These new demarcations strove to separate

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the reliable from the unreliable, the loyal from the disloyal, and thereby sought to impose new forms of political conformity in Burmese society. Yet the state was handicapped by the prejudices and presumptions of its own intelligence providers regarding indigenous society. And this problem was compounded by the inability of intelligence users, managers and gatherers to make any real inroads towards narrowing the divisions between rulers and ruled, between colonial authority and Burma's civil society.

Bayly notes that British colonial rule placed its faith in 'pure information'.⁵ Reliable information about indigenous affairs – and, of course, the ability to act swiftly upon it - ensured the stability of colonial rule. In Burma colonial officials sought to construct an intelligence machine that was both efficient in transmitting incoming information and effective in producing reliable analysis of that information. Put simply, the intelligence services worked to counter indigenous nationalists' efforts to win over the aggrieved subaltern groups to their anti-state viewpoint and lead them in rebellion against the government. The intelligence branch monitored the activities of nationalists and disrupted their ability to spread their views. The authorities believed that the construction of a perfectly functioning feedback cycle of intelligence would, in turn, assure political order.⁶ However, Bayly further observes in the Indian context that obtaining 'pure information' became problematic when sourcing that information from native informants who were often found untrustworthy.⁷ Feedback failure in the intelligence cycle of the Indian colonial authorities occurred where these local agents provided inaccurate information, or even disinformation, which frustrated the functioning of the cycle. In Burma, too, this failure occurred in the collection of raw information by intelligence gatherers. During the rebellion local informers had often proved unreliable. But the underlying dilemma remained: establishing a functioning intelligence machine/cycle demanded that working relationships be forged with local agents, and during 1932 – 1936 efforts were

⁵ C. A. Bayly, "Knowing the Country: Empire and information in India," *Modern Asian Studies*, 27, no. 1 special issue: How Social, Political and Cultural Information is Collected, Defined, Used and Analysed (1993): 3 – 43 at 3.

⁶ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. date: December 1930-March 1932, War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 03 Feb. 1932, 131.

⁷ Bayly, op. cit., 4.

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made in Burma to link together these nodes of the intelligence cycle while introducing more trustworthy indigenous members as the providers of raw intelligence. This meant, in practice, that efforts to win the collaboration of members of the population proceeded apace after the end of the rebellion.

The state's development of the intelligence services after Saya San was an acknowledgment that the politicisation and heightened organisational capacity of Burmese opposition posed an ever-present threat to state control and had to be countered. Since colonial rule was, ipso facto, bound to remain non-consensual, no real efforts were made to accommodate the indigenous majority to the British presence. Rather, the authorities pursued the lesser target of preventing anti-government rebellion. Some degree of popular hostility would always be present in Burma. The objective was to prevent its coalescence into rebellious activity. This objective was best served by targeting political organisations deemed responsible for rebellious activity. By expanding their understanding of the politicisation of Burmans through surveillance and intelligence gathering, the intelligence services and the government of Burma refined their understanding of Burman culture and activity. More precise and detailed codifications for varying types of Burmese nationalists were developed, a reflection of the fact that it was in the immediate post-rebellion/pre-separation period that Burmese radical nationalism was first examined in depth by state security agencies. Fears of communism, increasing in the 1930s, shaped the authorities choices of intelligence targets.⁸ Nationalists who espoused left-wing ideals posed the gravest concern to colonial security agencies and the intelligence services began acting more vigorously to counter these threats.

Intelligence user's approach to intelligence reform

Reverting for a moment to the wider political background to these security reforms, it is worth recalling that by August 1933 MacDonald's National Government had decided on Burma's separation from India and the Secretary of State for India, Sir David Taylor Montearth, presented a scheme for further

⁸ BL IOR V/27/262/5 India. Intelligence Bureau, India and communism. Reprint, 1935. Simla, 1935.

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constitutional reform in Burma (to be implemented once separation from India took place) to the Joint Committee.⁹ The Joint Committee was a British parliamentary inquiry held to examine the future political status of colonial India and Burma. It met 154 times during 1933 to 1934 and the final product was the Government of India Act, 1935, in which it was made plain that Burma was to be governed as a unitary state.¹⁰ This decision entailed great discussion regarding the future of intelligence in Burma. The rebellion had demonstrated the importance of sound information, quickly gathered, processed, and exploited, as a means to prevent disorder. All levels of colonial government in Burma recognised this. The Viceroy of India, Lord Willingdon Freeman-Thomas, the Governor of Burma, Sir Hugh Landsdowne Stephenson, who replaced Sir Charles Innes in 1933, the Secretary of State for Burma, H. H. Craw and Monteath, occupied the most senior positions of intelligence users in the intelligence cycle and, alongside their principal advisors in Delhi, Rangoon and the India Office, were deeply involved in intelligence reform (see Appendix B). The intelligence users ultimately determined the policy priorities of colonial government in Burma and, to that end, sought to establish an intelligence bureau that would restore colonial security after the shock of Saya San.¹¹ Monteath reported to Stephenson that the government 'required a permanent organisation to obtain and coordinate information as to the activities of societies responsible for rebellion'.¹² A review of the intelligence users' approach to intelligence indicates the broad scope and purpose of intelligence gathering in Burma. Post-rebellion, the government was aware that the Burmese could organise into a formidable political force, one which had to be understood politically, socially and culturally if it was to be effectively contained. As we have seen, it fell to the intelligence services to serve as the means of containment.

⁹ BL IOR Neg 9691 L/PJ/12/734 Burma Local Government Report Burma August 1933 42.

¹⁰ John Leroy Christian, *Modern Burma: A Survey of Political and Economic Development* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1942), 73.

¹¹ see BL IOR M/1/93 - Safeguards for control of Special Branch (Criminal Investigations Department) and Intelligence which collects letters and reports produce by these intelligence users on the crucial role intelligence played in maintaining colonial rule and requirements for its safeguarding on separation.

¹² Ibid, Letter from Under Secretary of State for India and Burma Sir David Monteath to Sir Hugh Stephenson Governor of Burma 21 Jul. 1934, 14.

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As the last chapter described, the Head of the Indian brigades in Burma during the rebellion, Brigadier Cummings had suggested that an intelligence 'machine' be created during meetings at Government House in Tharawaddy.¹³ The outlying elements of the machine would work in villages throughout the country, reporting back to the colonial government at the centre. District Commissioners and Police officers were to liaise with indigenous informers and send intelligence reports to an intelligence bureau in Burma, which, in turn reported to the intelligence users in government.¹⁴ The machine was expected to operate in the manner of an intelligence cycle. The intelligence 'machine' would issue commands to gatherers who would collect intelligence and provide it to the centre which would respond accordingly. Cummings considered this a cost-effective measure that would provide advance warning of troubles. Burma's security forces could then suppress disorder before it escalated to dangerous levels. Armed with reliable information, the colonial authorities, despite their minimal presence in the interior of the country, could prevent major disorder and so avoid making belated demands for large scale and prohibitively expensive military resources to suppress unrest. Constructing an intelligence cycle was pivotal to this aim.

In theory at least, the Governors of India and Burma and the Under Secretary of State for India would receive intelligence and exploit it when devising policy for Burma. However, as Michael Herman notes, the intelligence cycle is rarely so neat; the nodes of the cycle overlap often in real life intelligence gathering projects.¹⁵ Intelligence users often influence intelligence management. Freeman-Thomas, Stephenson, Craw and Monteath, took a keen interest in the development and functioning of intelligence in Burma and oversaw the construction of the intelligence machine. This was to be expected given the fundamental role that intelligence occupied in colonial rule. Their discussions made it quite clear that they considered intelligence vital to the political security of British rule and they thus expected to hold the reins over intelligence reforms.

¹³ BL IOR L/MIL/5/862 War Diaries of the Burma Rebellion 1930-1932: Burma District HQ ('G' Branch) - ref. date: December 1930-March 1932 War Diary of Rangoon Commanding Brigadier 03 Mar. 1932, 185.

¹⁴ see BL IOR V/24/3242 Burma: Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1922-1933, 56 for descriptions of the administration of intelligence gathering.

¹⁵ Herman, *op. cit.*, 288.

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Perhaps unsurprisingly, in their preliminary discussions on the state of intelligence in Burma, Stephenson and Monteath stressed the importance of secrecy in intelligence administration. The new intelligence bureau was to be hidden from the oversight of Burman representatives 'for purposes of political camouflage'.¹⁶ They repeatedly emphasised the need to exclude indigenous representatives from any involvement in the development of the intelligence bureau. Material collected by confidential agents was therefore systematically withheld from Burman ministers.¹⁷ In more abstract terms, we might think of the users' approach to intelligence as vertical. It allowed no input on the part of the population into any of the nodes of the cycle beyond that of raw intelligence gathering by local informants. Reliant on these informants at the base of the intelligence gathering hierarchy, it shut them out thereafter. Here, the insights of Ann Stoler make more sense. As she observes, 'colonial hegemony was by definition never secure. Its power rested on more than control of material resources; it relied on the colonist's ability to establish and change the definitions of danger and the public good, on his ability to give the impression of an impervious authority despite contests to it'.¹⁸ By using intelligence to construct a reliable picture of political threats to state rule the Government could, it hoped, pursue the non-democratic tendencies of separation unhindered.

The vital role of intelligence in securing the authority of colonial rule was especially notable in discussions between Monteath and the Chief Secretary to the Governor of Burma H. H. Crow during late July 1934 over the role the Governor should take in response to intelligence on terrorism. Monteath remarked that 'the suppression of terrorism is of paramount importance... the Act should give the Governor special powers entitling him to assume charge of any branch of government'.¹⁹ Stephenson replied, suggesting a special clause be included in the Government of Burma Act for separation. This would 'enable

¹⁶ BL IOR M/1/93 - Safeguards for control of Special Branch (Criminal Investigations Department) and Intelligence Letter from Sir Hugh Stephenson Governor of Burma to Under Secretary of State for India and Burma Sir David Monteath 21 Jul. 1934, 59.

¹⁷ Ibid, 53.

¹⁸ Ann Stoler, "Perceptions of Protest: Defining the Dangerous in Colonial Sumatra," *American Ethnologist*, 12, no. 4 (1985): 642-658 at 655.

¹⁹ BL IOR M/1/93 - Safeguards for control of Special Branch (Criminal Investigations Department) and Intelligence: Letter from Under Secretary of State for India and Burma Sir David Monteath to Sir Hugh Stephenson Governor of Burma 21 Jul. 1934, 11.

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the Governor to deal, on the basis of information received from the Defence Intelligence, with terrorism, widespread subversive movements, such as the late rebellion, and possibly in the future with subversive communist movements'.²⁰

The Delhi Intelligence Bureau's warning about the rising influence of communism in Burma was predicated on its observation of a 'weaning of those [who] were behind rebellion from crude forms of propaganda and organisation which were then employed to more practical and subtle methods'.²¹ More elaborate and better organised conspiracies were expected, justifying the Governor's arrogation of key powers to himself at the first sign of any kind of dissent. As soon as the intelligence services deemed Burman activity a threat to the security of state, the Governor would be 'entitled to dismiss the minister in charge of the police' and 'declare a breakdown of the constitution and assume powers requisite for dealing with the situation' Stephenson stated in July 1934 when discussing the role of intelligence for the Governor's powers in a separate Burma. The growing tendency to equate terrorism with communism chimed with the government's painting of the rebellion as entirely political in origin. The official report produced by the government considered the Saya San rebellion 'entirely political', dismissing the role of economic grievances in what was 'undoubtedly a rebellion organised to overthrow the existing government by force of arms'.²² The government was on the lookout for political movements which may, again, agitate a rebellion against the government, and communism was considered the most likely contender for dissent.

By defining intelligence targets, intelligence users also codified their normative standards of what was – and was not - acceptable behaviour in colonial society. Intelligence targets that behaved in ways contrary to those normative standards were henceforth deemed enemies of the state. Burmans who expressed economic and political ideas which were counter to the colonial state were

²⁰ BL IOR M/3/750 Civil and Military Police in Burma; proposed arrangements in event of separation from Burma from India; proposed defence force; transfer of personnel from Burma Frontier Force to Burma Military Police 19 Oct. 1939 - 3 Apr. 1941, 7.

²¹ BL IOR V/27/262/5 India. Intelligence Bureau, India and communism, Reprint, 1935. Simla, 77.

²² BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 – 1932, Origin and Causes of Burma Rebellion 1930-1932, Government of Burma, 1934, 38.

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dubbed a threat. The Intelligence Branch reported in 1933 that 'communism is gaining a hold on the impressionable minds of the youth of Burma'.²³ Stephenson elaborated on the dangers of communism in discussion with Monteath. On separation they feared that the police and, with them, the CID, would become subject to the overview of an elected Burman representative.²⁴ If this individual had communist sympathies the intelligence bureau would be compromised. Major enemies (communists) of imperial administration might gain information about the colonial government's intelligence apparatus. The bureau could not possibly stay within the apparatus of the police for fear that pro-communist Burmans, whether among police ranks or with connections to them, would have access to secret information about police activity.²⁵ It was decided by Monteath in 1934 that, as a result of these concerns, the bureau would have to be removed to the defence department where there was no such requirement for scrutiny by a Burman representative. The fear of communism justified the removal of the intelligence bureau from any purview by the Burmans, a development that only made clearer that the governor of Burma was constructing an intelligence bureau to counter the spread of subversive political ideas that threatened colonial rule. Rather than concede political control to Burman representative the state invoked the fear of communism to ensure its grasp on power.

The fear of communism was prevalent throughout the Indian Intelligence services and, Burma still being a part of India, it is unsurprising that they shared a number of similar concerns. Intelligence concerns relevant to India featured in police and other intelligence reports produced in Burma after the rebellion.²⁶ The activities of Bengali communists in Burma feature especially prominently. In the subcontinent an intelligence led crackdown on communism in Bengal successfully repressed rebellion there during 1930 – 1933 explaining its

²³ BL IOR V/24/3242 Burma: Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1922-1933, 43.

²⁴ BL IOR M/1/93 - Safeguards for control of Special Branch (Criminal Investigations Department) and Intelligence Letter from Sir Hugh Stephenson Governor of Burma to Under Secretary of State for India and Burma Sir David Monteath 21 Jul. 1934, 53.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 59.

²⁶ BL IOR V/24/3242 Burma: Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1922-1933, 43.

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prominence in Burma's intelligence reporting.²⁷ Intelligence gathering on Bengali targets aided the Indian government's repression of rebellion. However, new notions of indigenous Burmans as discrete, locally-focused political actors also began to appear in intelligence reports. The rebellion had stimulated a desire to understand the population of Burma in their own right, beyond the wider parameters of Raj politics, thus overcoming the longstanding British ignorance about the specificities of Burmese opposition. The security services inevitably focused on those sectors of indigenous society, especially 'subversive political societies' judged 'responsible for the rebellion'.²⁸ Ann Stoler considers the 'written rhetoric' of colonialists as an 'active voice, advocating action (or inaction) in certain prescribed ways'.²⁹ The intelligence services gathered information about indigenous society with pre-determined expectations of active opposition, which, in turn, encouraged the government, army and security forces to take certain repressive actions against those elements in society labelled potentially seditious. The irony was obvious and has been pointed out in the context of the Dutch East Indies by Stoler who observes that the least important members in the process of providing written rhetoric to colonial government were the indigenous people who were the focus of that rhetoric.³⁰ The intelligence services gathered information on the population to enable the government to maintain its control, not for the benefit of the population.

Stephenson and Monteath's discussions reflected a concern over the spread of political ideas throughout Burmese society. The intelligence bureau would have to operate in areas of society where the dissemination of subversive ideas took place; the media, schools, unions, which were, to borrow Gramscian terminology, the 'hegemonic apparatuses' of civil society.³¹ In order to do so, bureau staff intercepted communications, censored offensive material and had a network of informers working for them. Stephenson was attuned to the

²⁷ BL IOR L/PJ/12/466 Mar.-Jul. 1933 Report on work of Central and District Intelligence Branches in Bengal from Intelligence Bureau Government of India, Simla to Indian Political Intelligence 04 May 1933, 28.

²⁸ BL IOR M/1/93 - Safeguards for control of Special Branch (Criminal Investigations Department) and Intelligence Letter from Secretary to the Governor of Burma Craw to Under Secretary of State Monteath 18 Dec. 1936, 12.

²⁹ Stoler, op. cit., 643.

³⁰ Ibid, 643.

³¹ Chantal Mouffe, "Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci," in *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge and Paul Kegan Ltd, 1979), 187.

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prevention of hostile political activity in Burma, before rebellion broke out. In May 1933, he referred to recent rebellious activity in his monthly intelligence report to Willingdon. Leaflets advocating rebellion in familiar millenarian-style language had been circulated in Prome. Counter-propaganda swiftly met this and the Governor voiced hope that no such rebellion would transpire.³²

Manipulation of the information order was the primary means of suppressing dissent. Stephenson then noted that while rebellion would fail, a campaign of civil disobedience was possible; 'this difference may be crucial'.³³ As Crawford Young notes in his analysis of the African colonial state, civil disobedience, 'action that recognises the law while disobeying it' may be tolerated by the colonial state.³⁴ The intelligence users expected the intelligence bureau to keep the dial at the point of civil disobedience, or, at least to ensure that it never moved from there to the point of rebellion.

As we have seen, the intelligence users in Burma, with the Governors of Burma and India and the Under Secretary of State for India at their apex, were alert to the importance of intelligence post-rebellion and were actively involved in the establishment of the new bureau. They outlined their understanding of political activity in Burma and highlighted the areas of concern to which the intelligence bureau was expected to respond. This hands-on approach to intelligence at the upper echelons of colonial authority was in keeping with imperial tradition, Lord Curzon, former governor of India having played a vital role in intelligence reforms in India at the beginning of the century.³⁵ Intelligence users, confronted with a society they feared, constructed what they considered the most effective means of neutralising that threat, a new intelligence bureau.

³² BL IOR Neg 9691 L/PJ/12/734 Burma Local Government Report Burma Jun. 1933, 28.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1994), 35.

³⁵ BL IOSM Mss Eur F161/212 *Intelligence bureau, Government of India* Intelligence Department: papers relating to the creation of Criminal Intelligence Department and the operation of the Central Intelligence Officer System 1937-1947 F. W. Kidd, 13.

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Political Intelligence management in post-rebellion Burma

Intelligence managers occupy the node below the intelligence users in the intelligence cycle. A special intelligence bureau, part of the CID, constructed in 1934 managed intelligence collection in Burma on a temporary basis.³⁶ After this, the intelligence users envisaged that it would be removed from police control on separation. The special intelligence bureau was thus at the epicentre of intelligence management and reforms in post-rebellion Burma. Intelligence gathering with an avowedly political purview was a new development requiring specialist management. There was a concerted effort to manage Burma's intelligence gathering from this administrative centre according to a standardised set of rules. Intelligence managers elaborated these rules and also determined the designation that intelligence gatherers throughout the country were to follow; the 'duty of the intelligence branch of the CID [was to] coordinate and draw conclusions from district intelligence reports'.³⁷ Intelligence managers thereby provided the template for intelligence activity in Burma. In doing so they expanded the state's mission to regulate society. An intelligence branch with a specialist directive was required, rather than one that primarily gathered criminal intelligence and merely targeted political intelligence as incidental as the CID had done previously. The governors of Burma and India considered this a preparatory exercise for the separation of Burma from India anticipated in 1935, but, due to domestic opposition to the separation constitution, delayed until 1937.³⁸ Extra resources were allocated for intelligence gathering by the state while the country prepared for separation.³⁹ The colonial state expanded its understanding of civil society by centralising the management of the information order in Burma.

³⁶ BL IOR V/24/3243 Burma. Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1934-1939, 38.

³⁷ BL IOR V/24/3242 Burma: Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1922-1933, 56.

³⁸ BL IOR M/1/93 - Safeguards for control of Special Branch (Criminal Investigations Department) and Intelligence Letter from Sir Hugh Stephenson Governor of Burma to Under Secretary of State for India and Burma Sir David Monteath 04 Nov. 1936, 2.

³⁹ Ibid, Letter from Sir Hugh Stephenson Governor of Burma to Under Secretary of State for India and Burma Sir David Monteath 21 Jul. 1934, 58.

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The authorities continued to perceive the population through the prism of the rebellion after its cessation. Guha notes that the 'prose of counterinsurgency' was not limited to the duration of a counter-rebellion campaign.⁴⁰ The Burmese were considered likely to rebel again. When discussing the purview of future intelligence branches, officials noted that, in Burma, rebellions 'spring up like mushrooms in the night and early information of their outbreak must primarily be the concern of district intelligence systems'.⁴¹ In order to provide early information, a more detailed understanding of Burmese society was required. Intelligence managers needed to develop categories for understanding the political, social, cultural and economic features of Burman society that might lead to rebellion.

On the formation of the temporary special intelligence bureau, police officials hoped 'that the new arrangements made will have the result of enabling local government to deal effectively with subversive movements in their initial stages'.⁴² These 'new arrangements' referred to the admission of additional staff to the intelligence branch of the CID, which took place during 1933. Intelligence 'needed improvement' and 'abundant material [was] circulated with instructions on incorporating other officers into the intelligence scheme'.⁴³ The entire police administration was being integrated into the intelligence system. A District Superintendent of police with two inspectors and four sub-inspectors of police with four head constables were appointed to this branch. They occupied the intelligence management node of the cycle.⁴⁴ It was charged with supplementing district intelligence systems and 'to cope with the single finger print system respectively'.⁴⁵ Concerted efforts were made to collect personal data on troublemakers in society. All Detective Superintendents of Police were urged to 'make surveillance key' and 'impress on subordinates the need to

⁴⁰ Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counterinsurgency" in *Subaltern Studies II, Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1.

⁴¹ BL IOR V/24/3242 Burma: Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1922-1933, 56.

⁴² BL IOR V/24/3242 Burma: Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1922-1933, 56.

⁴³ BL IOR V/24/3243 Burma. Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1934-1939, 51.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ BL IOR V/24/3242 Burma: Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1922-1933, 3.

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collect information on criminals for comparative purposes'.⁴⁶ During this expansion the intelligence branch was repeatedly referred to as a temporary bureau; a permanent bureau was a project for separation from India. It was in an experimental phase during this time. In 1933, the demands of the colonial government were to hold the line until separation, and the temporary intelligence bureau assisted them in this.

Histories of Burma highlight the development and rationalisation of colonial state institutions throughout the 1920s.⁴⁷ The increase in intelligence gathering in the 1930s might be considered a facet of this, part of the state's broader modernisation. However, as Bayly observes, the rapid growth in intelligence apparatuses following rebellions in British India were 'far from... rational responses to the need of the modern state': in fact rebellions stimulated 'official agencies through curious parabolas of growth'.⁴⁸ The development of intelligence bureaus was a panicked reaction to the outbursts of hostility to the state.⁴⁹ In Burma, the expansion of the state was less a concomitant of modernisation than of the desire to control the population in the interests of state security. The special intelligence bureau's adoption of finger printing techniques in 1933 is an indication of the state's mounting concerns with identification and control of the population.⁵⁰ John Leroy Christian notes that the CID eventually built up 225,000 fingerprints of 'persons with criminal histories'.⁵¹ Finger printing aided the surveillance of individuals who might provoke hostility to the government. This would provide the warning signals the government required from the intelligence bureau. The rebellion provoked the development of more sophisticated means of state surveillance – however, these were not fail-safe mechanisms.

⁴⁶ BL IOR V/24/3243 Burma. Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1934-1939, 10.

⁴⁷ see Carl A. Trocki, "Political Structures in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries" in *The Cambridge History of South East Asia Volume Two Part One: From c. 1800 to the 1930s*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 114.

⁴⁸ Bayly, op. cit., 38.

⁴⁹ Bayly, op. cit., 39.

⁵⁰ BL IOR V/24/3242 Burma: Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1922-1933, 3.

⁵¹ John Leroy Christian, *Modern Burma: A Survey of Political And Economic Development* (London: University of California Press, 1942), 160.

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James C. Scott argues that a state's efforts to impose simplified categories on a subject population are doomed to failure.⁵² The state observes 'only those aspects of social life that are of official interest', while rejecting those aspects that are important to grass-roots society.⁵³ In Burma, from the outset, the intelligence apparatus imposed simplifications on the Burmese and neglected their culture. The view of the Burmese as rebellious was the template for intelligence gatherers, as the report on the causes of the rebellion indicated it should be; information was gathered with regard to the likelihood of the population's rising in rebellion while information regarding their grievances was of lesser importance. Scott observes that in colonialist settings indigenous locals mediate the relationship between state and civil society, carrying out the demands of government among the population. Burmese society was a force to be reckoned with by the colonial state which made links with its members in order to better manage the flow of information through society. The intelligence bureau, with its staff and informers, was the embodiment of these efforts.

The intelligence managers' efforts to classify society in Burma exemplified a tendency Scott considers typical of the modern state's efforts to impose simplified categories on society which aid the 'state functions of taxation, conscription and prevention of rebellion'.⁵⁴ Historian of Burma Michael Aung Thwin anticipated Scott's arguments, describing British colonial efforts to carve up the country into recognisable categories as an imposition of 'order without meaning'.⁵⁵ The categories adopted by the centralised intelligence bureau for Burman society were entirely imposed, not derived from a dialogue with indigenous society. Intelligence reports reflected the interests of the colonial authorities as was evident from the manner in which the Burmese vote on separation from India in 1932 was discussed.⁵⁶

⁵² James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: how certain schemes to improve the human condition failed* (London: Yale University Press, 1998), 2.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 80.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 2.

⁵⁵ Michael Aung Thwin, "The British 'Pacification' of Burma: Order without Meaning," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 16, no. 2, (1985): 245-261.

⁵⁶ BL IOR Neg 9691 L/PJ/12/723 Burma 1932 Burma local government report Oct. 1932, 54.

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In 1932 the population of Burma was asked to participate in a forthcoming election on the question of separation of Burma from India, mooted for 1935, and indicate whether they were in favour of the measure or not. If no clear popular decision were forthcoming, the Westminster parliament would decide on separation. The entire process was disingenuous as the British government had by this point already decided in favour of separation.⁵⁷ Unaware of this fait accompli, the Burmese broadly voted against separation. But, as anticipated, the decision of the Joint Committee to separate in 1935 was passed anyway in complete disregard of Burmese hostility towards the move.⁵⁸ Stephenson, in his intelligence reports for Freeman-Thomas, noted that all the Burmans he encountered expressed 'universal criticism' of the decision to separate.⁵⁹ This gulf between popular will and policy-makers' intentions seeped into intelligence reportage. Reports on grass-roots political mobilisation described it in a way that dismissed popular grievances. Stephenson wrote that the elections were a 'farce'.⁶⁰ The pongyis (Buddhist monks) were reported to have intimidated the population and used propaganda to influence the vote. Thus, the description of local political activity in terms of conspirators inciting unrest among the population was already in evidence in 1933, and was used here to justify the separation of Burma from India, thereby confirming that the popular vote was considered worthless in the eyes of the government.

Gramscian theory contends that hegemony 'operates principally in civil society in the actualisation of the interests of the fundamental class... in order to form a collective will, a unified political subject'.⁶¹ It is, therefore, amongst civil society that the state must disrupt the organisation of the population for action against the state. This was the function of the intelligence services. Intelligence was managed from the centre but in order for the intelligence services to gain any knowledge of events within civil society, the intelligence cycle had to function at the ground level in society itself. This was where intelligence gatherers operated, working at the most vulnerable node of the intelligence cycle.

⁵⁷ BL IOR L/PJ/12/480 Activities of Indians in Japan and Japanese Propaganda in India, Special Branch report Sep. 1931, 8.

⁵⁸ BL IOR Neg 9691 L/PJ/12/723 Burma 1932 Burma local government report Oct. 1932, 54.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, Aug. 42.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, Oct. 54.

⁶¹ Mouffe in "Hegemony and ideology," ed. Mouffe, *op. cit.*, 10.

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Intelligence gathering and the organisation of grass-roots society

After the official end of the rebellion in October 1932, the colonial authorities had by no means ensured that a functioning intelligence cycle was in place.⁶² The rebels' hold on the information order had been broken, as discussed in chapter one, but bringing that information order under the control of the state remained an aspiration yet to be fulfilled. Governor Innes still reported of headmen too terrified to speak for fear of rebel reprisals in early 1932 and of informers murdered long after Indian troops had returned home.⁶³ Any reports of 'rebel preparations' or activities 'preparatory to uprising' were dealt with swiftly through the use of 'preventive sections' and vigorous punitive action.⁶⁴ but this only made the task of re-establishing reliable links with the local population harder, a task that was delegated to District Commissioners and Police Officers moving in to secured areas after the rebellion. These officials worked in local districts throughout Burma and reported their observations to the special intelligence bureau. They provided all the data for the temporary bureau which drew up reports for the Governor for the years 1933 to 1935. Deputy Commissioners were in charge of gathering the information from villages and tried to forge working relationships with Burman representatives of those villages. This was where the colonial state sought to lay down the building blocks of its relationship with indigenous society and so create the foundations of a new information order.

State and indigenous society thus came into direct contact through the meetings between police officers, commissioners, their deputies, and local headmen, and this was the most vulnerable point of the intelligence cycle: as the rebellion had demonstrated, the headmen frequently chose not to pass on relevant information to the authorities. Nevertheless, native informants provided the colonial state with some understanding of events within indigenous society. Looking forward to 1936, police reports still emphasised the importance of close

⁶² BL IOR Neg 9691 L/PJ/12/723 Burma local government report Oct. 1932, 52.

⁶³ Ibid, Jan, 2.

⁶⁴ Ibid, Dec, 62.

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relations with village headmen, the 'backbone of the administration'.⁶⁵ Intelligence was clearly at the heart of this connection between state and the indigenous population; Martin Thomas observes that French and British colonial states in the Middle East were 'intelligence states' whose authority was sustained by the information gathered locally by administrative officers who formed part of a vast intelligence apparatus.⁶⁶ Burma was an intelligence state not only because the state relied on political information to maintain its power, but also because indigenous society's relationship to the state was mediated by the intelligence services. But the system had limits. The state's contacts with the population were necessarily confined to those members of society who were willing and able to provide information.⁶⁷

In a number of districts in central Burma institutions of the state were being built anew following the devastation of the rebellion. The provinces worst afflicted by the rebellion had been purged of those accused of collaborating with the colonial administration, headmen et al, many of whom had been murdered as the last chapter described. In rebuilding state control from the bottom up, forging links with new informers who would provide the state with intelligence was a crucial first step. Deputy Commissioner John Keith Stanford kept a diary of his experiences in establishing just such a local intelligence gathering apparatus in Kachin State during 1933. As we shall see, his recollections afford a micro-political analysis of the nature of the intelligence cycle on the ground. Karl Hack observes that the 'effectiveness of intelligence at any one time cannot be gauged by its organisational condition alone'.⁶⁸ Intelligence needs to be examined at its point of contact to be understood.

Stanford, as Deputy Commissioner, was expected to manage local society for state ends. 'Active and conscientious Deputy Commissioners exercised

⁶⁵ BL IOR V/24/3243 Burma. Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1934-1939, 53.

⁶⁶ Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial disorder after 1914* (London: University of California Press, 2008), 107.

⁶⁷ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932 Hints for guidance of civil officers in the event of outbreak of disturbances in Burma by G. S. Carey, Commissioner in Sagaing Division, 582.

⁶⁸ Hack, op. cit., 131.

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executive and judicial authority' in the provinces.⁶⁹ They were the 'linchpins between British dominated central administration and largely indigenous local govt officials'.⁷⁰ Stanford oversaw the integration of the information order into colonial administration in Myitkina district, Kachin State from 1933 - 1936. This required the selection and appointment of local headmen as well as ensuring that they reported to colonial officials thereafter. It was a difficult job. Headmen had deserted their posts for months at a time during the rebellion and the vestiges of colonial rule they represented had vanished.⁷¹

Headmen were a major concern not only because of desertion from their posts; some had actively cooperated with the rebels in 1930. Stanford recalled an incident prior to the rebellion in his diaries during which a local headman had impeded the investigations of the police into the whereabouts of Department of Forestry guns in late 1930.⁷² The headmen had refused to reveal any information he held about the matter. On another occasion during the rebellion a headman had leaked crucial information to a target about to be arrested. The headman 'had information on the rebellion's imminence' and refused to accompany the police party in charge of the arrest.⁷³ It is striking, however, that despite this evidence of divided loyalties, the colonial administration once again turned to headmen to support them by providing the bulk of information on village-level developments. The rebellion had proven, after all, that without their assistance colonial order crumbled rapidly. That is not to say that headmen were viewed uncritically. As Stanford pointed out, referring to papers that were being circulated throughout Burma from Henzada division, Irrawaddy, several hundred miles to the south of his position in Myitkina district, Deputy Commissioners were advised to take particular care in their relations with village leaders.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Cady, *op. cit.*, 93.

⁷⁰ Taylor, *op. cit.*, 80.

⁷¹ BL IOSM Mss Eur E244/2, Papers of John Keith Stanford (1892-1971), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1919-38 Correspondence and papers from the office of the Deputy Commissioner, Myitkina report to the Commissioner, 127.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

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Lieutenant-Colonel De Vine was another colonial police officer, working in Pegu, and like Stanford he recorded his efforts to administer a locality with the minimal means available to him in 1933. As we saw in chapter one, De Vine had played an important role in the development of new intelligence practices during the rebellion. He was now expected to pay particular attention to cultivating local intelligence sources of information as he oversaw the administration of villages under his jurisdiction. De Vine recorded his experiences in a diary as he toured villages in Pegu.⁷⁵ Touring was itself a vital part of colonial policing and all officers were directed to tour frequently.⁷⁶ While touring, officers met with headmen and other informers in the villages who gave them a picture of what was happening in their domains. De Vine listed a 'servant to a wealthy household' and a 'cultivator's tailor' among his informants from whom he asked for 'political news' when touring a village in February 1935.⁷⁷ Like other officers, De Vine left instructions for local officials to follow, and he reviewed the execution of these on the subsequent tour. De Vine recorded his experiences of following up the investigation of murders, public sanitation work, and birth and death registration in the villages.⁷⁸ Through such varied means, police officers asserted order by ensuring that information was systematically recorded – and works undertaken - in the villages in their absence. If information was recorded properly and designated work was completed it suggested that colonial regulation of local affairs was proceeding well. By touring, the police, acting at once as advisers, scrutineers and gatherers of intelligence, made links between the local information providers in village communities. Deputy Commissioners were thus a fleeting, but important presence in village society. In Cooper's terminology, colonial governance was certainly 'thin' and still required the compliance of indigenous officials to function.

In Stanford's intelligence reports and in his efforts to build a local intelligence apparatus as described in his diary, he adopted a meticulous approach to the

⁷⁵ BL IOSM Mss Eur F246/13 Papers, diaries and photographs of Lieutenant-Colonel James Chancellor De Vine.

⁷⁶ BL IOR V/24/3242 Burma: Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1922-1933, 10.

⁷⁷ BL IOSM Mss Eur F246/13 Papers, diaries and photographs of Lieutenant-Colonel James Chancellor De Vine 08 Feb. 1935.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

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standardisation of intelligence gathering. Stanford exhorted officers to record information under fixed headings and submit their reports on fixed dates every month at the beginning of his command in July 1933.⁷⁹ The categories applied were wide ranging: political agitation, communal disturbances, crop prices and other economic factors such as wages, food prices, shortage of cash and employment and labour troubles, were the labels under which officers classified information about local society. The regularisation of such reporting procedures led to a great increase in the amount of information gathered in post-rebellion Burma assisting administrative efforts to restore meaningful control. Stanford certainly relied on the information provided by local officials to reassert colonial authority, reviewing the diaries of inspectors of excise, or receiving information from peons and utilising informers to build cases against criminals or other subversives.⁸⁰ Stanford, for instance, mentioned his reliance on the use of intelligence from spies to control smuggling, noting in one instance that, 'acting on his [the spy's] information, [Stanford] attempted to arrest smugglers who dropped the opium into the river'.⁸¹ He also recorded another instance of the use of surveillance against certain Europeans he described as 'undesirable political suspects who have been forbidden to enter Burma' in March 1935.⁸² Snapshots such as these challenge Callahan's contention that the military in Burma remained the most important guarantor of colonial order, and her suggestion that the state in Burma was one in which 'the military... had a prominent role in shaping individual and social behaviour'.⁸³ Contrary to this picture, it seems that, after the rebellion, management of the information order was equally critical to local administration and in shaping patterns of social behaviour as De Vine and Stanford's experiences attest.

⁷⁹ BL IOSM Mss Eur E244/2 Papers of John Keith Stanford (1892-1971): Indian Civil Service, Burma 1919-38 Correspondence and papers from the office of the Deputy Commissioner, on the political and economic situation in Magaung Sub Division 08 Jul. 1933, 198.

⁸⁰ BL IOSM Mss Eur 244/8 Papers of John Keith Stanford (1892-1971), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1919-38 Correspondence from the office of Deputy Commissioner to the Commissioner Apr. 1936, 291.

⁸¹ BL IOSM Mss Eur 244/7 Papers of John Keith Stanford (1892-1971), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1919-38 Correspondence from the office of Deputy Commissioner to the Superintendent of excise in Myitkina 03 Feb. 1936, 519.

⁸² BL IOSM Mss Eur E244/4 Papers of John Keith Stanford (1892-1971), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1919-38 Demi Official letter to Commissioner Myitkina 13 Mar. 1935, 24.

⁸³ Callahan, *op. cit.*, 31.

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Yet, by restoring some degree of control over the information order, the state did not ensure a perfectly reliable flow of intelligence. Much as some Burmans helped them, others frustrated Stanford and De Vine's efforts. Dissembling on the part of the target population obstructed accurate intelligence gathering. Police reports observed that headmen performed their tasks of assisting the colonial administration in the 'face of the apathy or opposition of the villagers'.⁸⁴ This was a classic example of what Scott describes as low-key efforts by a dependent population to frustrate state control through 'low profile stratagems' that impede the progress of the powerful but which do not amount to overt resistance.⁸⁵ Poaching is an example of this, a frequent occurrence in local villages in Burma, referred to by the police in regular reports from 1933 to 1936.⁸⁶ During their tours following the rebellion Stanford and De Vine recorded a number of occasions on which even the headmen engaged in such 'low profile stratagems', obstructing their efforts to bring the rural interior under central administrative control.

Take, for instance, a local policeman in Stanford's district who obstructed Kachin levies that were carrying a large consignment of opium in July 1933. The policeman refused to assume responsibility for the cache and ordered the Kachin on to another destination, inviting Stanford's censure.⁸⁷ Another headman was accused by an anonymous informer of interfering in a different opium case in December 1934.⁸⁸ Stanford charged a number of local representatives with opium use and failure to keep a diary as he had instructed. Apparently a minor infraction, it signified nonetheless that local officials were not adopting the notion of uniformity in administrative practice that the colonial authorities wished to impose. De Vine recorded similar instances of bribery and

⁸⁴ BL IOR V/24/3243 Burma. Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1934-1939, 51.

⁸⁵ Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance*, 188.

⁸⁶ BL IOR V/24/3243 Burma. Police Department: Report on the Police Administration of Burma, 1934-1939, 31.

⁸⁷ BL IOSM Mss Eur E244/2 Papers of John Keith Stanford (1892-1971): Indian Civil Service, Burma 1919-38 on the political and economic situation in Magaung Sub Division 08 Jul. 1933, 198.

⁸⁸ BL IOSM Mss Eur E244/3 Papers of John Keith Stanford (1892-1971): Indian Civil Service, Burma 1919-38 Enquiry into conduct of Mg po Kyi Headman of Pataung Dec. 1934, 439.

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non-cooperation by headmen in his district.⁸⁹ For all the standardisation and expansion of intelligence gathering in Burma it was often frustrated at its lowest level by unreliable indigenous intermediaries. Stanford's contacts with such individuals remained remote, as a review of his experiences in Kachin state indicates. A group of Tibetans had moved to Tazimwang, within Burma, and laid claim to the land there in September 1933.⁹⁰ The *Taungok* (a local headman with policing functions) reported on this to the *Kayaingok* (a similar figure to the *Taungok* with a higher status) who reported it to Stanford. The relationship between colonial officials and the indigenous population was thus complicated by a relatively long informational chain.

Once informed of it, Stanford acted on the information regarding the Tibetans by ordering a gang to 'go up there and cut these people off from their homes and then teach them a lesson'.⁹¹ He used the information received to apply violence in the face of perceived threats. Aside from his dubious methods, Stanford's experience here suggests that, far from constructing a reliable administrative 'machine' based on control over the flow of politically sensitive information, colonial officials were developing a tenuously negotiated relationship with the local population. While intelligence management post-rebellion standardised reporting and classification of society, this did not change the disposition of the population towards the colonial state. Stanford observed the situation in one district in Kachin state in July 1935, noting that *Kayaingoks* and *Taungoks* had not been put on a 'uniform basis' before. Some were 'little more than circle headmen who are supposed to report anything that happens in their tracts and collect tribute', meeting the assistant superintendent once a year to inform him of developments.⁹² This summary lends weight to the above observation that local officials held their positions by virtue of their capacity to provide information to the colonial state. Putting them on a 'uniform basis' was an

⁸⁹ BL IOSM Mss Eur F246/13 Papers, diaries and photographs of Lieutenant-Colonel James Chancellor De Vine.

⁹⁰ BL IOSM Mss Eur E244/2, Papers of John Keith Stanford (1892-1971): Indian Civil Service, Burma 1919-38, Report on Tibetans on Tazimwang 04 Sep. 1933, 202.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 243.

⁹² BL IOSM Mss Eur E244/4 Papers of John Keith Stanford (1892-1971), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1919-38, Demi Official letter to Commissioner Myitkina 20 Jul. 1935, 331.

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attempt to standardise the role of informers, but it could not alter the quality of information the *Taungoks* and *Kayaingoks* provided.

Stanford regarded his aim in Kachin state in classic terms of civilising mission, as an effort to introduce administrative modernisation to a backward people. He hoped that private investment would bring development to the area, in particular by developing the local jade mines.⁹³ But, in addition to his administrative duties, Stanford gathered information of his own, recording all details of the Kachin, including their hygiene and sexual behaviour. This, too, was politically useful. Reliable or not, such ethnographic information underpinned his subsequent comments in official correspondence about likely local reactions to government policy. Cooper and Stoler observe that colonial states typically attempted to influence 'the ways in which individuals, families and institutions were reproduced' by recording all details of their lives.⁹⁴ Classifying the Kachin was a first step in the process of reorganising their social practices in accordance with state aims.

All of this suggests that rebuilding local informational networks took precedence over the use of military troops to enforce administrative control in the remotest districts of Burma. Stanford acknowledged as much when reviewing the role of the military police in Kachin state in 1935. In this instance, the Governor agreed to Stanford's request that locally recruited peons (levies) assist the Taungok on policing and touring duties.⁹⁵ These levy forces were cheaper than the Military Police (MP), and, Stanford noted, local peons were better at providing information. The Military Police were 'useless' for this task.⁹⁶ Stanford expected the MP to perform an itinerant role, touring like district officials as a reminder of the government's presence and thereby demonstrating the administration's superior power as they had done during the rebellion. Even so, however, the

⁹³ BL IOSM Mss Eur E244/2, Papers of John Keith Stanford (1892-1971): Indian Civil Service, Burma 1919-38 Demi Official letter to Commissioner Myitkina Aug. 1933, 145.

⁹⁴ Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler introduction to *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Culture in a Bourgeois World* eds. Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler (London: University of California Press, 1997), vii.

⁹⁵ BL IOSM Mss Eur E244/4, Papers of John Keith Stanford (1892-1971): Indian Civil Service, Burma 1919-38, Demi Official letter to Commissioner Myitkina 20 Jul. 1935, 340.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

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provision of information rather than shows of strength remained the primary concern of colonial administrators.

To summarise, Stanford and De Vine played a minimal role in the day-to-day lives of the villagers under their jurisdiction. With such a minimal presence their ability to govern was limited by the quality of their relationships with local individuals, breakdowns in which could compromise the intelligence cycle. Stanford and De Vine's efforts to improve intelligence gathering at the local level nonetheless indicate a radical transformation in state efforts to control the information order after the rebellion. But, as their experiences demonstrated, such control remained extremely fragile.

The intelligence cycle in operation: threats and targets post-rebellion

The Government of Burma's report on the causes and origins of the Saya San rebellion was produced in May 1934 at a time when the administration was trying to construct a functioning intelligence cycle. As this section will indicate, the findings of the enquiry and the development of intelligence were closely related. The intelligence services were on the lookout for anything resembling the flashpoints of rebellion identified by the report. Hence the importance attached to what the report stated about political conspiracies, which, it claimed, were behind the rebellion. As a result, in July 1934 Monteath and Stephenson ordered the intelligence services to pay closer attention to organised political groups, monitoring their popularity at regional level.⁹⁷ This was itself part of a broader process in which a more precise understanding of indigenous Burmans' political inclinations was being developed. Given the responsibility to identify and prioritise likely threats, the intelligence services defined the state's enemies and legitimised their repression. In a struggle against a political opponent 'words are weapons, not analytical tools' Phillip Deery observes in his analysis

⁹⁷ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 – 1932, Origin and Causes of Burma Rebellion 1930-1932, Government of Burma, 1934, 21 and BL IOR M/1/93 - Safeguards for control of Special Branch (Criminal Investigations Department) and Intelligence Letter from Under Secretary of State for India and Burma Sir David Monteath to Sir Hugh Stephenson Governor of Burma 21 Jul. 1934, 14.

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of language and terrorism in British Malaya in 1948.⁹⁸ Language is 'determined by political institutions and interests [and is] a determinant of political perceptions and behaviour'.⁹⁹ In Burma, the intelligence services provided this determinant through the information they gathered on the Burmese.

Cooper and Stoler similarly note that the use of language in colonial states was a crucial factor in colonial rule, observing that 'agents of colonisation', including such officials as District Commissioners, used language to describe the population of colonies that advocated the application of certain policies to that population; 'categories could legitimise violence against certain people and not others'.¹⁰⁰ In Burma the intelligence services delineated these categories defining how the government would come to understand the dependent population. To use Ann Stoler's words, these were the 'private transcripts of the powerful'. As she puts it, 'written interpretations of events and partisan pronouncements were self-confirming; they became the arsenal for evidence of precedent actions'.¹⁰¹ Developing an intelligence bureau that was always searching for political conspiracies provided the government with the informational ammunition it required to suppress political opponents. The emerging intelligence bureaucracy also provided the government of Burma with new ways of describing, codifying and perceiving the population in the 1930s; Deery describes a similar conceptual shift in the Malayan counter-insurgency campaign of 1948 when the British abandoned the term 'bandits' to describe insurgents and adopted the term 'communist', acknowledging their political motivation.¹⁰² However, as Guha observed in regard to earlier counterinsurgency campaigns in the Raj, the terms the intelligence services used to describe the population they targeted often reflected the prejudices the colonial government held regarding that population.¹⁰³ In Burma the government's alarm at any indications of communist sympathies among the population reflected a reflex response triggered by their fears of communist

⁹⁸ Phillip Deery, "The Terminology of Terrorism: Malaya, 1948-52," *Journal of South East Asian Studies* 34, no. 2 (2003): 231 – 247, 231.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 233.

¹⁰⁰ Cooper and Stoler, *op. cit.*, 6.

¹⁰¹ Stoler, *op. cit.*, 643.

¹⁰² Deery, *op. cit.*, 233.

¹⁰³ Guha, "The Prose of Counterinsurgency" in *Subaltern Studies II* Guha, ed. 14.

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mobilisation of the population rather than by tangible evidence of actual communist activity within the country.

Intelligence reports produced soon after rebellion during 1933-1934 by Stephenson for Freeman-Thomas reported a number of instances where sound intelligence and prompt police action had, it seemed, averted insurgency. In March 1933 'incipient uprisings' were nipped in the bud by 'early information'.¹⁰⁴ Rumours of rebellions still continued, some more serious than others; 'Saya San's disciples' were holding secret meetings, but were discovered before a serious breakout.¹⁰⁵ In Akyab, police acted on information regarding the Binpani library, a meeting place for revolutionary Bengalis, seizing a number of papers describing revolutionary activity and arrested nineteen Bengalis. In doing so they discovered an underground network of revolutionary spies and organisers.¹⁰⁶ The CID considered a major revolutionary movement to have been averted. Reports of fanatical anti-government sentiment in previously rebel held areas reached the ears of the Governor. In Tharrawaddy, where 'underground propaganda... instigating die hard *wunthanus* to refuse to pay taxes, the leader was sent up for trial under section 107 of the Criminal Procedure Code' in October 1934.¹⁰⁷ 'Rumours of rebellion' were considered to be responses to 'economic stress and political ferment'.¹⁰⁸ The notion of agitators provoking dissent among aggrieved subaltern groups was becoming a firmly entrenched notion in intelligence reporting.

Those members of the population who were deemed political agitators were singled out and faced prosecution and severe jail terms under colonial law. *Pongyis* speaking out against unfair taxes were prosecuted under section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, a harsh expedient used for fear that they would provoke the population into anti-colonial activity.¹⁰⁹ One such was U Saw, who had risen to prominence as a politician after defending Saya San at his trial,

¹⁰⁴ BL IOR Neg 9691 L/PJ/12/734 Local Government Report Burma Mar. 1932, 10.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, Aug. 1932, 56.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, Dec. 1933, 64.

¹⁰⁷ BL IOR Neg 9691 L/PJ/12/745 Local Government Report Burma Oct. 1934, 53.

¹⁰⁸ BL IOR Neg 9691 L/PJ/12/734 Local Government Report Burma Jan. 1932, 5.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

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who was prosecuted in April 1933 for making seditious speeches.¹¹⁰ But if colonial criminal law was applied to censure political dissidents, it was intelligence that first alerted the authorities to the activities of potential opponents against whom that law could be applied. Not all were as well known as U Saw. The leader of a campaign for non-payment of taxes was 'sent up under section 107 of the Criminal Procedure Code' in October 1934 after Stephenson recorded that he was one of the most significant local leaders 'under surveillance'.¹¹¹ Intelligence reports were informing the government of the political sentiments of the population – and leading to distinct political choices - in ways which had not been seen prior to 1930.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the earliest intelligence reports produced after the rebellion, in late December 1932, were particularly alert to any events resembling the recent disorders. Millenarianist hermits and monks were of great concern as they bore both a physical and a methodological resemblance to Saya San.¹¹² However, other more important elements of civil society, such as students and nationalist groups underwent rapid changes in political outlook after the rebellion and retained little affiliation to the ideologies of Saya San. That such groups chose instead to adopt new ideas and attitudes towards the government was confirmed by the upsurge in the number of nationalist organisations agitating for colonial overthrow. The official May 1934 report on the origin and causes of the rebellion ascribed a predominant organisational role in the rebellion to the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) in the 1920s (see chapter one), stating that there was 'a deep laid conspiracy against the government by Saya San countenanced by the General Council of Buddhist Associations'.¹¹³ The report, meanwhile, considered the peasantry to be prone to 'ignorance, gullibility and superstition', making it fodder for agitators.¹¹⁴ Guha and Stoler observe similar presumptions and crude stereotypes in colonial intelligence reports on violence in India and the Dutch East Indies, where officials did not consider the peasantry or wage labourers

¹¹⁰ Ibid, Dec. 1932, 61.

¹¹¹ BL IOR Neg 9691 L/PJ/12/745 Local Government Report Burma Oct. 1934, 55.

¹¹² BL IOR Neg 9691 L/PJ/12/734 Local Government Report Burma Oct. 1933, 61.

¹¹³ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 – 1932, Origin and Causes of Burma Rebellion 1930-1932, Government of Burma, 1934, 21.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

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capable of acting on their own initiative, and instead attributed all dissent to the provocation of outside conspirators.¹¹⁵ The report on the rebellion certainly followed this trend. Its conclusion opined that there was 'not a scintilla of evidence to support the thesis to the effect that the rebellion was an economic uprising on the part of an impoverished peasantry exacerbated by the slump in paddy prices and maddened by harsh taxation'.¹¹⁶

However, while Ian Brown concedes that it 'is difficult to establish a causal link between economics and the rebellion' he does note that 'in other circumstances' to those of the severe hardship occasioned by the depression, 'the call to rebellion would have been ignored'.¹¹⁷

Ultimately, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Saya San rebellion was a response to the misery induced by agrarian capitalism, the worst trouble being where 'the modernisation project had been ongoing'.¹¹⁸ It is significant in this context that in the underdeveloped frontier areas, where modernisation had as yet made no impact, the rebellion caused little disturbance. This bears out the findings of Eric R. Wolf who observes of peasant wars in the twentieth century that peasants were caught 'painfully between old solutions to problems which have shifted shape and meaning and new solutions to problems they cannot comprehend'.¹¹⁹ And so in Burma, the rebels' uprising, while expressed in the religious and cultural terms typical of the traditional forms of Burman political resistance, was a functional response to the economic impact of colonialism on their country.¹²⁰ If this argument seems persuasive now, it figured much less in the Government of Burma's own analysis which, as we have seen, dismissed these concerns entirely and held radical agitators responsible for the upheaval. The intelligence bureau being developed in 1934 was therefore directed to employ its resources towards countering the activities of those nationalist groups who were apt to mobilise the peasantry against colonial rule.

¹¹⁵ Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 80 and Stoler, op. cit., 643.

¹¹⁶ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 – 1932, Origin and Causes of Burma Rebellion 1930-1932, Government of Burma, 1934, 44.

¹¹⁷ Ian Brown, *A Colonial Economy in Crisis: Burma's Rice Cultivators and the World Depression of the 1930s* (Oxon: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 112.

¹¹⁸ Adas, op. cit., 201.

¹¹⁹ Wolf, op. cit., 296.

¹²⁰ Sarkisyanz, op. cit.

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The expression of radical communistic ideas on the part of nationalists was not solely a product of the colonial government's irrational prejudices however – Burman nationalists did adopt increasingly left-wing ideals following the rebellion. Taylor describes a radical politicisation of Burman opposition during the 1930s.¹²¹ Cady observes that the organised student and radical nationalist movement 'grew from 1930'.¹²² These groups were descendants of the GCBA. The most prominent among these were the '*Thakins*', or 'Masters' using the Burmese word usually reserved for the colonial occupiers, as '*Sahib*' had been used in India. The intelligence bureau discovered a '*Thakin*' (Master) periodical published by nationalists advocating the overthrow of Imperialism.¹²³ The *Thakins* were members of the *Dobama Asi Ayon* (DAA) (We Burmans Association) that was the first Burman nationalist organisation to advocate a combination of modern Western development with Burman nationalism.¹²⁴ They held their first conference in Rangoon in 1931.¹²⁵ The discovery of the *Thakins* allowed the intelligence services to put a face on the conspiracy against the government which, they feared, would instigate the next rebellion. The cover of the *Thakin* periodical featured a 'red terror' stalking the earth and walking towards the factories of capital cheered on by a crowd with hammers and sickles in their hands. The periodical was edited by an 'avowed communist', a feature of great alarm to the security services who feared the influence of communism on a Burman population predisposed to rebellion.¹²⁶

The *Thakins* were not the only enemy of the state espousing communist ideals that emerged in the post-rebellion climate. There was the All Burma Youth League which organised branches throughout the provinces in April 1934 and intelligence reports recorded that 'some spoke in favour of a Russian style administration'.¹²⁷ The Indian Intelligence Bureau recorded the rise of 'volunteer

¹²¹ see Robert H. Taylor, "The Burmese communist Movement and Its Indian Connection: Formation and Factionalism," *Journal of South East Asian studies*, 14, no 1 (1983): 95 – 108.

¹²² Cady, op. cit., 373.

¹²³ BL IOR Neg 9691 L/PJ/12/734 Local Government Report Burma Jan. 1933, 2.

¹²⁴ Khin Yi, *The Dobama Movement in Burma, (1930-1938)* (Ithaca: New York, 1988).

¹²⁵ U Maung Maung, *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma 1920-1940* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1980), 120.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ BL IOR Neg 9691 L/PJ/12/745 Local Government Report Burma April 22 Apr. 1934, 21.

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organisations' that were 'communist inspired' in Burma in 1933.¹²⁸ In Burma the 'starting of youth leagues and volunteer corps, attempts to tamper with labour and close contact maintained with Communist bodies in London are characteristic of methods which are being adopted in other parts of the East under the COMINTERN's direction' the bureau noted in 1933.¹²⁹ Even these nascent developments in nationalist activity were viewed as part of an international communist conspiracy to undermine the Empire. The bureau warned that 'there is much in the character of Burma to make the masses amongst them susceptible to communist influences, especially the depression'.¹³⁰ The bureau did acknowledge that poverty made Burmans vulnerable to communist agitation, which, the bureau believed, stemmed from the *Thakins*. The security services therefore attached particular significance to what Stephenson reported in 1933 as the *Thakins*' 'policy to foster patriotism among Burmans and instil new ideas in connection with the present political situation in [the] country'.¹³¹ This description paralleled the official report's inquiry into the causes of rebellion in its sensitivity to the activity of newly organised nationalist groups.

Managing the flow of information through society also extended to control of the vernacular presses. Sir Charles Innes' intelligence reports to Freeman-Thomas following the end of the rebellion listed the vernacular newspapers circulating in Burma, singling out those that had been subject to official sanction in the past.¹³² This made sense. Cooper reminds us that in a political conflict words and symbols are struggled over as they shape the ideas of society. Leaders of social movements make 'efforts to get members of putative constituencies to identify themselves in a certain way... [and] to see themselves as identical with one another', through the distribution of nationalist literature for example.¹³³ By promoting and circulating pamphlets expressing nationalist sentiments, Burman radicals sought to unify their fellow countrymen in opposition to the colonial

¹²⁸ BL IOR V/27/262/5 India. Intelligence Bureau: India and communism, Reprint, 1935. Simla, 77.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ BL IOR Neg 9691 L/PJ/12/734 Local Government Report Burma Jan. 1933, 2.

¹³² BL IOR Neg 9691 L/PJ/12/723 Local government Report Burma Mar. 1932, 21.

¹³³ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 72.

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state.¹³⁴ The intelligence services intercepted printed material to counter the spread of nationalist sentiment. As Gramscian theory observes, when the masses are viewed as a social force mobilising for political change, as they were in 1930s Burma, the struggle to manipulate ideas and beliefs increases in importance.¹³⁵

For all these mounting official fears, the *Thakins* were not yet a widespread revolutionary movement. Until at least 1935, intelligence reports recorded that the *Thakin* periodical, and the main student activist body the *Dobama Asi Ayon* with which the *Thakins* overlapped, were foundering, a trend highlighted by the fact that publication of the periodical was often halted due to financial problems.¹³⁶ *Thakin* groups were hardly the organised conspirators capable of provoking a rebellion that the intelligence services sometimes predicted. Nevertheless, by intercepting nationalist circulars such as those of the *Thakins*, the security services aimed to keep the dial on the spectrum of anti-state activity within the range of acceptable activity. By limiting the spread of subversive ideas throughout society and so preventing the growth of organised anti-governmental opposition, the intelligence services felt sure that renewed insurgency could be averted. But, after 1935, with the increasing sophistication and organisation of Burman nationalists, this was to prove a formidable task.

Conclusion

The years of the supposed 'political doldrums' in Burma actually marked an important chapter in the development of the relationship between the colonial state and indigenous society in the immediate aftermath of the Saya San rebellion. The government reformed its intelligence practices with the intention of implanting its administrative authority more securely in a country it ruled with difficulty. And, underpinning this was the fact that the rebellion had shaken the foundations of colonial security, stimulating a major expansion in the state

¹³⁴ see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso Books, 2006) for an analysis of the use of the printing presses in fostering national identity.

¹³⁵ Benedetto Fontana, *Hegemony and Power: On the Relations between Gramsci and Machiavelli* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 20.

¹³⁶ IOR BL M/5/9 Notes on the Thakins and the DAA and Kindred societies By Mr. C. G. Stewart Director Intelligence Branch government of Burma 24 May. 1939, 5.

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security apparatus. The methods of intelligence gathering that were to be employed on separation in 1937 were, therefore, refined in these years. The colonial authorities at local and national level made great efforts to develop a functioning intelligence 'machine' capable of producing and acting upon information about the indigenous population. The intelligence users, the Governors of India and Burma and their counterparts in the Indian Office in London, also emphasised the crucial role of political intelligence gathering in maintaining control in Burma. It was at their insistence that a special intelligence bureau to centralise and standardise intelligence gathering was developed. The bureau developed categories by which the state could employ to understand civil society. However, their choices of categories to understand the population reflected their fears and concerns for political rule in the country. The intelligence machine was not the neutral and impartially operating system the authorities claimed, it was a highly politicised means of colonial control.

A temporary special intelligence bureau worked to fulfil the requirements of colonial control following the rebellion and before separation. Colonial officials throughout the country administered local intelligence branches and provided intelligence to the bureau. The state had to engage with indigenous representatives on some level to be able to siphon any information about Burma's civil society and engineer an intelligence cycle. The cycle was weakest at this first stage, where intelligence gatherers connected with indigenous representatives. Indigenous intermediaries were few and far between, and those that existed proved themselves unreliable and often obstructed administrators' efforts to gather information. Stanford and De Vine, district commissioners trying to rebuild such local contacts, discovered this on their tours around the villages under their jurisdiction. Their observations of society demonstrate that a major effort was underway to enforce a standardisation of record keeping, report writing, and the recruitment of local personnel in Burma. Yet, as much as the state attempted to impose this standardisation, Burmans remained as hostile to the colonial state as ever.

That said, an intelligence cycle of the type described by Michael Herman was operating in post-rebellion Burma. Indeed, the Governor of Burma frequently

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noted its merits. A number of potential outbreaks of rebellious style activity were halted by the use of intelligence. Whatever its faults, the temporary special intelligence bureau made a recognised contribution to colonial control. This was vital to prepare for separation from India. A functioning intelligence machine to counter radicalised Burman activism was a pivotal feature of this preparation. However, the process remained a tenuous one and the preconceived notions held by colonial officials impeded accurate understanding of the local events they described.

The intelligence state in Burma: The Burma Defence Bureau in operation on separation from India: 1935-1937

Introduction

The colonial government in Burma separated from its Indian equivalent on 1 April 1937. Burman representatives became elected ministers of the new parliament in Burma, which was based on the Westminster system.¹ A British colonial official still held the position of Governor, however, and Sir Archibald Cochrane assumed the mantle of Governor in 1936 taking over from Sir Hugh Stephenson. After separation Cochrane thus held ultimate responsibility for the administration of the country. Due to widespread hostility to the constitution developed for separated Burma, the date for separation was moved forward from 1935 to 1937. A Burman minister U Ba Pe was elected the first premier, although his government collapsed within a matter of months. The colonial authorities' 'structures of collaboration', as Guha defined the institutions by which 'colonialism had hoped to endow its dominance with hegemony', were shaky immediately on separation and British officials found it impossible to secure either indigenous acquiescence in, or cooperation with, colonial rule; the local population instead remained sullenly hostile to the colonial state.² Opposition groups still expressed dissent and attempted to mobilise against British overrule. In these circumstances, the new intelligence bureau developed for separated Burma, the Burma Defence Bureau (BDB) quickly acquired critical importance as the linchpin of colonial state security on the eve of World War II. The construction of a political intelligence bureau was thus a product of the state's failure to achieve popular acceptance of the colonial presence.

Dr. Ba Maw, a Burman nationalist educated in France, had come to prominence as a defender of Saya San before launching his career as head of the *Sinyetha* (Poor Man's) party (see figure 3). It was he who became Premier following the collapse of U Ba Pe's coalition government in August 1937. This confronted the British authorities with an immediate dilemma as Ba Maw recorded that he

¹ Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 123.

² Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without hegemony: history and power in colonial India* (London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 128.

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thought the constitution was a futile project and one 'worse in the actual working'.³ The new premier was never likely to collaborate with the colonial administration; indeed, he considered mobilisation against the state outside of parliament the sole means to influence Burma's political destiny. As intelligence reports noted of the functioning of parliament in August 1937, 'the skein of Burma's politics [was] more tangled than ever'.⁴ Little wonder, then, that several intelligence officials observed mounting hostility towards the new constitution. Taylor notes that elections for the 1937 parliament were the only poll in which more than fifty percent of registered voters participated.⁵ Yet, even this equivocal turn-out belied the depth of nationalist anger: at the time the Governor observed that Burman nationalists were uniformly hostile to the constitution and condemned it in a series of seditious speeches.⁶ These nationalists were predominantly *Thakin* groups, which had rapidly expanded their membership on separation. They strove to undermine the working of the new parliamentary system from the outset, challenging its legitimacy and thereby undermining its edicts.

³ Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma: Memoirs of a Revolution 1939-1946* (London: Yale University Press, 1967), 18.

⁴ BL IOR M/5/48 Information relating to Burmese political activity, and political parties and associations Extract from BDB Intelligence Summary no. 8 26 Aug. 1937, 68.

⁵ Robert H. Taylor, "Political Values and Political Conflict in Burma," in *Burma: Prospects for a Democratic Future*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 42.

⁶ BL IOR M/5/48 Information relating to Burmese political activity, and political parties and associations Secret, Extract from BDB Intelligence Summary no. 6 25 Jul. 1937, 72.

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Figure 3. Dr. Ba Maw, radical Burman nationalist and Premier of Burma 1937-1939.

<http://wpcontent.answers.com/wikipedia/commons/thumb/c/c4/DrBaMaw.JPG/180px-DrBaMaw.JPG>

A number of powers were reserved to Governor Cochrane in 1937 on separation. And these reserved powers sapped any genuine autonomous management of indigenous affairs. First, the Governor retained ultimate control over a wide range of government policy-making, including national defence and internal security, as well as financial affairs, including revenue-raising powers. Judicial matters and the maintenance of law and order were also reserved to the Governor.⁷ Second, the Governor also retained ultimate control over the local administration of the frontier areas, connoting those regions outside of

⁷ Frank N. Trager, *Burma From Kingdom to Republic: A Historical and Political Analysis* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1966), 48.

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central Burma, especially those populated by Burma's numerous ethnic minorities. The writ of parliament, then, only ran in central Burma. The frontier areas thus lay outside the central region in which some progress towards autonomous self-governance was being attempted. By contrast, in John Leroy Christian's words, the frontier regions were dubbed politically 'retarded' next to the Burmese heartland.⁸ Frontier peoples still had no vote and, in consequence, no say in the functioning of parliament. Reflecting on the range of powers denied to the new legislature, Ba Maw observed that the separation constitution left 'no matter in which the governor could not intervene'.⁹ As Thomas observes, colonial projects of the 1930s that supposedly engaged indigenous representatives were typically 'constrained by a countervailing reluctance to concede meaningful political authority to local populations'.¹⁰ Burma was an extreme example of this reluctance played out in practice: in an emergency the Governor could even suspend parliament and arrogate all powers to the colonial administration. If British interests were threatened all arms of the state could mobilise against a hostile population. A functioning intelligence service was a crucial indicator of the rise of such threats and as such was removed from any ministerial interference and kept close to the Governor.

How would such repressive control be sustained? Despite the growth of a discrete intelligence apparatus, Taylor and Callahan consider the colonial army in Burma to have been the primary instrument through which order was enforced among the population.¹¹ It is important, in this context, to remind ourselves that the army was composed of non-Burman ethnicities for much of the colonial period. Even when the army's lower tiers were opened up to Burman membership, Callahan has demonstrated that very few Burmans joined its ranks. In her view, by 1937 it was already 'too late to build a proper Burmese army'.¹² Nationalism was endemic and those Burmans who joined the military were liable to be ostracised as collaborators. Yet each of these authors goes

⁸ John Leroy Christian, *Modern Burma: A Survey of Political and Economic Development* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1942), 99

⁹ Ba Maw, *op. cit.*, 19.

¹⁰ Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial disorder after 1914* (London: University of California Press, 2008), 293.

¹¹ see Taylor, *The State in Burma*, 99 and Mary P. Callahan *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2003).

¹² *Ibid*, 40.

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further, and identifies the structure of the colonial army in Burma as the prime culprit in the alienation of the population from the state. This is to overlook the central role of intelligence gathering in the entire process of colonial control. An understanding of the population, the targets of suppression, always rested on intelligence relayed to front-line security forces. Intelligence was expected to have a complementary role for all other security forces on separation. Martin Thomas observes that 'colonial insurgencies and the fierce state violence they encountered were often shaped by the acquisition and exploitation of covert information'.¹³ And in Burma, the BDB acquired this covert information through the informers and agents it had working among Burman groups.

Aside from its new constitutional status, Burma became distinct from India in a number of ways after 1937. For one thing, the brand of nationalism that the colonial government faced in Burma was perceived as radically more subversive than that in India. And, as we have seen, anti-state violence and colonial agitation were conflated into equivalent phenomena in the minds of the colonial authorities. For another thing, externally, Japan was fast increasing its presence throughout South East Asia and making tentative incursions into Burma's domestic affairs through cultural associations, influence within the media and an expanded embassy in Rangoon which undertook a number of efforts to undermine the colonial government. The BDB was required to respond to these pressures. The Saya San rebellion brought home to the local government in Rangoon that Burmans were a political force whose particular political concerns had to be countered. Put simply, the Delhi Intelligence Bureau could not address both Indian and Burmese security concerns in the same manner, as the two colonies' internal and external security threats were fundamentally different.

More attuned to the dangers of internal subversion after the Saya San rebellion, the colonial authorities expected the BDB to focus its work in those areas where such political ideas were thought most likely to take root. The goal was to break radical nationalists' - and especially the *Thakins* - hegemonic control over a

¹³ Martin Thomas, "Insurgent Intelligence: Information Gathering and Anti-Colonial rebellion," *Journal of Intelligence and National Security*, 22 no. 1 (2007): 155 – 163 at 155.

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broad constituency of popular opinion and, to do so, the BDB required informers and agents working in schools, universities, workplaces and unions. This heightened intelligence effort meant, in practice, that the colonial state expanded its presence in civil society – part of its attempt to regulate the information order. As nationalist ideas grew in popularity and challenged the colonial state's management of society, so the intelligence services desperately manoeuvred among the indigenous population to prevent the spread of these ideas. In short, countering nationalist hegemony was the prime directive of the security services and the backbone of state security work on separation.

Establishment of the Burma Defence Bureau

As we have seen, the foundations for a specialist intelligence bureau had been laid following the rebellion, the bureaucratic product of which was the Burma Defence Bureau (BDB), headed by its Director, C. G. Stewart. The Bureau began operations in January 1937. Unlike the previous Special Intelligence Bureau the new BDB was entirely independent of the police; it was no longer a special branch of the CID.¹⁴ As the Governor's secretary, H. H. Craw indicated, Burma required 'a permanent organisation to obtain and coordinate information as to the activities of societies responsible for rebellion'.¹⁵ Such an organisation had operated in more embryonic form since May 1933, and the BDB was expected to continue and expand on the work done by the previous Special Intelligence Bureau (see Appendix B).¹⁶

In order to challenge predominant nationalist influence among the Burman population, it was necessary to render the BDB as free from any sectarian Burman political involvement as possible. The early fears of the rise of communism in Burma noted in chapter two had stimulated a drive to prevent any Burman political interference in the Bureau, but the authorities constructed 'political' Burmans more broadly as any individuals or groups that espoused an

¹⁴ BL IOR M/1/93 - Safeguards for control of Special Branch (Criminal Investigations Department) and Intelligence, Letter from Secretary to the Governor of Burma Craw to Under Secretary of State Monteath, 18 Dec. 1936, 6.

¹⁵ Ibid, 12.

¹⁶ Ibid.

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anti-state position. Aside from the intelligence bureau's 'reliance on a number of confidential agents for information', this reflected the 'growth of a convention that the identity of secret service agents shall not be disclosed to ministers' in imperial intelligence gathering.¹⁷ Robert H. Taylor observes that those Burmans referred to as 'non-political' by the BDB were those that complied with government instruction, while the 'political' Burmans were those that did not.¹⁸ As Stanford and De Vine's experiences demonstrated, the state's early forays into political intelligence gathering made it plain that total consent to colonial rule was an unlikely outcome. Yet, even if willing consent could not be expected, rebellion – the outright rejection of the state – had to be prevented. A manageable level of dissent was the optimum achievable goal. Put differently, pragmatism dictated that the intelligence services set themselves an easier task than the pursuit of Gramscian-style hegemony, whereby they would impose acceptance of the ideas of the ruling elite among Burmans. Rather, the BDB's aim was to prevent radical Burmans from disseminating their views among other Burmans and unifying them in a call to rebellion against the state. The construction of the BDB was an acknowledgment of the state's inability to achieve civil society's freely-accorded recognition of colonial authority.

The rationale behind the secrecy surrounding the construction of the intelligence apparatus lay in the pivotal role that the BDB was expected to play in securing the Governor's authority on separation. The BDB was placed 'entirely in the hands' of the Governor of Burma, Hugh Cochrane, once separation took place.¹⁹ It was 'charged with the duty and responsibility of supplying the Governor with intelligence required by him in exercise of his functions with respect to the Defence of Burma' exercised 'through the Defence Department at the head of which [was] the Counsellor to the Governor'.²⁰ The government 'required a monthly intelligence report on all aspects of the life of

¹⁷ Ibid, Letter from Sir Hugh Stephenson Governor of Burma to Under Secretary of State for India and Burma Sir David Monteath, 18 Feb. 1937, 2.

¹⁸ Taylor, *The State in Burma*, 204.

¹⁹ BL IOR M/1/93 - Safeguards for control of Special Branch (Criminal Investigations Department) and Intelligence, Letter to Secretary of State for Burma Monteath from Secretary to the Governor of Burma H. H. Craw, 15 Jan. 1937, 3.

²⁰ BL IOSM Mss Eur F125/114 Hope (Victor Alexander John), 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow Linlithgow collection: Papers of Victor Alexander John Hope, 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow (1887-1952) as Viceroy of India 1936-43 Letters and telegrams regarding Burma 1937-39, 161.

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people as they affect the peace and order of the whole province' (see Appendix A).²¹ All such reports were to be 'coordinated' and 'unified all the information' received.²² Booth-Gravelly, the Defence Counsellor to the Governor in Burma in 1937 had come to prominence as the former Special Commissioner of the rebellion.²³ In this capacity he had overseen the development of an intelligence apparatus to contain subversion in 1931 (as was discussed chapter one). His promotion confirmed the official emphasis placed on continuity in security personnel from the days of the rebellion and this rationale informed both the selection of personnel to staff the BDB and those charged with overseeing its operation.

As noted earlier, the Governor retained a number of sweeping powers on separation. Included among these was the right to declare Emergency Rule conferred by the Government of Burma Act 1935.²⁴ When discussing the future of intelligence arrangements on separation Under Secretary of State for Burma, Monteath, expressed the desire to the Governor of Burma, Stephenson in August 1934, that 'in case of emergency – e.g. terrorism – the governor [was] to take charge of any branch of government necessary to defeat such activities or create a new machinery for the purpose'.²⁵ The Governor was 'entitled to dismiss the minister in charge of the police' and was 'allowed to declare a breakdown of the constitution and assume the powers requisite for dealing with the situation'.²⁶ Monteath expressed that 'special powers in paragraph 11 (of the Indian Constitution) for containing subversive conspiracy should be made available by the constitution act to the governor of Burma'.²⁷ It would fall to BDB

²¹ BL IOR M/4/2074 Defence: Burma Defence Bureau Pamphlet Internal and Frontier Intelligence, Issued under the authority of the Governor of Burma, Rangoon 1937, (see Appendix A), 3.

²² Ibid.

²³ BL IOR L/MIL/7/19520 Changes in Imperial military intelligence arrangements after separation of Burma Letter from Director of Intelligence in India, J. M. Ewart to Laithwaite, Private Secretary to the Viceroy 01 Sep. 1937, 20.

²⁴ BL IOR M/3/513 Burma riots: situation reports - ref. date: 26 Jul. 1938-21 Jan. 1939 Minute paper Burma Office Department Riots in Burma – 13 Sep. 1938, 10.

²⁵ BL IOR M/1/93 - Safeguards for control of Special Branch (Criminal Investigations Department) and Intelligence Safeguards for Control of Special Branch (Criminal Investigations Department) and Intelligence Letter from Under Secretary of State of Burma D. T. Monteath to Governor of Burma Hugh Cochrane, 20 Aug. 1934, 67.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

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staff to indicate when these 'special powers' should be utilised, meaning that the BDB would give the signal for the Governor to declare emergency rule.

In periods of disorder any extension of the Governor's authority was thus contingent on the information provided by the intelligence services. Decision about the implications and extent of instability in the country, and any measures appropriate to containing it, all flowed from the intelligence received. No other branch of state power had such a role in determining official treatment of the population. The increasing centrality of political intelligence to the style of colonial rule in Burma was not simply a response to the increased politicisation of Burmans during the 1930s as may be surmised by a brief sideways glance at the situation in nearby Dutch-ruled Indonesia. Ann Stoler considers the politicisation of industrial unrest within the plantation economy of colonial Sumatra, economic powerhouse of the Dutch colonial regime, a product of the colonial government's efforts to 'deflect attention away from investigation of labour conditions' and portray workers as susceptible to the overtures of "extremist agitators".²⁸ The Dutch colonial authorities insisted that "extremist" agitators had to be "wiped out" and judged sterner repression a legitimate response' to the mounting threat of insurrection among plantation workers.²⁹ A similar process was taking place in Burma, although not, this time, confined to a particular sector of the colony's agricultural economy. Portraying nationalists as on the threshold of provoking rebellion among the subaltern groups legitimised their suppression. Unbeknownst to Burman ministers in the new parliament established on separation, the BDB was operating behind the scenes to legitimise the colonial state's repression of civil society.

As its title indicates, the Burma Defence Bureau had ties to the military; it was expected to report to the General Officer in Command of the armed forces in Burma as well as to the Governor. Either a Civil Officer at the rank of a Senior District Superintendent, or a Military Officer at the rank of Major occupied the position of Director of the BDB (see table):

²⁸ Ann Stoler, "Perceptions of Protest: Defining the Dangerous in Colonial Sumatra," *American Ethnologist*, 12, no. 4 (1985): 642-658 at 652.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 653.

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insurgency along the lines of the Saya San rebellion. But dialogues between officials regarding the formation of the BDB betray ulterior motives for secreting a political intelligence bureau within the Defence department. The BDB was merged with the military branch of the General staff for 'purposes of political camouflage'.³¹ This original statement was crossed out in the correspondence and replaced with the more anodyne phrase 'political reasons'. The prevention of Burman political interference had a major influence on the structure of the BDB.

The BDB was initially established for a three-year trial period, after which it would be subject to review.³² Gathering intelligence specifically about the indigenous population was still a very novel idea in Burma. The efficacy of political intelligence gathering as a means of pre-empting dissent was still unknown. The BDB was thus created with the awareness that the colonial state had little understanding of the indigenous population, but its officials were nonetheless required to suppress the political activity of Burman nationalists from the Bureau's inception. At the apex of this administrative system, the Governor required the BDB to ensure that colonial rule went unchallenged by ethnic Burmans. Other security forces, the army, paramilitaries and the police in Burma relied on the BDB to provide an understanding of Burmans that would enable them to act against the population when required.

The role of the BDB and the management of the information order in containing disorder in colonial Burma

Colonial security rested on the intelligence provided by the BDB for other branches of state security, the police, the paramilitaries and the army to use. Robert H. Taylor considers the army to have been the predominant means of enforcing control in colonial Burma; 'the security of the state relied primarily on

³¹ BL IOR M/3/750 Civil and Military Police in Burma; proposed arrangements in event of separation from Burma from India; proposed defence force; transfer of personnel from Burma Frontier Force to Burma Military Police 19 Oct. 1939 - 3 Apr. 1941, 7.

³² BL IOR M/4/2074 Defence: Burma Defence Bureau Pamphlet on Internal and Frontier Intelligence – Issued under the authority of the Government of Burma, Rangoon 1937, 2.

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the army'.³³ Along with Callahan, Taylor notes that the army considered its primary purpose in Burma was the maintenance of 'internal security'.³⁴ A review of colonial government discussion papers on plans for the role of the army post-separation confirms this.³⁵ However, it is a crude simplification to suggest that the army was deliberately constructed for this purpose, or that it was relied on as the most effective means of suppression of internal dissent. Gramsci's observation that colonial occupation was a highly complex affair that went beyond standard military confrontation is confirmed by a review of the planning for the army on Burma's separation.³⁶ Intelligence played a crucial role in defining and suppressing internal threats in a way that the army could not.

The Governor and the General Officer in Command's discussions regarding the army's role in separate Burma indicate that it was a much less formidable and imposing force than Taylor and Callahan's analyses suggest. The decision to build an army for the preservation of internal security was decided on by default rather than design, as Cochrane rejected any plan to fashion a 'modern army equipped and trained to provide at short notice an expeditionary force capable of taking part in company with other regular troops of Empire in modern warfare against well armed and highly disciplined forces'.³⁷ 'Financial circumstances' dictated that an army suitable only for 'local needs' be established.³⁸

Intelligence estimates by the Delhi Intelligence Bureau in 1936 of likely threats to Burma did not indicate a serious threat to Burma's borders in the near future.³⁹ Resources were never likely to be made available for a sophisticated military apparatus in Burma, capable of meeting the dual challenges of foreign invasion and internal security. The decision to confine the army's role to the day-to-day support of colonial order was not based on the authorities opinion

³³ Taylor, *The State in Burma*, 99.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ BL IOR M/8/3 Defence: Future organisation of the Burma Defence Forces and BL IOR L/WS/1/276 War Staff 'WS' Series Files Burma: Burma: Miscellaneous Reports.

³⁶ BL IOR L/WS/1/276 War Staff 'WS' Series Files Burma: Burma: Miscellaneous Reports

³⁷ BL IOR M/8/3 Defence: Future organisation of the Burma Defence Forces Defence Department at Rangoon Apr. 1936, 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ BL IOSM Mss Eur F125/160 File of correspondence arising out of consideration in 1936 of the possibility of Japanese aggression against India, Burma, British Far Eastern Countries and Netherlands Indies 8.

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that it was the best means of controlling a troublesome population: its role was simply a reflection of material weakness. Put differently, army units lacked the equipment, the training, and the cohesion necessary to mount complex security operations, whether inside Burma's frontiers or beyond them. Kolinsky's analysis of the role of the military in colonial Palestine observes that the army there 'could not be used as a means of preventing disorder but rather quelling it in its initial stages'.⁴⁰ The military had a role in colonial security, but it was not that of preventing disorder. The intelligence services had a far more vital role in this regard.

The BDB provided the definition of 'internal security' for the government and the other security forces. The Army Headquarters for Burma in Maymyo, in its internal security scheme for the country, in turn, considered a rebellion along the lines of the Saya San uprising the most likely threat to require military intervention:

rebellion is the most likely of the potential causes for military action in Burma. Rebellion should be nipped in the bud by strong action before it has time to spread and that deplorable second phase which arose in the last rebellion, and which has been apparent in others, which develops into a drawn out guerrilla warfare, resulting in vital loss and expense should thereby be avoided.⁴¹

Lessons from the Saya San rebellion remained the criteria against which security requirements in Burma for all branches of Government were assessed. The lessons learned from the tactics applied during the rebellion were refined on separation. The army's role was complementary to the police and other branches of administration. The army required sound intelligence to nip any rebellious style activity in the bud. Analysis and observation of political activity by a reliable intelligence bureau of activity in society was the best means of gaining this intelligence. The army was instructed to provide any information it

⁴⁰ Martin Kolinsky, *Law, Order and Riots in Mandatory Palestine, 1928-1935* (Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1993), 79.

⁴¹ BL IOR L/WS/1/276 War Staff 'WS' Series Files Burma: Burma: Miscellaneous Reports, 76.

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gathered to the BDB who would collate it and disseminate it at a local level, making it available to all nodes of colonial control.⁴² Where the army was utilised to suppress disorder the intelligence apparatus was of paramount importance.

Callahan and Taylor are correct in observing that the army, composed of non-Burman forces, was alienated from the society in which it operated. However, the army did not overwhelm indigenous society with its presence because its numbers were limited. In such a situation 'the importance of good intelligence arrangements cannot be over emphasised' the War Office stated in its review of Burma's internal security conditions.⁴³ The review further observed that 'military units were not at full strength – men on leave cannot be recalled quickly' and as a result required 'early warning of any subversive activities leading to a serious situation'.⁴⁴ Repeating the refrain of civil and military officials during the rebellion, officials at the Military Headquarters in Burma in Maymyo 1938 observed that the use of mobile columns inspired confidence and encouraged the production of good intelligence.⁴⁵ The colonial state required the army to function in the production of intelligence, and in turn intelligence was vital to the army's role. There was no major change in its role since the end of the rebellion. The day-to-day gathering of intelligence was more vital to colonial security than the occasional, if dramatic, instances in which the army was deployed to suppress disorder. In Burma the army's role was to demonstrate that the government was the superior power in the land.

Intelligence gathering with a political remit was exclusive to central Burma; in the undeveloped frontier regions, radical political and nationalist ideas were non-existent. However, some relationship with the information order was nevertheless crucial to maintaining colonial control. In Wa States, situated in the

⁴² BL IOR L/MIL/7/19520 Changes in Imperial military intelligence arrangements after separation of Burma Secretary to the Government of Burma A.H. Seymour to Under Secretary of State for Burma D. T. Monteath, Burma Office London, 22 Sep. 1937, 9.

⁴³ The National Archives (TNA) War Office (WO) 203/5668 South East Asia Command: Military Headquarters Papers, Second World War The First Burma Narrative: Internal Security: Scheme for Burma, Scheme for Burma, from the Office of Controller of Military Accounts, Burma, 19 Sep. 1939, 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

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North of Shan States (see map) the British maintained a minimal presence and the army patrolled to demonstrate the superiority of the colonial government. In the frontier areas of Burma, indirect rule persisted insofar as there was a 'minimal state apparatus which rested on local elites and communities who had an interest in withholding resources and knowledge from the centre'.⁴⁶ Even here, reliance on local intelligence was of vital importance to control as an incident in Northern Shan States, Burma in April 1936 demonstrated. Near the border with China a village had sided with anti-British Chinese forces and the colonial government sought to reassert colonial authority. Village elders from surrounding villages provided the Civil Officer for Wa States, S. De Glanville, with intelligence on the rebellious village of Maukwe. De Glanville then deployed two military columns to Maukwe where they were met with cannon fire. The troops burned eight villages and all the houses in reprisal, a punitive act that De Glanville considered a valuable example to surrounding villages.⁴⁷ The conflict was mediated through the use of locally gathered intelligence. Intelligence gathering in central Burma used undercover agents and informers, letter opening, surveillance; these methods had no application in Wa States where the modern state and industry were alien notions. Nevertheless, the information order played a critical role in the reassertion of control, on this occasion, through violence. Contacts with local representatives had enabled the colonial government to repress disorder.

The Wa had no opportunity of participating in the modern state, nor was there much prospect of their admission to the ranks of British-controlled civil society that the BDB was so keen to monitor. The British did not make any revolutionary changes to the Wa's culture and society; 'village administration [had been] largely unaltered since 1890' Cochrane observed in 1937.⁴⁸ In these circumstances, Wa acknowledgment of British rule was enough. The frontier forces patrolled Wa States suppressing recusant villages and headhunting. Yet

⁴⁶ James C. Scott *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed* (London: Yale University Press, 1998), 77.

⁴⁷ BL IOR L/PS/20/D235 Report on the punitive expedition from Lufang, 10th Apr. to 10th May 1936. By S. De Glanville [Civil Officer in Charge] Rangoon: Government of Burma [Home and political dept] 1936, 2.

⁴⁸ BL IOR M/5/46 Governor's fortnightly reports, 17 Apr.-29 Dec. 1937; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, first half of Aug. – first half of Dec. 1937, 60.

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even here, BDB work could prove decisive: when the forces were deployed they relied on locally-provided information to govern their deployments and priorities in seeking out alleged dissidents and other wrongdoers.⁴⁹ As Bayly observes, 'knowledge was not the by-product of colonial rule but a condition for it'.⁵⁰ The British relied on intelligence even where military force was the predominant means of enforcing British rule. Callahan and Taylor's contention that the army's function was to suppress internal dissent ignores the fact that beneath the dramatic instances of military deployment, colonial management of the information order directed the use of force. This was true even in the areas furthest from the state and its modern political institutions. But the BDB did not consider the threat to 'internal security' to arise from these areas, but from radical Burman nationalism, which was on the rise after separation.

The BDB and the rise of nationalism: Conspiracies against the state in 1937

The *Thakins'* organisational capacity was clearly increasing in 1937 and, as we have seen, imperial security reviews of Burma already equated them with the phenomenon of rebellion. British Military Intelligence Section 2 (MI2 (a)), a sub-branch of the Directorate of Military Intelligence produced a report on Burma in March 1939 in which it was confidently stated that it was the 'consensus of the Army HQ and the counsellor to government [that there was] every possibility of a rebellion staged by *Thakins* coinciding with a major war, or alternatively in the next two to three years'.⁵¹ The spectre of Saya San continued to haunt the intelligence services; intelligence reports even suggested a 'Saya San style rebellion' could occur in March 1937.⁵² At the same time the *Thakins* began to make deeper inroads among the peasantry and wage labourers with a view to mobilising mass opposition against the government.⁵³ The BDB began to list the rise of *Dobama* and other associations throughout the country in its monthly

⁴⁹ BL IOR M/5/54 Burma Monthly Intelligence Summaries, Apr to Dec 1937 Intelligence Report no. 8 Dec. 1937, 22.

⁵⁰ C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 56.

⁵¹ TNA WO 106/3704A Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence, and predecessors: Correspondence and papers: War of 1939-45 Burma: Political Intelligence, MI2 (a), 28 Jul. 1938, 2.

⁵² BL IOR M/5/54 Burma Monthly Intelligence Summaries, Apr. to Dec. 1937, 205.

⁵³ Khin Yi, *The Dobama Movement in Burma (1930-1938)* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), 47.

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intelligence reports, presenting the results in tables that listed the number of such organisations in each part of central Burma.⁵⁴ Nationalist efforts to achieve hegemonic influence were also apparent in the work undertaken by *Thakin* members of the *Dobama Asi Ayon* who organised a relief campaign for victims of a flood in 1937.⁵⁵ Intelligence reports were packed with examples such as this of the *Thakins'* political agitation and the consequent measures taken against them. 'Action was considered' against *Thakins* who made 'violent speeches' and securities were demanded from certain periodicals ran the commentary in one such report.⁵⁶ The *Thakins* were by this point viewed as potential instigators of a coordinated attack on the colonial state infrastructure, and their activity mirrored that of the GCBA described in early intelligence reports as detailed in chapter one. Intelligence reports issued by the Army soon after separation in August 1937, in which most of the information cited came from the BDB, noted that a 'revolutionary terrorist vanguard among the *Thakins* was created'.⁵⁷ The BDB henceforth devoted its attentions to monitoring the activity of this vanguard as this was exactly the sort of threat to colonial stability that would require the Governor to seize the reins of power to secure the continuation of colonial rule. Even at the very inception of Burma's separation from India, then, challenges to colonial power were much in evidence.

Aside from its central preoccupation with the *Thakins*, following the directives of Stephenson, Cochrane, Craw and Monteath, the BDB was on constant alert for anti-colonial conspiracies. Intelligence received by the military in November 1937 reported that 'information so far unconfirmed but received from a fairly reliable source' warned of a 'secret organisation pledged to adopt terrorist methods formed by the *Dobama Asi Ayon* in Prome'.⁵⁸ Following the government's suppression of the rebellion, the government increased its efforts to infiltrate those nationalist groups which sought the overthrow of the state. Radicals, in response, worked harder to conceal their activities from the scrutiny

⁵⁴ BL IOR M/5/48 Burmese political activity, and political parties and associations BDB Intelligence Summary no. 9, 25 Sep. 1937, 57.

⁵⁵ Khin Yi, op. cit., 51.

⁵⁶ BL IOR M/5/54 Burma Monthly Intelligence Summaries, Apr. to Dec. 1937 Intelligence Summary no. 9, 11 Nov. 1937.

⁵⁷ Ibid, Intelligence Summary no. 5, 31 Aug. 1937, 139.

⁵⁸ Ibid, Intelligence Summary no. 4, 31 Jul. 1937, 164.

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of the intelligence services. Intelligence reported that the Central *Dobama Asi Ayon* was concerned by the district commissioner's use of 'sections 107 and 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code' to prevent nationalists from speaking and distributing material as the DAA worried that 'the whole of their propaganda would be wrecked'.⁵⁹ These laws were being used to effectively silence political dissidents. *Thakin* 'leaders were seeking ways to defeat these means' of state suppression of their activity: as Herman observes, intelligence collection is directed against non-consenting targets.⁶⁰

In 1936 Rangoon University students organised a strike against University staff after two students, Koe Saw Myint and Aung San, who became prominent members of the *Thakin* organisation, published an article in the student magazine that was highly critical of the University authorities. They were expelled for this, provoking widespread student anger resulting in a strike which was imitated across a number of other colleges and schools in central Burma.⁶¹ The Governor, Stephenson, opined that another cause lay behind the strike, this being the provocation of students by radical nationalists seeking to raise 'canvassers and helpers at elections'.⁶² Once again, the Governor raised the fear of conspiratorial agitators in response to unrest. As much as Stephenson desired to 'smash it at all costs and re-establish order' he observed that the use of an Indian police force against the strikers would likely 'lead to racial riots'.⁶³ The students were well organised and considered they had won a major victory against government by striking.

Radical sentiments among the student union had increased following the 1935 Rangoon University Students Union elections of a number of 'members with a radical nationalist agenda'.⁶⁴ U Maung Maung, a student at the time, left records of the strike revealing that it was highly organised with a great effort undertaken

⁵⁹ Ibid, Intelligence Summary no. 4, 14 Apr. 1937, 164.

⁶⁰ Ibid and Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in peace and war* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 132.

⁶¹ BL IOSM Mss Eur D1066/3 1936 Rangoon University Strike U Maung Maung, papers on the Rangoon University Strike of 1936, 7.

⁶² BL IOR M/1/147 Rangoon University Strike, 21 Mar. – 22 Jul. 1936, Letter from Stephenson to Cochrane, Mar. 1936, 35

⁶³ Ibid, 38.

⁶⁴ BL IOSM Mss Eur D1066/3 1936 Rangoon University Strike U Maung Maung, papers on the Rangoon University Strike of 1936, 4.

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to conceal any planning from the authorities. Six hundred students 'divided into cells, each under a leader'.⁶⁵ Ko Kyaw Nyein, a student radical, was appointed the chief of intelligence. As the strike progressed, morale flagged and activists worked to keep their situation secret from the government spies among their ranks. Aung San, who went on to become Burma's most notorious anti-colonial nationalist, discovered that Ko Kyaw Nyein's men had even shadowed him on suspicion of being a government informer.⁶⁶ The students demonstrated a heightened awareness of the threat the intelligence services posed to their activities, even to the extent of developing a specialist intelligence apparatus to counter government efforts to infiltrate their ranks. While Callahan and Taylor argue that the military was the key component of control of the population, during the student strike it is evident that radicals considered the state intelligence services to be their greatest fear. Preventing surveillance of their activities was crucial to their ability to mobilise against colonial rule. Erik J. Dahl observes that deceptive practices of the enemy are often a prime factor of intelligence failure.⁶⁷ Nationalists adapted to the new means of state oppression that the state developed following the rebellion.

Histories of Burman nationalism observe that nationalists adopted increasingly conspiratorial, clandestine tactics during the 1930s. Trips to India to meet members of the Indian National Congress Party (INC) had introduced *Thakins* to the methods of Leninist vanguardism, a model of organisation whereby a small elite at the top communicated its wishes downwards and received feedback from lower units.⁶⁸ The BDB monitored the *Dobama Asi Ayon's* efforts to perpetuate their influence throughout society. In September 1937 under the heading of 'Thakin Activity' it was recorded that the *Dobama* Song was being adopted by schools throughout the country: 'whether the influence of the song will be desirable from the Government's point of view is doubtful'.⁶⁹ The *Thakins* 'get to the masses through 'peasants' and cultivator associations successfully' a

⁶⁵ Ibid, 9.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Erik J. Dahl, "Warning of terror: Explaining the Failure of Intelligence Against Terrorism," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 28, no. 1 (2005): 31-55 at 33.

⁶⁸ Khin Yi, op. cit., 45.

⁶⁹ BL IOR M/5/48 Burmese political activity, and political parties and associations Intelligence summary no. 9, 25 Sep. 1937, 61.

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report on Burmese political activity in 1937 noted, reporting that action had been taken to prosecute *Thakin* Ba Ou 'who said in a speech that Thakins would oppose the new constitution and if they failed they would resort to rebellion'.⁷⁰ Chantal Mouffe's analysis of Gramscian theory describes 'hegemonic apparatuses' as the sectors of civil society, 'schools, churches, etc' in which any class desiring hegemony must operate to spread its ideas among the masses.⁷¹ The *Thakins* worked through schools, student and labour unions and peasant organisations to affiliate members with the *Thakin* ideology. Khin Yi's history of the *Dobama* movement based on Burmese language primary sources likewise describes the *Thakins*' aim during these years as 'to organise students, youths, workers and peasants'.⁷² *Thakins* were working to 'gain the active consent of the masses', a strategy Anne Showstack Sassoon equates with hegemony.⁷³ The BDB manoeuvred to intercept the *Thakins*' influence among the hegemonic apparatuses.

As the foregoing evidence suggests, information gathering within Burman society only intensified on separation, allowing a more comprehensive picture of the different elements of the colony's internal politics to be built up as the various branches of intelligence gathering were more closely integrated and centralised during 1937. The BDB, by this point, had a number of informers and agents infiltrated among student and nationalist organisations and gained access to some of the *Thakins* most private meetings. *Thakin* Tun Ok gave a speech calling for a parallel administration to the existing government in April 1937. The BDB reported that:

at a private meeting held later, Tun Ok threatened that if Dr Ba Maw failed to take action against local officials who were oppressing them, the Thakins would embark on an intensive campaign throughout the length

⁷⁰ Ibid, Intelligence summary no. 5 26 May. 1937, 80.

⁷¹ Chantal Mouffe "Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci," in *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1979), 187.

⁷² Khin Yi, op. cit., 27.

⁷³ Anne Showstack Sassoon, "Passive revolution and the politics of reform" in *Approaches to Gramsci* ed. Anne Showstack Sassoon (London: Workers and Readers publishing cooperative society ltd. 1982), 119.

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and breadth of Burma to denounce Ba Maw and his colleagues as traitors and swindlers.⁷⁴

Informers working for the BDB undermined the *Thakins* from within.

The BDB directed its activities to monitoring seditious groups judged most likely to make inroads amongst the Burman students, labourers and peasantry where resentment of the colonial state was still rife. In November 1937, military intelligence, still drawing on BDB reports, stated that in Tharawaddy district *Thakins* were 'making speeches' to 'unite disaffected villagers', and were advocating the 'non-payment of taxes'. The report concluded that 'when Thakin Soe Thein gave word they were to be ready to fight the government with arms of which they had plenty'.⁷⁵ The conclusion reached was unsurprising, the recommending 'energetic action' be taken against 'more truculent members of associations in this neighbourhood'.⁷⁶ In a statement that set the tone for all intelligence reporting on the *Thakins*, military intelligence cited a 'most reliable authority' who considered that the 'anti-government campaign of the Thakins is exactly similar to that before the 1930-1932 rebellion'.⁷⁷ This assertion was cited in later War Office reports produced by the Military Intelligence Section on internal security in Burma in 1939.⁷⁸ An uprising provoked by a conspiratorial group was an entrenched theme in intelligence considerations and nationalists were targeted on the basis of this expectation.

The BDB also gathered intelligence on issues affecting the subaltern groups of peasants and labourers as they were concerned about their proneness to manipulation by agitators. C. G. Stewart, in a pamphlet issued to officers attached to the BDB (see Appendix A), urged that intelligence on economic issues - exploitation of workers, taxes, crop failures, especially resistance to tax

⁷⁴ BL IOR M/5/54 Burma Monthly Intelligence Summaries, Apr. to Dec. 1937 Intelligence Summary no. 4 Jun. 1937, 165.

⁷⁵ BL IOR M/5/54 Burma Monthly Intelligence Summaries, Apr to Dec 1937 Intelligence Summary no. 6 Nov. 1937, 106.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁷⁸ TNA WO 106/3704A Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence, and predecessors: Correspondence and papers: War of 1939-45 Burma: Political Intelligence, MI2 (a), 28 Jul. 1938, 2.

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collection - be especially attended to, as, Stewart observed, 90% of the population was agriculturalist (see Appendix A).⁷⁹ Guha observes that Indian nationalist groups attempted to mobilise the subaltern groups against colonial rule.⁸⁰ The BDB was attempting to prevent Burman nationalists efforts to do the same in Burma. However, managing the information order on the ground in rural Burma was a difficult task, as proved by Stanford and De Vine's earlier efforts, discussed in chapter two. Following in their footsteps, Stewart was more alert to signs of discontent and hostility to colonial rule among the subaltern groups, advising officers to be on the lookout for 'attacks on local officials' and a 'lack of respect to headmen' or 'non-cooperation' with the administration (see Appendix A).⁸¹

As usual all such acts were likely to be interpreted in the light of the earlier rebellion. Renewed examples of such hostility from villagers were recorded by Detective Superintendents of the Police who reported high incidences of cattle theft.⁸² It was 'difficult to detect this form of theft' which, the police officers noted, 'could be suppressed by villagers if they cooperated and refused to buy beef'. Furthermore, the policemen commented, 'headmen and elders if they exerted themselves could stop the trade'.⁸³ In fact, unreported cattle theft spiralled to a 'tremendous' height by 1936. Police made references to similar rises in other forms of criminality, noting more cases of opium smuggling and increased evasion of the regulation of the opium trade in 1936.⁸⁴ However efficient the machinery of colonial rule, the British were still frustrated in their project to regulate social behaviour at its grass roots in rural society. Indeed, popular animus ran rife, and Stewart urged BDB officers to attune themselves to its escalation.

⁷⁹ BL IOR M/4/2074 Defence: Burma Defence Bureau Pamphlet on Internal and Frontier Intelligence – Issued under the authority of the Government of Burma, Rangoon 1937, (see Appendix A), 3.

⁸⁰ Guha, *Dominance without hegemony*, 101.

⁸¹ BL IOR M/4/2074 Defence: Burma Defence Bureau Pamphlet on Internal and Frontier Intelligence – Issued under the authority of the Government of Burma, Rangoon 1937, (see Appendix A), 4.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

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The above observation by the police provides insight into the 'infrapolitics of subordinate groups' described by James C. Scott.⁸⁵ This refers to the cultural and political activity of indigenous society during colonial rule, normally unrecorded but revealed in instances of illicit activity such as cattle theft. Such acts have 'a lively backstage transcript of values, understandings and popular outrage' behind them.⁸⁶ Colonial efforts to regulate society were frustrated by indigenous society's infrapolitical activity. Cattle theft was not an act of rebellion against the state, but it impeded the ability of the state to organise society on terms favourable to colonial rule. Indigenous ways of life asserted themselves in a 'host of down to earth stratagems to minimise appropriation' by the colonial state.⁸⁷ As radical and innovative as the expansion of the state throughout the 1930s seems, an inertial momentum of indigenous political and social hostility to colonial rule impeded the state's efforts to impose a template for order on society. Scott's analysis of the state contends that while 'techniques devised to enhance legibility of a society to its rulers have become vastly more sophisticated, political motives driving them change little'; it is also true that the indigenous society's position regarding the state in colonial Burma barely changed.⁸⁸ The hostility of the majority population of peasants to the state could only concentrate the BDB's efforts to repress the nationalists they considered likely to provoke a subaltern uprising.

Similarities and differences between the Burma Defence Bureau and the Delhi Intelligence Bureau on separation

Burma had been a part of the Raj since its annexation in 1885, and many of the same approaches to colonial control would be expected to apply to Burma as well as India. Administrative and political changes were underway in India in 1935 as the Government of India Act was passed. Similarly to the Governor of Burma, the 'Viceroy retained overall authority throughout India for Law and Order, defence and finance' and authorised the Governors of the 11 provinces

⁸⁵ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 183.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 190.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 188.

⁸⁸ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*, (Hale and London: Yale University Press, 1998) 77.

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of India to 'dismiss Indian Ministers and govern directly if Law and Order broke down' F. W. Kidd, former deputy director of the Delhi Intelligence Bureau, described in a review of the intelligence arrangements for India after the passing of the Act.⁸⁹ It was essential that Governors of the Provinces and the Viceroy 'be informed of political and economic development in various provinces' by 'covert as well as overt information'.⁹⁰

The intelligence services role was to indicate potential crises of colonial control which would require the arrogation of state powers in a political crisis, as in Burma during 1930. The Governor, responding to signals from intelligence, could declare a suspension of elected ministers to bring unrest under control, much as his counterpart in Burma did. The Central Intelligence Officers (CIOs) had the power to decide when such measures were required, giving them a primary role in underpinning colonial authority. The Government of India Act of 1935 ceded a number of powers to elected members of the Indian National Congress (INC). As in Burma, this had caused consternation among the intelligence managers, as both the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, and the Secretary of State for India, Leo Amery, recalled in 1944. Indeed, Amery's account of the history of the Bureau in India recalled of the Act of 1935 that 'interference by politicians [should] be resisted' and that measures to protect the intelligence bureau from political interference had been put in place.⁹¹

The Central Intelligence Officer (CIO) staff in India was expanded in 1937. From then on, the CIOs acted as 'channels of communication to provincial police authorities of information essential that is not to be entrusted to offices whose records are part of archives of government conducted by a political party'.⁹² The struggle to ensure that the state could maintain its grasp of the information order went on in India as it did in Burma. Patrick French observes that the Act

⁸⁹ BL IOSM Mss Eur F161/212 Intelligence Bureau, Government of India, F. W. Kidd, Bengal Intelligence Department: papers relating to the creation of Criminal Intelligence Department and the operation of the Central Intelligence Officer System 1937-1947, 20.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ BL IOR L/PJ/12/662 Reorganisation of Indian Political Intelligence and future of Delhi Intelligence Bureau Letter from Viceroy Linlithgow to Secretary of State for India L. S. Amery, recounting history of Central Intelligence Organisation 05 Dec. 1944, 13.

⁹² BL IOR L/PJ/7/1071 Expansion of the Central Intelligence Bureau 24 Nov. 1932 – 5 Dec. 1942 Secretary of Governor Generals Public reports in 1938, 14.

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reinforced British control and increased surveillance and infiltration of Indian political groups.⁹³ The Indian Government experienced the same pressures as Burma's government; a shoestring budget, and rising nationalist activity in the 1930s requiring heightened intelligence powers.⁹⁴ It is not surprising that the BDB bore so many resemblances to its parent organisation.

In broad terms the security forces in India shared all the features found in Burma. Gyanesh Kudaisya has recently analysed the role of the army in India, and has reiterated its prominent role in maintaining internal security in their inter-war years. As is well known, the army was frequently deployed 'in aid of civil power', immediately after World War One especially.⁹⁵ The army became increasingly integral to the repression of nationalism and the suppression of communal disturbances, often with appalling consequences of which the Amritsar massacre obviously stands out.⁹⁶ Kudaisya's analysis of the army in India is similar to that of Callahan and Taylor's description of the army in Burma. India had a much larger army however, and a number of functions other than internal security. Kudaisya observes that 1/3 of the imperial Indian security budget was allocated to internal security purposes. "The function of the army', the Government of India's Home Department pronounced, 'is to suppress rebellion'", records Kudaisya.⁹⁷ Showing the flag marches and providing a back up to the civil administration were typical responsibilities of the army in India. Likewise, David Arnold's analysis of the police in Southern India notes that the police took on a repressive and alienated character, emphasising the 'remoteness of police from the majority of people and the heightened alien and repressive character of the government'.⁹⁸ They were similar to the Burma Military Police, the rapid force paramilitary called out to suppress dissent.

⁹³ Patrick French, *Liberty or Death* (London: Flamingo, 1997), 96.

⁹⁴ BL IOR L/PJ/7/1071 Expansion of the Central Intelligence Bureau 24 November 1932 – 5 December 1942 Secretary of Governor Generals Public reports in 1938, 16.

⁹⁵ Gyanesh Kudaisya, "In aid of civil power: The colonial army in Northern India, c. 1919-1942," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 32, no. 1 (2004): 42-68.

⁹⁶ Derek Sayer, 'British reaction to the Amritsar massacre, 1919-1920,' *Past and Present*, 131 (1991): 130-64.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 44.

⁹⁸ David Arnold, "Police and Colonial Control in Southern India," *Social Scientist*, 4, no. 12 (1976): 3-16.

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Contrary to Kudaisya's argument, however, Christopher Bayly and Patrick French argue that the intelligence services had the more significant role in maintaining imperial order in colonial India. French observes that the Delhi Intelligence Bureau was the mainstay for Indian colonial rule by 1937. Bayly considers the role of the army to have been exaggerated in analyses of colonial security in India.⁹⁹ Young's analysis of the colonial state observes that 'large detachments of metropolitan soldiers were found only in a few places'; military force was thus not the mainstay of colonial rule.¹⁰⁰ This was true of both India and Burma. Army and paramilitary activity depended on the framing activity of the intelligence services, which were, as Nehru noted, a pervasive presence in the day-to-day activity of Indian nationalists.¹⁰¹ As the Secretary of the Governor General The Marquess of Zetland observed in 1938, the colonial military in India much appreciated the work of the intelligence services.¹⁰² As in Burma, intelligence on Indian nationalist activity was deemed a crucial linchpin of colonial control well into the late stages of Imperial occupation.

Although an in-depth appraisal of the role of Indian intelligence is beyond the scope of this thesis, a review of the literature and Indian intelligence archives on the history of intelligence development reveals broad similarities between Burma and India's security planning during the period of separation, 1935-1937. The DIB maintained strong links with the BDB. The Viceroy of India, Linlithgow, and the Governor of Burma, Cochrane, emphasised the importance of 'personal contact' between the heads of the intelligence bureaus in each country, Stewart of the BDB and J. M. Ewart of the DIB, on separation.¹⁰³ The DIB continued to incorporate BDB reports into its own reports after separation. The Indian Political Intelligence (IPI) organisation that headed surveillance of Indians outside of India, was situated in the Indian Office in London and distributed the Burma Defence Bureau's reports after receiving them from the Governor of

⁹⁹ C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 56.

¹⁰⁰ Crawford Young *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective*, (Yale: Yale University Press, 1994), 246.

¹⁰¹ Patrick French, op. cit., 96.

¹⁰² BL IOR L/PJ/7/1071 Expansion of the Central Intelligence Bureau 24 Nov. 1932 – 5 Dec. 1942 Secretary of Governor Generals Public reports in 1938, 9.

¹⁰³ BL IOSM Mss Eur F125/114 Hope (Victor Alexander John), 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow Linlithgow collection: papers of Victor Alexander John Hope, 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow (1887-1952) as Viceroy of India 1936-43 Letters and telegrams regarding Burma 1937-39, 163.

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Burma following separation in 1937.¹⁰⁴ Anderson and Killingray's study of colonial policing observes that in colonial administration 'policing, security and the gathering of political intelligence became closely interwoven activities that were directed from London to an unprecedented extent'.¹⁰⁵ Burma was not excluded from these attentions, particularly being so close to Indian intelligence operations; Monteath stated that 'the new bureau [the BDB] will have continuous liaison with India and direct correspondence with London and other centres'.¹⁰⁶ Management of the information order by state intelligence had been so vital to colonial rule in India, that it was not to be neglected in its offshoot, Burma. However, the two bureaus faced very different brands of nationalist agitation following separation.

The rise of radical nationalism was a major concern for the governments of both India and Burma. However, the INC and the *Thakins* were distinct varieties of nationalism and the *Thakins* did not adopt the INC's ideological values and identity, nor did they seek to work as a combined force. *Thakins* emphasised their ethnic Burman identity and made an appeal for a 'Burma for the Burmans'.¹⁰⁷ Although a number of *Thakins* went to India and learned tactics for anti-colonial mobilisation from the INC, in their domestic activity they retained their hostility towards Indian immigrants, a major grievance of the labourers and peasantry of Burma.¹⁰⁸ BDB reports on terrorism in Burma noted that the *Thakins* had been in touch with Bengali terrorists to learn how to make hand bombs and explosives. The central *Dobama Asi Ayon* had 'agreed to send *Thakins* for military training' in Bengal.¹⁰⁹ However, the INC had very little impact on *Thakin* ideology. In May 1937, on separation, Nehru visited Burma; the intelligence summary considered it 'improbable that Nehru will influence

¹⁰⁴ BL IOR M/4/2539 Civil Intelligence Bureau reports, 346.

¹⁰⁵ David Killingray and David M. Anderson, introduction to *Policing and Decolonisation: Nationalism, Politics and the Police, 1917-65*, eds. David Killingray and David M. Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 2.

¹⁰⁶ BL IOR M/1/93 - Safeguards for control of Special Branch (Criminal Investigations Department) and Intelligence Under Secretary of State for Burma D. T. Monteath to Chief Secretary to Governor of Burma H. H. Craw, 18 Feb. 1937, 4.

¹⁰⁷ TNA WO 106/3704A Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence, and predecessors: Correspondence and papers: War of 1939-45 Burma: Political Intelligence, MI2 (a), 28 Jul. 1938, 2.

¹⁰⁸ BL IOR M/5/54 Burma Monthly Intelligence Summaries, Apr. to Dec. 1937, Intelligence Summary no. 9, 31 Dec. 1937, 13.

¹⁰⁹ BL IOR M/5/52 Information relating to Terrorism and subversive activities, Intelligence summary no. 1, Jan. 1938, 3.

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Burma' particularly given the 'very few manifestations of communal feeling arising between the two races [Indian and Burman] after the separation'.¹¹⁰ After the First World War, nationalist activism had provoked a number of political changes in India and Burma.¹¹¹ Intelligence reforms were often a response to nationalist agitation, as Patrick French observes of colonial India.¹¹² This was also true in Burma, where nationalism was the perceived cause of widespread dissent. The two distinct strands of nationalism in India and Burma required different intelligence responses. It is in their distinct approaches to nationalist activity that the Burma Defence Bureau and the DIB differed.

J. M. Ewart, head of the DIB, observed that the BDB was 'in great measure a replica of my organisation here, but its connection with the military authorities is emphasised by the inclusion of a military member in the officer personnel'.¹¹³ The BDB had a distinct counter-insurgency component to its make-up as it expected rebellion. The model of intelligence administration adopted during the Saya San rebellion, and the perceptions of society provoked by the rebellion, had an impact on the formation of the BDB on separation. Colonial attitudes to the emergent nationalist movements in India and Burma provide an explanation for this reasoning. MI2 (a) reviewed political intelligence reports compiled by the BDB in July 1938 and considered that the *Thakins* 'corresponded to the left wing of the Indian Congress party but had a distinct terrorist leaning in addition'.¹¹⁴ However a review of the BDB's reports on terrorism in 1938 reveal that 'nil' events were frequently reported under the heading of terrorism.¹¹⁵ It was more the nationalists' covert political agitation amongst the subalterns, equated with subversive anti-state activity, which concerned the BDB. The existence of a radical nationalist indigenous organisation, combined with the

¹¹⁰ BL IOR M/5/54 Burma Monthly Intelligence Summaries, Apr to Dec 1937 Intelligence Summary no. 2, Apr. 1937, 233.

¹¹¹ Paul Kratoska, "Nationalism and Modernist Reform," in *The Cambridge History of South East Asia Volume Two Part One: From c. 1800 to the 1930s* ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 249.

¹¹² French, op. cit.

¹¹³ BL IOR L/MIL/7/19520 Changes in Imperial military intelligence arrangements after separation of Burma, Letter from Director of Intelligence in India, J. M. Ewart to Laithwaite, Private Secretary to the Viceroy 01 Sep. 1937, 20.

¹¹⁴ TNA WO 106/3704A Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence, and predecessors: Correspondence and papers: War of 1939-45 Burma: Political Intelligence, MI2 (a), 28 Jul. 1938, 2.

¹¹⁵ BL IOR M/5/52 Information relating to Terrorism and subversive activities, Intelligence summary no. 1, Jan. 1938, 3.

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perceived threat of violent anti-state action, made the BDB take on a different aspect to the DIB.

The expanding presence of a Japanese threat to Imperial security in the East also influenced the two colonies approach to security threats. The Japanese had a greater presence in Burma than India and were a threat to the colonial government there in a way they were not in India. Activities of Japanese citizens in and around Burma were an escalating concern by 1937. The conflict in Manchuria between the Japanese Empire and the Chinese in 1932 stimulated the British Imperial Security network into directing intelligence activities in the Far East to monitoring Japanese activities.¹¹⁶ The Far Eastern Combined Bureau (FECB) was opened in 1935 on Stonecutters Island in Hong Kong. It was established to reform intelligence in the East and improve the coordination of Secret Intelligence Service organisations, although it did not cover Burma. Burma had some communication with the FECB; military intelligence in Burma utilised FECB reports in their external affairs intelligence appraisals. The BDB did not refer to the FECB reports in the main however, concentrating on issues relevant to the domestic stability of the government in Burma. Yet Japan was of increasing concern to the BDB as an inspiration to *Thakins* and other nationalists in Burma, especially U Saw.¹¹⁷ Japan was an Asian success story and an opponent to the British Empire. It exercised a grip on the revolutionary fervour of Asian, anti-imperialist movements. It was through their appeal to the imagination of Burman radicals that the Japanese presented the greatest threat to the security of the government of Burma.

Antony Best's review of British intelligence in the Pacific before the war notes the tendency of the colonial security services to resort to racial stereotyping regarding Japanese activity in the Empire. Best notes that intelligence reports frequently featured descriptions of the Japanese 'propensity to indulge in fishing and photography' which was taken as an indication of their inclusiveness and established their reputation as a community of spies.¹¹⁸ The intelligence

¹¹⁶ Antony Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia, 1914 - 1941* (London: Macmillan, 2002), 83.

¹¹⁷ John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1965), 366.

¹¹⁸ Best, op. cit., 17.

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services in Burma certainly paid great attention to such activities, especially in their pre-separation reporting.¹¹⁹ Yet on separation the BDB turned its attention to the increasing allegiance of Burman nationalists with representatives of the Japanese empire. Japanese businessmen and officials had been making links with Burman nationalists since at least 1934, when a Japanese millionaire, Mr. Ito was received by *Thakins* on arrival in Burma. The Special Intelligence Bureau had him placed under observation. Ito offered two *Thakins* the chance for a trip on a world tour and a scholarship in Japan. The bureau considered that 'the chances of a prospective convert to Japanese political ideas and methods obtaining a passport are very small'.¹²⁰ However, it was the beginning of a worrisome relationship between the parties.

C. G. Stewart instructed officers to be on the look out for 'pan-Asiatic Japanese movements directed to overthrow or embarrass the government of Burma' (see Appendix A).¹²¹ Japanese government representatives in Burma were becoming a threat to the stability of the government of Burma, not through their mobilisation for attack on Burma's borders, as a military opponent, but through their infiltration of civil society in Burma. The Japanese were able to operate in the hegemonic apparatuses in Burma in a way that the British could not. Through their appeal to Asian ethnicity and the common religion of Buddhism, the Japanese hoped to access important anti-government circles in Burma. U Saw, a leading non-*Thakin* nationalist in Burma, had visited Japan in 1935. He returned to Burma and became the majority shareholder in the popular vernacular newspaper 'The Sun'.¹²² U Saw was an elected representative in the 1937 parliament and a figure of great concern for the British. He had been so since the rebellion, when he was described as a 'thorn' in the side of the colonial government.¹²³ By allying themselves with nationalists with an

¹¹⁹ BL IOSM Mss Eur F125/160 File of correspondence arising out of consideration in 1936 of the possibility of Japanese aggression against India, Burma, British Far Eastern Countries and Netherlands Indies, Apr. 1934, 3.

¹²⁰ BL IOR Neg 9691 L/PJ/12/745 Local Government Report Burma Oct. 1934, 53.

¹²¹ BL IOR M/1/93 - Safeguards for control of Special Branch (Criminal Investigations Department) and Intelligence Under Secretary of State for Burma D. T. Monteath to Chief Secretary to Governor of Burma H. H. Craw, 18 Feb. 1937, 4.

¹²² Cady, op. cit., 366.

¹²³ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932 Extract from the Official Report of the Burma Legislative Council Debates, 20 Feb. 1931, 8.

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influential role in the vernacular media, the Japanese were appealing to Burmese civil society. BDB intelligence officers had to counter Japanese, as well as indigenous nationalists', influence over the population. The BDB had a vital role in this area, operating where the army could not, in the control of the information order.

For the BDB, the Japanese were another political threat as their proximity to Burman nationalists was most alarming. The Japanese had by no means a universal appeal to Burmans on separation, but were stepping up their activities to form working partnerships with nationalists against the government. Security concerns in India and Burma were so divergent and specialised that different approaches were developed to respond to them. Intelligence gathering was at the forefront of government efforts to counter the rise of nationalism and Japanese activity on separation. Indeed, only the intelligence services had the ability to target the Japanese, working in the hegemonic apparatuses where the intelligence services had informers and agents.

Conclusion

The colonial government of Burma separated from India in 1937 with a more specialised political intelligence-gathering bureau designed to contain rising nationalism. The Burma Defence Bureau consolidated the work of the temporary specialist intelligence bureau which had been in operation prior to separation. Without achieving the consent of the population, the government in separation Burma was incapable of functioning without some means of monitoring popular sentiment towards colonial rule. The government entered separation prepared to counter anti-state activity, not by relying on the army as a fallback tool in case of dissent as Taylor and Callahan suggest, but by employing a system of intelligence gathering to alert them to areas of concern within the country. Intelligence was the bedrock of the Governor's power, as his discussions with his colleagues in colonial government made plain. Nationalist ideas perpetuated by radical students and other agitators were deemed the greatest threat to colonial rule, as they resembled the attributed causes of rebellion. The BDB oversaw the efforts of agents, police superintendents and

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district commissioners to gather information on Burmese society. The BDB was responsible for describing Burman society to the Governor. In doing so they framed the population in a manner that allowed the government to take certain repressive steps towards the population.

The army depended on the BDB to define the security threats that it was expected to suppress in the event of disorder. Rebellion, emanating from *Thakin* provocations, was considered the most probable threat to internal security. The intelligence services were in the closest proximity to the *Thakins* and other nationalist organisations, and provided the army with its understanding of internal security threats. The army was operating at a minimal presence on separation and was concerned that it would not be able to contain another rebellion. Intelligence was considered vital to prevent dissent from escalating to an extreme where the army would have to confront guerrilla warfare. Even in the most remote areas of Burma, the state's ability to rule was mediated by its relationship to the local information order. In districts far from central administration where colonial officials were few in number and the army was required to suppress rebellious villages, the army's actions depended on information gathered by civil officials from indigenous representatives. The government did not just wait until some event occurred and then send in the army to crush activity; 'one has to ask whether a simple coercive instrument best serves the interests of the oppressors', John Lonsdale questions of views of the colonial state which emphasise coercion rather than consensus.¹²⁴ Developing a means whereby the authorities could keep a tab on activities within society that would enable them to deploy their resources optimally, without the requirement of heavy coercion, was crucial to colonial control in Burma, as the rebellion had demonstrated.

Nationalist conspiracies and subaltern hostility to the colonial state impeded the smooth functioning of the intelligence apparatus. Villagers obstructed the effective functioning of the colonial administration by engaging in activities such

¹²⁴ John Lonsdale, "State and Social Processes in Africa: A Historiographical Survey," *African Studies Review* 24, no. 2/3 Social Science and Humanistic Research on Africa: An Assessment (1981): 139-225 at 151.

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as smuggling. While the BDB was kept secret from the knowledge of Burmese representatives, nationalists were alerted to the dangers government informers posed and worked to evade them. Ferris observes that 'subjects under observation resist the observer through denial and deception and change their behaviour in response to one's own' and evidently students and nationalists were doing just this in response to the threat of colonial intelligence.¹²⁵ The BDB however, managed to infiltrate informers into the innermost circles of the Thakins on separation and was privy to their conspiracies.

BDB specialisation was also driven by the effort to differentiate the bureau from its cousin, the Delhi Intelligence Bureau, on separation. The rebellion had convinced the Governors of India and Burma that the nature of the security threats in the two countries was too diverse to be handled by the same bureau. But if the two offices were organised differently, their approach to their target populations reveals that both bureaus considered nationalism to be the greatest threat to colonial security. It was here, though, that the differences came into play. Clearly, Burman nationalism was distinct from Indian nationalism and warranted a different approach. In particular Burman nationalism was equated with the threat of rebellion, in a way in which Indian nationalism was not. Other security threats to India and Burma's borders were forcing those countries' security apparatuses to adopt different approaches; Japan was beginning to infiltrate indigenous Burman activity in order to foster sympathy to the Japanese empire's ends. The BDB, closest to indigenous activity, was at the forefront of preventing the Japanese threat which was becoming linked to nationalist activity. Ironically, the BDB and the Japanese each struggled to control Burman nationalism: the BDB to counter it, the Japanese to use it to their own ends.

Nationalists were accelerating their efforts to perpetuate hegemony among civil society in Burma in the 30s; Young's observation that civil society emergent is nationalism is in evidence in colonial Burma's history as the intelligence

¹²⁵ John Robert Ferris, "Image and Accident, Intelligence and the origins of the Second World War, 1933 - 1941," in *Intelligence and Strategy: Selected Essays*, ed. John Ferris (Chippenham: Frank Cass, 2005), 99.

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services had to work in civil society to counter the rise of nationalism.¹²⁶ The intelligence bureau construed its activity as preventing the rise of the population in rebellion against state rule by countering nationalism. The independent organisation of civil society was inimical to colonial rule. The state wanted to manage civil society in a manner convenient to colonial aims. With minimal resources, the BDB was the colonial government's best shot at manipulating civil society and preventing the nationalists' achievement of hegemony which would have thwarted colonial rule. Yet it was a struggle, not a won game. Immediately on separation intelligence reports perceived conspiracies to undermine the state being hatched in nationalist circles and moved quickly to curtail them. Intelligence considered a crisis of control already to have erupted in 1937, legitimising the application of harsh colonial laws against nationalists and ensuring the Governor's firm grasp of the reins of power. As separation had failed to develop institutions which would win the favour of either the subaltern groups or nationalists, the likelihood of conflict between the state and the population was strong.

¹²⁶ Crawford Young, *The African State in Colonial Comparative Perspective* (Michigan: Yale University Press, 1994), 236.

The state undermined by subaltern disorder: intelligence failure in ‘the year of revolution’: 1938

Introduction

The year 1938 was termed the 'year of revolution' by Burman nationalists, and historian Martin Smith refers to it as the 'year of strife' for the British colonial administration.¹ Central Burma was afflicted by widespread disorder throughout the year as the population's frustration with the colonial state erupted in a series of strikes, protest marches and rioting. In January 1938 labourers in the oil fields at Syriam went on strike over a fellow worker's unfair dismissal.² Sympathy strikes quickly spread to oil fields and refineries throughout the country as workers broadened their demands to seek improved working conditions.³ In January, paralleling the action of the strikers, peasants organised a cultivators' march on Rangoon in protest at punitively high levels of taxation.⁴ Strikes and marches continued throughout the year in intermittent, but often volatile, phases. Peasants expressed their hostility to taxation and crop requisitioning through rick and haystack burning which was also frequent throughout 1938.⁵ The colonial government responded to these expressions of hostility by deploying paramilitary forces to patrol troubled districts and oilfields with often violent consequences.

Most devastating to colonial stability that year was a riot between Burman and Indian communities in August which originated in Rangoon but spread throughout central Burma's districts. Ostensibly provoked by the publication of an Indian Muslim tract defaming the Buddha, the riot actually stemmed from the continuing political and economic frustrations of the Burman population. This was the greatest disturbance since the Saya San rebellion and wrought widespread destruction of British commercial premises. The costs of its

¹ Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 1991), 54.

² BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence Summary no. 1, Jan. 1938, 297.

³ Ibid, Intelligence summary no. 9, Nov. 1938, 96.

⁴ Ibid, Intelligence Summary no. 1, Jan. 1938, 285.

⁵ BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan 1939-10 Jan 1940; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Dec. 1938 - second half Dec. 1939, 228

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suppression also depleted state coffers.⁶ These 1938 disorders were also the apogee of Burman nationalist dissent. Once again, nationalist organisations, especially the *Thakins*, worked closely with striking workers and peasant protesters, supplying a programme of action and coordinating anti-government demonstrations. Socio-economic grievances, particularly the resentment felt by many Burmese towards the Indian *Chettyar* class of traditional money-lenders, alienated chronically indebted peasant smallholders from the government, in turn making them more amenable to the *Thakins'* overtures.⁷ Perhaps most importantly, the structures of collaboration developed for separation were proved a failure by the events of 1938, lending weight to *Thakin* claims that this was indeed a revolutionary year.⁸

Senior figures within the government of Burma, including Governor Cochrane, Monteath, Craw and Stewart, failed to recognise the threat that the grievances of the peasantry, of landless labourers and of striking industrial workers posed to the colonial state. The BDB was ultimately responsible for failing to perceive how nationalists could subsume their nationalist agenda within the more immediate demands of the peasant cultivators and industrial workers for better pay and conditions and, in the absence of intelligence-led pre-emption, the only response to the disturbances was harsh repression, which took the form of arrests, blanket censorship and violent crackdowns on public protests. The BDB's inability to predict the riots was evidence of serious limitations in its day-to-day operations as an intelligence bureau. However, the government and security forces still relied on the BDB as their guarantor of defence against local disorder, hoping that its predictive capacities would improve over time.

Burma had been separated from India for less a year before the population expressed their rejection of the new government. Robert H. Taylor observes that the new administration had little public backing, requiring the support of

⁶ BL IOR M/5/12 Memorandum of Burma British Association concerning disturbances between Burmese and Moslem communities and speech by W. J. C. Richards, President of Burma British Association concerning political situation in Burma, 2 Feb. 1939, 4.

⁷ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1938 Intelligence Summary no. 10, 26 Oct. 1938, 53.

⁸ Smith, op. cit., 54.

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Europeans and Indians to function.⁹ Indian affairs still took priority over Burmese concerns and after separation Burma continued to pay for the Indian troops stationed in the country.¹⁰ Furthermore, calls for regulation of Indian immigration went unheeded, an unwise move, as immigrant Indian labour was a root cause of the riots in 1930 described in chapter one, and, as mentioned before, rural frustration with the financial power of the Indian *Chettyar* class provided a rallying cry for rebellion.¹¹ The BDB's failure to discern these tensions, let alone to counteract them, left the government peculiarly vulnerable to outbreaks of inter-communal violence. To make matters worse, an official enquiry into the police force in 1937 revealed major corruption.¹²

If the pre-conditions for another outbreak of disorder were already in place, nationalist exploitation of them was more sophisticated than in 1930. The *Thakins* and U Saw had for several months concentrated their efforts on expanding membership of their organisations and developing more widespread local networks of support. The *Thakins* adopted a more radical plan of action after a *Dobama Asi Ayon* conference in March 1938, rejecting much of the more cautious approach to anti-colonial action to which they had felt obligated after the failure of Saya San.¹³ Meanwhile, U Saw formed the *Myochit* Party that became the *Thakins'* greatest competitor for influence among the population.¹⁴ Aware of these organisations' mounting influence among the population, the BDB were naturally concerned. But the Bureau focused its gaze on those nationalists known to be working to inculcate their anti-colonial agenda among Burma's subaltern groups, while ignoring the grievances that exercised the population and made them receptive to such ideas in the first place.

Burma was not alone among British colonial territories in experiencing upheaval against colonial rule in 1938. India witnessed major labour, peasant and student

⁹ Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 187.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹¹ Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: The Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier 1852- 1941* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), 208.

¹² Albert D. Moscotti, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Burma, 1917-1937* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1974), 111.

¹³ Khin Yi, *The Dobama Movement in Burma (1930-1938)* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), 59.

¹⁴ John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1965), 391.

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unrest in a number of states, which stimulated an expansion of state intelligence operations.¹⁵ There was also a resurgence in Palestine's Arab Revolt against expanding Jewish settlement, which likewise provoked an overhaul of the Mandate authorities' intelligence services.¹⁶ In Kenya, Sir David Petrie, former head of the Delhi Intelligence Bureau, took charge of a long overdue reform of the Kenyan intelligence services centred on the creation of a dedicated Special Branch in Nairobi.¹⁷ Both local disorder and expanded intelligence operations were thus recurrent features across Britain's colonial territories as the Second World War drew nearer. In Burma, police and military resources were stretched thin, and containing an emergent nationalist movement necessitated the use of all the security forces available, these being the police, their paramilitary auxiliaries and the army. This made for a tense atmosphere, and the BDB was expected to do its part to facilitate targeted repression of the nationalist activists locally identified as a threat to colonial security (see Appendix B). This, as we have seen, it did – at least to some extent.

There were also mounting external threats to consider. In addition to monitoring its internal strife, the Japanese took an increasing interest in Burma due to the construction of the Burma-Yunnan road, which ran through Burma to South China and provided vital transport links to Chiang Kai Shek's anti-Japanese forces in their struggle against Japan's occupation of China.¹⁸ Anthony Eden, Foreign Secretary in Neville Chamberlain's National Government administration encouraged the road's development, while Governor Cochrane of Burma resisted it.¹⁹ This friction between the high policy-makers and the 'men-on-the-spot' was symptomatic of the contradictions inherent in Britain's imperial policy in the Far East, which, by 1938 as Nicholas Tarling observes, sought to

¹⁵ BL IOR L/PJ/7/1071 Expansion of the Central Intelligence Bureau 24 Nov. 1932 – 5 Dec. 1942 Secretary of Governor Generals Public reports in 1938, 16.

¹⁶ Martin Kolinsky, *Law, Order and Riots in Mandatory Palestine, 1928-1935* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1993), 102.

¹⁷ TNA Colonial Office (CO) 533/507/8, Kenya, Original Correspondence, Police Department Staff: Formation of CID Special Branch, 26 Apr. 1939, 18

¹⁸ Nicholas Tarling, *A Sudden Rampage: the Japanese occupation of South East Asia* (London: C. Hurst, 2000), 55.

¹⁹ BL IOSM Mss Eur D1080/4 Papers of Maurice Alfred Maybury, Burma Civil Service 1938-48, including diaries as sub-divisional officer Kawkareik 1940-42 An essay: "The Burma Road and the Burma-Yunann railway" c. 1942, 6.

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'preserve the status quo without getting involved in war'.²⁰ This was a difficult balancing act to sustain as the Japanese did their utmost to exploit anti-colonial nationalist movements in Burma and elsewhere, in this case, hoping to enlist their support against the use of the Burma-Yunnan road for the transport of war materiel.

Crawford Young observes that colonial states usually strove to make members of indigenous civil society incorporate the state into their 'thinking and action'.²¹ He goes on to note that 'civil society can secure collective goods through the state, thus its behaviour is in part cooperative'.²² Colonialism would, in other words, be normalised in the minds of its subjects, becoming part of their everyday existence. Yet in 1938, the population of Burma – certainly organised into a functioning civil society – did exactly the reverse: collectively demonstrating their rejection of the colonial state's legitimacy. In these circumstances, Crawford's further argument that the colonial state typically 'seeks pathways to domination that rest on authority rather than force... that preserve and enhance its legitimacy' seems problematic when applied to Burma's case.²³ Even so, Young's precepts remain useful when thinking about what the BDB was trying to do. In Young's terms, it strove to assert the authority of the state by setting the parameters of legitimate political behaviour and thus prescribing the limits to popular expression of Burman national identity. In 1938, however, recourse to force, meaning the use of the army and paramilitaries to regain order, became essential to preserve state security as other means of 'authority' had failed. The failure either to control public opinion or to read the signs of discontent among the population meant the disorder that erupted had to be contained retrospectively by forceful means. Yet, as noted above, still the BDB was not discredited, retaining its vital role in monitoring the relationship between nationalist groups and Burma's subaltern groups, which had been its

²⁰ Nicholas Tarling, *Britain, SouthEast Asia and the Onset of the Pacific War* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2006), ix.

²¹ Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1994), 22.

²² *Ibid*, 22.

²³ *Ibid*, 24.

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original purpose.²⁴ Much as before, the BDB targeted nationalists who deviated from politically acceptable activity, branding them a threat to the state and a legitimate target for repression. Thus a paradox: while the BDB failed accurately to indicate the nature and extent of discontent with colonial rule, its role in maintaining the colonial state in Burma at the end of the year of revolution was stronger than ever.

The Burma Defence Bureau and nationalist movements in Burma: countering radical efforts to achieve hegemony

In March 1938, the deadline for a review of BDB activity thus far in helping to uphold colonial rule fell due. Governor Cochrane expressed his confidence in the BDB in a report to Lord Zetland, Viceroy of India. He even dismissed any need for an 'exhaustive report on the Bureau', instead recommending the postponement of a thorough-going review and urging the BDB's continuation on a temporary basis for at least three more years.²⁵ In intelligence parlance, the BDB was evidently functioning to the satisfaction of its 'intelligence users'. It remained the government's first line of defence against increasing *Thakin* agitation. Radical nationalist mobilisation against the state was of grave concern to government; Stewart remarked in BDB and Army intelligence reports on the likelihood that the *Thakins* would instigate another rebellion.²⁶ By the start of 1938 the *Thakins* had distinguished themselves as the most highly-organised of the country's nationalist groups, having 'decided to strengthen control over members of the party who were successful at recent ministerial elections' at the end of the previous year.²⁷ More than ever before, an intelligence apparatus with access to the inner workings of anti-colonial nationalist organisations seemed vital to state security.

²⁴ BL IOR M/1/93 - Safeguards for control of Special Branch (Criminal Investigations Department) and Intelligence, Letter from Under Secretary of State for India and Burma Sir David Monteath to Sir Hugh Stephenson Governor of Burma, 21 Jul. 1934, 11.

²⁵ BL IOR M/4/2074 Defence: Burma Defence Bureau, Letter from Cochrane to Lord Zetland, 10 Mar. 1938, 39.

²⁶ BL IOR M/5/9 Notes on Thakins, Do-Bama Asi-Ayon (We Burmese Association) and kindred societies notes on the Thakins and the DAA and kindred societies C. G. Stewart, Director Intelligence Bureau, Government of Burma, BDB Intelligence Summary no. 5, 31 May. 1938, 10.

²⁷ BL IOR M/5/3 Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Nov 1937-second half Apr 1938 Home Secretary's Office Rangoon, Secretary to Governor of India 21 Dec. 1937, 36.

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As the preceding comments suggest, however, the *Thakins* were not the only nationalist group working to mobilise the population against British imperialism and there was often bitter competition among nationalist activists to attract mass support. Among the groups involved were the Young *Sanghas*, novice initiates to the Buddhist clergy, who likewise agitated against the government. A distinct 'Youth Movement' was also coalescing into a discrete political organisation.²⁸ So, too, was the 'Red Dragon Society' which 'ordered books from England on Marxism [which were] actually banned under general communist notification in India'.²⁹ According to the BDB the Society's purpose was to 'inculcate the minds of Burmans to work for the freedom of the country'.³⁰ Many of these groups shared the *Thakins*' vehement anti-imperialism. The BDB recorded in October 1938, for instance, that the Young *Sanghas* Association was 'armed to fight capitalists'.³¹ The younger monks were considered 'seriously out of hand' and the BDB noted 'protracted communal troubles due to youths'.³² While they received much less attention than other nationalist groups, the Young *Sanghas* were judged a threat to security nonetheless. Unsurprisingly, a further paramilitary formation, the 'Green volunteers' were said by BDB analysts in mid-1938 to have 'dangerous possibilities'.³³ That said, U Saw's *Galon Tats*, established in 1938 were the most significant nationalist movement besides the *Thakins*.

Clearly, then, the BDB saw numerous causes for alarm. On the lookout for groups likely to incite the rural masses and the urban poor against colonial rule, the Bureau was alarmed by this rapid increase in the number of such organisations. Proliferation also fostered radicalisation as nationalists vied with one another and against the state to win influence over their fellow citizens. Ranajit Guha describes the Indian nationalist movements under the Raj that competed to perpetuate hegemony amongst the subaltern groups and 'mobilise

²⁸ see U Maung Maung *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma 1920-1940* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1980).

²⁹ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1938 Intelligence Summary no. 4, 26 Apr. 1938, 217.

³⁰ *Ibid*, Intelligence Summary no. 1, 25 Jan. 1938, 288.

³¹ *Ibid*, Intelligence Summary no. 11, 26 Nov. 1938, 40b.

³² *Ibid*, 89.

³³ *Ibid*, Intelligence Summary no. 10, 28 Oct. 1939, 57.

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the population in a political space of its own making'.³⁴ Nationalists sought 'to enlist [the masses] support for its programs, activate them in its campaigns and generally organise them under its leadership'.³⁵ In Burma a similar contest went on between nationalist radicals who sought to win support for their programmes in villages and towns. Among these nationalist groups, the intelligence services again considered the *Thakins* to be the group most likely to work through a network of regional cells that would 'undermine the present system of village administration'.³⁶ Their strongest contender for influence among the subaltern classes in 1938 was U Saw's *Myochit* Party and its associated *Galon Tats*. The question is why?

By 1938 U Saw had become a prominent figure in mainstream politics and a notorious figure to the intelligence services. During the Saya San rebellion he had acted as one of Saya San's defenders in court. He went on to become an elected member of the Legislative Council and circulated a report on British abuses during the rebellion that confirmed his reputation as a 'thorn in the side' of the government.³⁷ Saya San's other defence lawyer was Ba Maw, another leading figure in 1930s colonial Burman politics but a very different personality to U Saw. Ba Maw was a Doctor of French Literature, an urbane and sophisticated socialist. U Saw, by contrast, did not have a university degree and was economically conservative. He expressed great admiration for the more dictatorial Japanese approach to managing the economy after visiting Japan in 1935.³⁸ Not surprisingly, U Saw made friends within Japanese business circles and was given enough money to become the majority shareholder in the vernacular 'Sun' newspaper, which had been the first newspaper that first printed the pictures of severed heads during the rebellion.³⁹ In 1937 U Saw was

³⁴ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without hegemony: history and power in colonial India* (London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 101.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ TNA WO 106/3704A Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence, and predecessors: Correspondence and papers: War of 1939-45 Burma: Political Intelligence, MI2 (a), 28 Jul. 1938, 2.

³⁷ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932 Chief Secretary to the Government of Burma Leach to the Secretary of State for Burma Monteath, 24 Aug. 1931, 300.

³⁸ see Robert H. Taylor, "Politics in Late Colonial Burma: The Case of U Saw," *Modern Asian Studies*, 10, no. 2 (1976): 161-93.

³⁹ John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1965), 366.

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elected to government as a representative for the United Party. He remained bitterly opposed to Ba Maw and worked in Parliament to undermine him as Premier.⁴⁰ To this end, U Saw formed the *Myochit* party to provide a focal point for opposition to Ba Maw and his other competitors for power in parliament. More alarmingly for the BDB, he also formed a military wing of the *Myochit* party, the aforementioned *Galon Tats*, which was trained by a former member of the Burma Military Police.⁴¹ (*Tat* means army in Burmese, and the *Galon* was a mythical bird which featured prominently in the propaganda circulated by rebels during the Saya San rebellion.)

BDB reports paid close attention to U Saw and his machinations, taking particular interest in the fact that a number of ex-rebels joined the *Galon Tats* and were trained in a 'military fashion to handle arms and weapons'.⁴² The BDB submitted regular reports on the expansion of the *Myochit* Party, noting during the worst of the disorders in August 1938 that 'Galon volunteer corps were formed in many districts'.⁴³ Even more damning from the BDB viewpoint, U Saw had called on his Japanese contacts to provide military training. Finally, in September, the BDB received an 'unconfirmed report' that U Saw had agreed to aid the Japanese in the event of a war.⁴⁴ Armed with this information, the authorities moved against him, censuring his newspaper and prosecuting him for sedition.⁴⁵

Yet, although U Saw's manifesto was considered a 'dangerous incitement of violence' when it was first published in December 1938, the BDB never took U Saw's threats as seriously as they did those of the *Thakins* themselves.⁴⁶ The BDB recorded his speeches which fiercely, if rather formulaically, condemned

⁴⁰ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1938 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries Intelligence Summary no. 10 28 Oct. 1939, 57.

⁴¹ Ibid, Intelligence Summary no. 12, 24 Dec. 1938, 9.

⁴² BL IOR M/5/48 Burmese political activity, and political parties and associations Burma Monthly Intelligence Summaries no. 5, 01 Jul. 1938, 14.

⁴³ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1938 Intelligence summary no. 9 09 Sep. 1938, 110.

⁴⁴ BL IOR M/5/48 Burmese political activity, and political parties and associations, Burma Monthly intelligence summary no. 6, 01 Jul. 1938, 11.

⁴⁵ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1938, Intelligence summary no. 9, 09 Sep. 1938, 85.

⁴⁶ BL IOR M/5/4 Governor's reports, 12 Jan. 1938-31 Dec. 1938, Governor of Burma to the Secretary of State for Burma, 31 Dec. 1938, 5.

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the British, but their own appraisals of internal security and the South East Asian Command's review of political intelligence in Burma still considered the *Thakins* to be the more likely source of rebellion.⁴⁷ U Saw did not enjoy a comparable level of popular support as the *Thakins*. Students reportedly found him 'unrepresentative' of their concerns and few were attracted by his pro-Japanese sentiments.⁴⁸ Thus, U Saw and his *Galon Tats* never achieved the popularity of the *Thakins* and were not thought likely to achieve hegemonic control over the country's population. However, they were still targeted under the same repressive laws as the *Thakins*; 'in connection with promulgations of orders under section 144 and proceedings under section 107 criminal procedure code against a couple of people and the arrest of students' belonging to the *Myochit* party, U Saw threatened a campaign of civil disobedience in December 1938 insisting that these measures should be withdrawn.⁴⁹ The *Myochit* party also pressed for the rapid passage of a land and tenancy bill in October 1938, threatening to launch a campaign of peasant protests if this measure were not forthcoming.⁵⁰ Like the *Thakins* he aimed to mobilise peasant opposition as a weapon against colonial rule. Indeed, U Saw's purpose in forming the *Galon Tats* was, the CID observed in a report to the BDB, to 'ensure a leading position in the country like the premier and other politicians'.⁵¹ This seems an accurate summation, for, as Burman historian U Maung Maung notes, the *Tats* were 'a strong political force of coercion'.⁵²

Other politicians and political groups in the country had their own *Tats*. These paramilitary-style groups had first arisen during the 1930 riots. Reflecting on these disorders in a January 1931 report to the Governor of India, the Rangoon

⁴⁷ For example see BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1938, Intelligence Summary no. 10, 28 Oct. 1939, 57 and TNA WO 106/3704A Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence, and predecessors, Correspondence and papers: War of 1939-45 Burma: Political Intelligence, MI2 (a), 28 Jul. 1938, 2 which remarks on the *Thakins* as the most likely source of rebellion.

⁴⁸ BL IOSM Mss Eur D1066/3 1936 Rangoon University Strike U Maung Maung, papers on the Rangoon University Strike of 1936, 5.

⁴⁹ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1938 Intelligence Summary no. 12, 24 Dec. 1938, 4.

⁵⁰ Ibid, Intelligence Summary no. 11, 15 Nov. 1938, 32.

⁵¹ BL IOR M/5/48 Burmese political activity, and political parties and associations BDB Intelligence Summary no. 5, 27 May. 1938, 16.

⁵² U Maung Maung, *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma 1920-1940* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1980), 76.

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government noted that it was unable to stop the development of these 'volunteer organisations' under the law.⁵³ Callahan considers the development of the *Tats* to have stemmed from the frustration of ethnic Burmans who were, at the time, not accepted into the military.⁵⁴ After separation from India the army did begin to open up to Burmans, but there was minimal representation overall. In a report sent to the Governor of India, Lord Linlithgow, the BDB noted that the Green Army, Ba Maw's private *tat*, was originally 'formed as a protest against the refusal to employ Burmans in the military forces'.⁵⁵ However the BDB considered its effect to be 'mild'.⁵⁶ The other three *tats* in the report were described as 'purely political'.⁵⁷ As a result, the government did not make any great effort to control them, dismissing them as a threat. Inter-factional strife also made the government's task easier: *Dobama* 'Red Tats' and Ba Maw's *Sinyetha* party's 'Green Tats' fought each other, not the state.⁵⁸ In sum, *Tats* were a means of mobilising sectors of the population in support of nationalists, but they were not designed to engage directly in conflict with the colonial army.

Labour and peasant organisation was deemed a greater threat by the BDB than the *tats*. As we have seen, no nationalist anti-colonialist organisation, U Saw, the *Thakins* or any others had a monopoly of mass support, although the *Thakins* came closest in their organisation of peasant and worker associations. Activist contacts with labour unions, peasant organisations and student groups were their best means of mobilising popular support; the *tats* were not the best means of attaining hegemonic influence despite the fact that Stewart reported that their membership ranged from between one to two thousand.⁵⁹

⁵³ BL IOR Neg 9691 L/PJ/12/712 Burma Local Government Report Jan. 1931, 9.

⁵⁴ Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), 36.

⁵⁵ BL IOSM Mss Eur F125/114 Hope (Victor Alexander John), 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow Linlithgow collection: papers of Victor Alexander John Hope, 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow (1887-1952) as Viceroy of India 1936-43 Letters and telegrams regarding Burma 1937-1939, 156.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan 1939-10 Jan 1940; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Dec. 1938 - second half Dec. 1939, 33.

⁵⁹ BL IOSM Mss Eur F125/114 Hope (Victor Alexander John), 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow Linlithgow collection: papers of Victor Alexander John Hope, 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow (1887-1952) as Viceroy of India 1936-43 Letters and telegrams regarding Burma 1937-1939, 156.

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For comparative purposes, it is worth recalling that the All Burma Students Union (ABSU), a radical nationalist association affiliated to the *Thakins*, had five thousand subscribing members in May 1940.⁶⁰ The War Office noted in their discussions of 'the Thakin problem' that since separation in 1937 the *Thakin* membership had expanded at an average rate of two thousand a month.⁶¹ Student, labour and peasant organisations were thus the preferred means of mobilising popular support. Callahan considers the authorities' leniency regarding the *tats* strange even so. After all, *tats* received military training and were plainly hostile to government, although they used bamboo sticks instead of rifles.⁶² However, for all the *tats* militaristic posturing, the BDB did not consider them an imminent menace to internal security. Admittedly, the police found them difficult to control, but the conclusion drawn was that they were best left alone to expend their energies in pursuit of their internecine rivalries.⁶³ None of the *tats* was strong enough to act as an armed force against colonial rule. Indeed, early covert efforts by the Japanese to foster instability and rebellion in Burma by supporting U Saw's *Galon Tats* failed, in the opinion of the BDB, because they 'overestimated the usefulness of such private armies'.⁶⁴ As war approached, however, the *tats* increasingly militaristic overtones caused deeper apprehension as an indication of broader rebellious sentiments – and the possibility of fifth columnist activity - within Burman society.⁶⁵

The Premier, Dr. Ba Maw, meanwhile, did not mobilise support against the colonial government while he worked within the structures of collaboration. Ba Maw expressed his mistrust of the colonial constitution and the structures of collaboration in his memoirs but by accepting the position of Premier he had

⁶⁰ BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries 1940 Intelligence summary no. 11, Nov. 1940, 15.

⁶¹ TNA WO 106/3704A Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence, and predecessors; Correspondence and papers: War of 1939-45 Burma: Political Intelligence, MI2 (a), 28 Jul. 1938, 2.

⁶² Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 37.

⁶³ BL IOSM Mss Eur F125/114 Hope (Victor Alexander John), 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow Linlithgow collection: papers of Victor Alexander John Hope, 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow (1887-1952) as Viceroy of India 1936-43 Letters and telegrams regarding Burma 1937-1939, Governor of Burma to Lord Linlithgow, 15 Aug. 1939, 156.

⁶⁴ BL IOR M/5/79 Information relating to 'Bangkok Conspiracy' to smuggle arms into Burma from Thailand with alleged view to start rebellion; involvement of Japanese; frontier routes, note by Monteath, 11 Sep. 1940, 12.

⁶⁵ BL IOR M/5/76 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries Intelligence summary no. 8, Aug. 1942, 95.

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consented to colonial rule.⁶⁶ The BDB observed early in his premiership that Ba Maw had passed a series of measures 'likely to win favour from the electorate', releasing political prisoners and ex-rebels and withdrawing the ban of the old *athins*, which had previously incited rebellion.⁶⁷ These acts might be considered provocative to the BDB but the intelligence services also noted widespread hostility to Ba Maw throughout his premiership, and this popular opposition was discernibly increasing in 1938.⁶⁸ By accepting a position in parliament, Ba Maw forfeited any credibility with the electorate. The structures of collaboration tended to nullify the activities of nationalists who worked with them but did not endear the state to the population at large and alienated nationalists working in those structures from the base of their support. Put simply, Ba Maw was not a threat to the state while he worked in parliament.

Far from generating mass support for himself, Ba Maw became a focus of opposition to colonial rule. The *Thakins* vehemently opposed him and even advocated violence against him.⁶⁹ Within parliament the nationalist U Ba Pe, in alliance with U Saw, were scheming against him; indeed, government action against U Saw and the suppression of U Saw's newspaper 'The Sun' was blamed on Ba Maw's personal animosity towards his old rival.⁷⁰ However, as the BDB later ruefully noted, once Ba Maw left after a vote of no confidence in February 1939 he was sure to become 'more dangerous in opposition'.⁷¹

Prior to this, the increase in labour unrest during 1938 was exclusively ascribed to the activity of the *Thakins*. BDB threat perceptions were predicated on the assumption that nationalist agitators, particularly those of communistic sympathies, were never more than a step away from fomenting an uprising against colonial rule (see Appendix B). The BDB considered the *Thakins*'

⁶⁶ Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma: Memoirs of a Revolution 1939-1946* (London: Yale University Press, 1967), 18.

⁶⁷ BL IOR M/5/54 Burma Monthly Intelligence Summaries, Apr to Dec 1937, Intelligence Summary no. 2, Feb. 1937, 233.

⁶⁸ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1938 Intelligence summary no. 12, Dec. 1938, 3.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, Intelligence summary no. 6, Jun. 1938, 165.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, Intelligence summary no. 9, Sep. 1938, 85.

⁷¹ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 2 Feb. 1939, 269.

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indulgence towards communism to make them the most likely instigators of mass protests by waged workers and landless peasants. Intelligence reports noted that *Thakins* 'got to the masses through "peasant" and cultivator associations' making them a greater threat than any activity of the *tats*.⁷² As Stewart observed, the *Thakins* were able to 'wield a considerable influence in labour', and strikes were 'organised on communist and anti-capitalist lines' by *Thakin* activists who were 'stationed in oil fields across the country to coordinate demands for workers and strikers'.⁷³ BDB analysis was, by this point, in some ways sharper, in others contradictory. Reviewing the precarious security conditions in the country in December 1938, the BDB's monthly summary noted that Burmans were 'strongly communistically inclined due to their poverty'.⁷⁴ The report conceded that there was an 'absence of outside agitation', but the BDB concluded that the aggrieved labourers and peasants remained fertile ground on which the *Thakins* could work.⁷⁵ Yet, if the poverty was acknowledged, there was little analysis of the grievances it caused or the structural economic conditions that made it endemic; rather, the BDB focused its attentions on restraining the activities of *Thakins* and other nationalists across the country. If the *Thakins* enjoyed the pre-eminent influence among the labourers, peasants and students that the BDB credited them with, then, in Gramsci's terms, it was vital to sever the links between the *Thakins* and these sections of society that, acting in unison, might yet undermine colonial hegemony.⁷⁶

Communism had provoked alarm among Imperial Government officials in the Raj long before 1938. And this was always echoed in Burma too. The December 1938 BDB analysis was doubly unusual, then, because in more general terms, as we saw in chapter two, colonial officials in Burma were all too ready to attribute popular dissent to the influence of outside agitators. The

⁷² BL IOR M/5/48 Burmese political activity, and political parties and associations Burmese Defence Bureau Intelligence Summary no. 5, 26 May. 1937, 80.

⁷³ BL IOR M/5/9 Notes on Thakins, Do-Bama Asi-Ayon (We Burmese Association) and kindred societies, intelligence summary no. 5, 31 May. 1938, 9 and BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 9, Nov. 1938, 96.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Intelligence summary no.12, Dec. 1938, 17b.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Antonio Gramsci in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, eds. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 210.

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Thakins' ability to influence workplace protest especially worried the BDB which reported that the *Thakins* 'exploited labour troubles in Burma especially in the oil fields and mining areas'.⁷⁷ As we have seen, since their formation, the *Thakins* were considered particularly menacing to colonial rule due to their communistic sympathies. BDB reports often focused on the *Thakins'* declared hostility to imperialism and capitalism and the Marxist rhetoric with which it was flavoured. The Criminal Procedure Code (CPC) was quickly applied to deter the *Thakins* from making speeches to workers liable to incite more severe industrial disturbances in 1938.⁷⁸ The CPC was applied with greater frequency during 1938 than before as the impending crisis of imperial control intensified. In January 1939 Governor Cochrane noted that the strike by over a thousand workers at the Burma Oil Company works at Yenangyaung that had begun a month earlier was 'becoming increasingly communistic in character and directed against every form of government'.⁷⁹ Protracted and large-scale, this was no mere industrial stoppage. The striking workers were nothing short of revolutionary, hoping to overthrow the state and see a communist regime installed in its place. Cochrane thus had no hesitation in applying the CPC's Section 107 against the strikers as an urgent, and well-justified, security measure.⁸⁰ Once again, due to their circulation of communistic material and their communistic statements, the *Thakins* were identified as the primordial security threat lurking behind the escalating strike movement.

The administration dismissed the grievances of workers and peasants in 1938 and instead the BDB concentrated on the activities of agitators they feared were mobilising the population in an uprising against the government. The *Thakins* were certainly aware of the power of the masses, and in 1938 successfully expanded their efforts to imbricate their agenda with that of peasant and worker associations. *Thakins* had trained 'cultivators and the unemployed... in drill

⁷⁷ TNA WO 106/3704/A Directorate of Military Operations and Military Correspondence and papers: War of 1939-45 Burma: Political Intelligence, MI2 (a), 28 Jul. 1938, 2.

⁷⁸ BL IOR M/5/3 Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Nov 1937-second half Apr 1938 Home Secretary's Office Rangoon, Secretary to Governor of India 21 Dec. 1937, 36.

⁷⁹ BL IOR M/5/4 Governor's reports, 12 Jan. 1938-31 Dec. 1938; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Feb. 1938 - first half Dec. 1938, Governor of Burma to the Secretary of State for Burma, 10 Jan. 1939, 4.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 20 Dec. 1939, 36.

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fashion' when organising marches against the government.⁸¹ Sarkisyanz' review of anti-colonial protest in Burma describes the *Thakins* as 'practically alone among Burma's pre-war parties in consistently espousing cause of Burmese agriculturalists'.⁸² *Thakins* propagandised among peasants to form 'Lethasa Ahpwes with a view to forming a cultivator's proletariat' as early as May in 1937 and were successfully increasingly successful in influencing labourers and peasants a development the government found most alarming.⁸³ Wherever they agitated amongst the labourers and peasants, they were harassed by the authorities; in February 1938 *Thakin* U Soe Thein visited Okpa in Tharrawaddy where he reportedly 'intended to advocate non-payment of capitation tax' for which he was penalised with 'action under section 144 of the criminal procedure code'.⁸⁴ Partha Chatterjee notes that 'both colonialist and nationalist politics thought of the peasantry as an object of their strategies' in Raj.⁸⁵ In Burma, the BDB considered the *Thakins* a danger for adopting such a strategy to influence the peasants against the government, yet they did not consider the peasants themselves a threat, considering them incapable of rising on their own initiative.

The year of revolution: Strikes, riots and the BDB

As unrest among the Burman labourers and peasants increased, the BDB was alert to any activity deemed likely to lead to uprising – there were many such signals in 1938. Simmering resentments erupted into a series of strikes by peasant and labour organisations at the beginning of the year. In January, cultivators frustrated by the heavy burden of taxes marched on Rangoon, and labourers at oil fields in the country protested for fairer working conditions.⁸⁶ As observed in the introduction, this was the beginning of prolonged protest against

⁸¹ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1938 Intelligence Summary no. 1, Jan. 1938, 9.

⁸² Erik Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1965), 180.

⁸³ BL IOR M/5/48 Burmese political activity, and political parties and associations BDB Intelligence Summary no. 5, 26 May. 1937, 80.

⁸⁴ BL IOR M/5/3 Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Nov. 1937 - second half Apr. 1938, Cochrane to Monteath 10 Jan. 1939, 14.

⁸⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus, The Nation and its fragments colonial and Post-colonial Histories* (Oxford: Open University Press, 1999), 159.

⁸⁶ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence Summary no. 1, 25 Jan. 1938, 285 and *ibid*, 297.

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the state that did not entirely subside until early 1939. *Thakin* Thein Pe, also known as U Thein Pye Myint, recorded in his recollections of the march that the *Thakins* worked to transform labour and peasant grievances into a broader anti-colonial movement.⁸⁷ The BDB feared as much and followed *Thakins* around the country at the beginning of 1938 recording their inflammatory speeches to workers, fearing they would provoke labour into rebelling against the government.⁸⁸

Stewart compiled a report on the *Thakins* for Monteath when it was all too clear that the *Thakins* were the greatest threat to the Government of Burma.⁸⁹

Stewart reported that information from a secret *Thakin* meeting in Prome in April 1938 told of a 'secret organisation formed to organise a general strike nation wide in the event of war and commit violent acts against the government'.⁹⁰ The general discontent among labourers, who were receptive to *Thakin* overtures, made these plans all the more ominous. The BDB took note of a CID report to the government warning that 'the *Thakin* connection to present agrarian agitation, if unchecked, will certainly lead to trouble at the end of the year'.⁹¹ Reports received from districts where the *Thakins* visited confirmed the BDB's suspicions; a special report from Moulmein received at BDB headquarters reported that the 'Thakins proposed to start rebellion on Britain's entry into war in Europe or the Far East by setting fire to oil wells and refineries... [and] stir up agitation amongst ruby miners and control of the ruby miners and traders associations'.⁹² Labour unrest and *Thakin* radicalism were complementary phenomena that, combined, would result in rebellion.

Robert H. Taylor observes that a number of mass radical peasant and worker organisations grew significantly in late 1937, 'initially without a great deal of

⁸⁷ BL IOSM Mss Eur C498 'Critique of Communist Movement in Burma': typescript note, dated 1973, by U Thein Pe Myint, 2.

⁸⁸ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 9 Sep. 1938, 96.

⁸⁹ BL IOR M/5/9 Notes on Thakins, Do-Bama Asi-Ayon (We Burmese Association) and kindred societies Intelligence summary extract no. 9 Sep. 1938, 13.

⁹⁰ Ibid, Intelligence summary no. 3, Mar. 1938, 209.

⁹¹ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 7, Jul. 1939, 128.

⁹² BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 3, Mar. 1938, 216.

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Thakin involvement' – however, *Thakins* quickly worked to make their influence felt.⁹³ When oil field and refinery workers began striking in early 1938 *Thakins* moved to agitate among the strikers' ranks.⁹⁴ In areas suffering from crops damaged by heavy rain, *Thakin* 'speakers concentrated on a reduction of land revenues and rents' to encourage peasants to align with them.⁹⁵ The purpose of the *Thakins*' activity in the oil fields was reported by informers to be to hit the government where it hurt when war broke out in Europe.

We can better understand the *Thakins*' success in appealing to the subaltern groups by comparing the *Thakins* with nationalists in India. Guha's analysis of Indian nationalism in 1930s India observes that the elitist nationalist ideologues of the Indian National Congress (INC) party were unable to represent the peasants and workers interests as they compromised with Indian landowners of the feudal classes and Indian industrialists. The nationalist elite could 'not be trusted to defend the interests of the peasantry'.⁹⁶ With 'all its concern to involve the peasantry in nationalist politics, it could not bring itself to include the struggle against rents in its programs'.⁹⁷

Much the same was true of the Indian nationalists' relationship to organised labour. An organised workforce posed a threat to Indian industrialists, and Congress leaders could not afford to incur industrialists' displeasure by incorporating workers' demands into their anti-colonialist agenda. This is evident if we review the INC's attitude towards the intelligence services and security forces in India: David Arnold notes that INC Premier of Madras, Rajagopalachari, was reluctant to intervene in the police force's arrangements in India when the INC was elected in 1937. The Congress Ministry 'recognised communism as a major threat to India' and the police were 'loyal to the

⁹³ Robert H. Taylor, "The Burmese communist Movement and Its Indian Connection: Formation and Factionalism," *Journal of South East Asian studies* 14, no. 1 (1983): 95 – 108 at 97.

⁹⁴ BL IOR M/5/3 Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, Home Secretary's Office Rangoon, Secretary to Governor of India fortnightly report for the first half of Jan. 1938 Nov. 1937-second half Apr. 1938 20 Jan. 1938, 29.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 28.

⁹⁶ Guha, *Dominance without hegemony*, 132.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*.

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propertied classes'.⁹⁸ The Indian ministers employed the colonial tools of control to protect elite interests, here Indian property owners. The Secretary of State for India, the Marquess of Zetland, remarked to the Governor General of India, the Marquess of Linlithgow, that, while some Congress ministers had obstructed the flow of information during a period of agitation in Indian states in 1938, 'in the last three years at least three Congress Ministers were in fact making use of the local Central Intelligence Officer'.⁹⁹ The Congress Ministers required the intelligence the CIOs provided to maintain the stability of the Congress government. There was greater cooperation between mainstream nationalists and the colonial auspices of power in India.

In Burma nationalists had no such qualms - working with disgruntled labourers and peasants suited their purpose. There was no real ethnic Burman industrialist class, or indigenous landlords forming such a significant social strata that nationalists were forced to compromise with to achieve political influence. The nationalists that struggled for hegemonic influence among workers and peasants were free to pursue a radical agenda that opposed capital and land ownership. Stewart observed in a report on the *Thakins* that 'Burmese capitalism scarcely exists'.¹⁰⁰ In Burma the most significant concentration of labourers was at the oilfields, which were a major source of energy for the government of India.¹⁰¹ As for the peasants, their antipathy was reserved for the *Chettyars*, the 'most hated Indians in Burma... they controlled 25% of lower Burma'.¹⁰² They had been a source of frustration for Burman peasants throughout colonial rule, and separation had done little to ease the *Chettyar's* grip on landholding. Tensions between the Burman peasants and the *Chettyars* were a likely source of violence.

⁹⁸ David Arnold, "Police and Colonial Control in Southern India," *Social Scientist*, 4, no. 12 (1976): 3-16 at 9.

⁹⁹ BL IOR L/PJ/7/1071 Expansion of the Central Intelligence Bureau, Expansion of the Central Intelligence Bureau 24 November 1932 – 5 December 1942 Letter from Secretary to Governor General – Under Secretary of State for India 12 May. 1942, 16 and in a letter from the Secretary of State for India to the Governor of India, 51.

¹⁰⁰ BL IOR M/5/9 Notes on Thakins, Do-Bama Asi-Ayon (We Burmese Association) and kindred societies extract from intelligence summary no. 8, Aug. 1938, 4.

¹⁰¹ BL IOSM Mss Eur F125/114 Hope (Victor Alexander John), 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow Linlithgow collection: papers of Victor Alexander John Hope, 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow (1887-1952) as Viceroy of India 1936-43 Letters and telegrams regarding Burma 1937-1939, 10.

¹⁰² BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1938 Intelligence summary no. 10, Oct. 1938, 53.

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The BDB observed that the riots in 1938 had an 'economic' basis 'in the struggle of Burmese against Indian' – however, the Bureau's concern was less the poverty which afflicted the peasantry than their susceptibility to *Thakin* provocation resulting from their impoverishment.¹⁰³ The *Thakins* were free to ally with the peasants, in a manner in which their counterparts in the INC were not, and encouraged non-payment of rent and taxes. The *Dobama Asi Ayon*, the umbrella organisation for the *Thakins*, 'distributed rice to the stricken and hungry' after the riots.¹⁰⁴ When the 'Chettyars refused to lend money due to the uproar', the 'Thakins filled the gap'.¹⁰⁵ Without any effective governmental response to the grievances of peasants and workers, nationalists easily made common cause with these aggrieved subaltern groups. *Thakins* trained 'cultivators and the unemployed... in drill fashion' in November, moulding them into a formidable force for protest.¹⁰⁶ Where the *Thakins* agitated among strikers at the oil fields in August the state deployed the Burma Military Police (BMP) and the Frontier Force to suppress disorder. Curfews were also imposed in all oil field areas.¹⁰⁷ Public meetings within the vicinity of certain oilfields were prohibited under section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code.¹⁰⁸ *Thakins* were forbidden from making 'inflammatory' speeches at oil fields.¹⁰⁹ Force, arrests and censorship were employed to prevent the *Thakins* from achieving their desired decisive influence among wage labourers.

The BDB's attention was directed to the *Thakins*' influence on workers and peasant cultivators during the strikes and riot, and intelligence reports happily observed that by April 1938 the 'oil fields strike as such can be said to be almost over... the prestige of the *Thakins* is at a low ebb and they have been accused of fomenting the strike in their own interest and not for the labourers'.¹¹⁰ The 'Thakins were interested in imperialism and capitalism rather

¹⁰³ Ibid, 67.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1938 Intelligence Summary no. 1, Jan. 1938, 9.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, Intelligence Summary no. 8, Aug. 1938, 118.

¹⁰⁸ BL IOR M/5/3 Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Nov. 1937-second half Apr. 1938, 3.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 6.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 3.

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than labour's grievances' the BDB reported.¹¹¹ The *Thakins* had failed to achieve their desired influence among the masses during the first half of 1938. Major repression had been directed against them, with special police precautions against strikes organised on communist/anti-imperialist lines declared.¹¹² Other nationalist groups fared even worse during the strikes, failing to make any significant inroads among workers and peasants. But this only added to the determination of the colonial administration to prevent the *Thakins* from intensifying their organisational activity. Moreover, prolonged strikes in the oilfields threatened the output of the Burma Oil Company and ending the strikes swiftly was of paramount importance. The Governor of India, Lord Zetland, 'emphasised the vital importance to the Empire of the Rangoon refinery of the Burma Oil Company' in relation to the riots.¹¹³ Securing the Empire's energy security and suppressing political strife were deemed equivalent goals by the Raj.

By the end of August 1938 the strikes and marches had ebbed to a low point, but frustrations and animosity against the government still ran high. The end of the strikes overlapped with the outbreak of a communal riot between Burmans and the Indian community in Burma, which particularly targeted Muslims. It was the greatest blow to colonial stability since the Saya San rebellion and caused major damage to European corporations' property. Suppression of the inter-communal violence also further depleted the state's limited internal security budget.¹¹⁴ In response to the riot, Cochrane enacted the Rangoon Emergency Security Act for five years under section 43 of the Government of Burma Act, under which the powers of the police were expanded.¹¹⁵ This move did not contain the disorder as hoped. Instead, further disturbances broke out as the hostility welling up among the population throughout the preceding years erupted into communal violence against Indians, particularly Muslims, in Burma.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid, Intelligence summary no. 7. Jul. 1938, 147.

¹¹³ BL IOR M/3/410 Defence of Rangoon and oil refineries: general file; Inter-Services Conference 1938, 1.

¹¹⁴ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 9, Sep. 1938, 95.

¹¹⁵ BL IOR M/3/15 Burma Riots: Governor's use of emergency powers; enactment of Rangoon Emergency Security Act, 1938 Telegram for the Governor of Burma to the Secretary of State reporting to the Viceroy 05 Sep. 1938, 157.

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The trigger for the riot was the publication of a book by Muslim scholar Maung Shwe Hpoë which contained offensive remarks against the Buddha that outraged Buddhist Burmans who attacked a number of mosques in reprisal.¹¹⁶ Nationalist newspapers that opposed the government fuelled the flames by republishing the extracts.¹¹⁷ The ensuing communal violence killed over two hundred people, the majority of them Muslims. Yet, despite their very different origins, inquiries into the rioting drew little distinction between the riots and the strikes which occurred both before and after the outbreak. Instead, all were treated as facets of the general disorder so pervasive in 1938.¹¹⁸ Indeed, the report of the Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee appointed by the Governor to examine the causes of the riot observed portentously that strikes at Syriam oil refinery preceded the riot by only a couple of days.¹¹⁹

Both the CID and the BDB had failed to indicate signs of any impending outbreaks in their intelligence reports, ignorant of the depth of economic frustration among Burmans, which had not diminished since the earlier widespread disorders of 1930.¹²⁰ Moreover, while the BDB gathered intelligence under the heading of 'communal tensions', ethnic relations were never given the same attention as the more straightforwardly political concerns of anti-colonial nationalism. The BDB did not consider rioting as a serious security concern and failed to receive any information of impending ethnic conflict. However, this did not prevent it from renewing its pursuit of political agitators with greater vigour than before, and it retained its paramountcy as a tool of colonial stability.

The Riot Enquiry Committee considered the disorders to have a political agenda explicitly opposed to the colonial government.¹²¹ In an atmosphere of repression of political protest in which more peaceful means of expression were denied to

¹¹⁶ BL IOR V/26/262/16 Burma Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee 1938-39, Final Report and appendices. Rangoon, 1939, 1.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 287.

¹¹⁸ see BL IOR V/26/262/16 Burma Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee 1938-39; Final Report and appendices. Rangoon, 1939.

¹¹⁹ BL IOR V/26/262/15 Burma Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee 1938-39, Interim Report Rangoon, 1939, 45.

¹²⁰ Donald R. Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (London: University of California Press, 2002), 134.

¹²¹ BL IOR V/26/262/15 Burma Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee 1938-39, Interim Report Rangoon, 1939, 290.

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them, Burmans' frustrations found another outlet in the riots; as Donald Eugene Smith observes, 'the Indians became a scapegoat, since the Burmese extremists were not in a position to attack the government directly'.¹²²

Horowitz's analysis of the phenomenon of inter-ethnic rioting further observes that 'recollection of the failure of the Saya San revolt may have made anti-British action seem futile'.¹²³ Indeed, vernacular newspapers responsible for stoking the flames of the riot had framed it as an anti-colonial protest. Noting that the *Thakins* had made their influence felt during the riot, the Committee recorded their strong influence in certain areas where they 'corrupted the nations' youth'.¹²⁴ Meanwhile, ever eager to steal *Thakin* thunder, U Saw used his influence in the newspapers to lambast the iniquities of colonial rule.¹²⁵

The Riot Enquiry Committee implicitly condemned the BDB, singling out the absence of a specialised intelligence bureau operating throughout the country as a major factor in the outbreak of the riot – such a bureau would have alerted the Government to signs of outbreak.¹²⁶ The Committee made no reference to the BDB; its members, Burman representatives, would not have been privy to the workings of the Bureau, and were most likely not even aware of its existence. Nevertheless, the Committee's appraisal of the failure of intelligence to warn of the outbreak was an implicit indictment of the Bureau. The BDB's failure to manage the information order effectively spurred Sir Hugh Stephenson to write to D. T. Monteath that 'the Defence Bureau is only four years old; there is nothing to compare its results with just before the rebellion'.¹²⁷ This neglect of the culture of the indigenous population is in marked contrast to the British intelligence gathering project in the Middle Eastern colonies. Priya Satia's analysis of bombardment and intelligence in post World War One Iraq describes

¹²² Horowitz, op. cit., 139.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ BL IOR V/26/262/15 Burma Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee 1938-39, Interim Report Rangoon, 1939, 290.

¹²⁵ BL IOR M/5/12 Memorandum of Burma British Association concerning disturbance between Burmese and Moslem communities and speech by W. J. C. Richards, President of Burma British Association concerning political situation in Burma, Monteath to Under Secretary of State for Burma, 2 Feb. 1939, 4.

¹²⁶ BL IOR V/26/262/15 Burma Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee 1938-39, Interim Report Rangoon, 1939, 262.

¹²⁷ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no., 12, Dec. 1938, 22.

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the Orientalist notions of intelligence agents in the Middle East, who aped the hero of Kipling's *Kim*, and based their work on 'notions of a shared past and racial affinities'.¹²⁸ The intelligence agents Satia describes considered themselves to 'think like an Arab, an empathetic mimicry of the "Arab mind"'.¹²⁹ This involved concern with local culture and heritage was entirely absent in Burma. The Bureau's efforts to take hold of the Burmese information order were late in the day of colonial occupation.

After the suppression of the riot and the end of the State of Emergency, the District Superintendent of Police in Prome reported to the BDB in September 1938 that *Thakins* were rumoured to be encouraging tenants to set fire to *Chettyars'* crops.¹³⁰ After the violence against Indians, the *Thakins* still attempted to maintain the momentum of the riot and lead the masses in support of their aims against the state. By December the BDB reported that the *Thakins* were again heading strikes by oilfield workers against the government. The BDB remarked that the 'object of the strike was to destroy capitalism'.¹³¹ After the worst of the violence had peaked in 1938, aggression refused to subside entirely and 'anonymous letters' to the BDB accused the *Thakins* of making the bombs which exploded in Rangoon in February 1939.¹³² Other reports from on the ground observers of the strikes recorded that oilfield marchers entered Rangoon and met with the *Thakins* in December 1938.¹³³ Suppression of the riot had not deterred nationalists from their goal of mobilising the masses against colonial rule.

Cochrane and the Home Secretary reviewed the events of the year up to October 1938 and outlined potential concerns for the future of Burma's internal

¹²⁸ Priya Satia "The Defense of Inhumanity: Air Control and the British Idea of Arabia," *The American Historical Review*, 111, no. 1 (2006): 16-51 at 22.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 24.

¹³⁰ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no., 10, Oct. 1938, 65.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 64.

¹³² BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1939 Intelligence summary no. 2, Feb. 1939, 294.

¹³³ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 12, Dec. 1938, 10.

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security.¹³⁴ The *Thakins*, the *Galon Tats*, an agitated religious youth movement and continuing racial tension featured highly on their list. Common to all these was the 'comparatively organised state of political movements as compared with the anti-government movements that existed prior to the outbreak of the rebellion of 1930 – 31'.¹³⁵ Nationalism with the strategic goal of overthrowing the state was a greater threat than ever before. Certainly, the events of the 1930s, the University Strikes, separation, the riots and labour and peasant strikes were a stimulus to Burman nationalism which was much emboldened by 1938.

Chatterjee notes that Indian nationalism developed in a spiritual, a personal and internal, domain, before utilising the material domain of printing apparatuses and technological means of communication to disseminate the nationalist ideology.¹³⁶ In Burma, the *Thakins* had developed their ideology since the rebellion and articulated it to the rest of society in 1938 through pamphlets and speeches. They had a 'considerable influence in labour', and had pressured government to 'withdraw prosecutions, release certain of their members from prison a considerable time before their sentences were completed'.¹³⁷ Cochrane, and other 'well informed people' worried that 'unless legislation is passed, to curtail the more violent and irresponsible members of this party, there is a grave danger of rebellion breaking out once more'.¹³⁸ The BDB summarised the views of 'experienced officers' on the increasing organisation of the *Thakins* who thought that 'a clash is inevitable'.¹³⁹ The threat of rebellion was invoked to legitimise repression of the *Thakins*. The *Thakins* still had ample opportunity for spreading their ideology after 1938 as the Bureau observed that the 'younger portion of the priesthood' was 'the most difficult portion' of

¹³⁴ BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan 1939-10 Jan 1940, fortnightly reports, second half Dec 1938 - second half Dec. 1939, Confidential report by Cochrane, 50.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Partha Chatterjee, *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus, The Nation and its fragments colonial and Post-colonial Histories* (Oxford: Open University Press, 1999), 6.

¹³⁷ BL IOR M/5/9 Notes on Thakins, Do-Bama Asi-Ayon (We Burmese Association) and kindred societies, warnings contained in the Burma Defence Bureau's intelligence summary no. 1, Apr. 1937, and the Army in Burma's intelligence summary no. 5, 31 May. 1938, 9.

¹³⁸ BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan 1939-10 Jan 1940; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Dec 1938 - second half Dec 1939, 01 Jun. 1938, Confidential report by Cochrane, Oct. 1939, 15.

¹³⁹ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 1, Jan. 1939, 304.

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protestors, and the 'industrial population' was 'also ripe for disorder' in January 1939, still as vexed as they had been during the previous year.¹⁴⁰ If these groups were arrogated to the *Thakin* cause they would present a serious threat to government.

Repression in Burma during the 'year of revolution'

In the 'year of revolution' violent crackdowns by the security forces on protesters was becoming the typical means of control in Burma. However, intelligence was not neglected as it was crucial to enabling the security forces to coordinate their responses to the disorder. By February 1939, daily situation reports on districts were forwarded to the Governor of Burma's home department, the secretary to the Governor of Burma at the defence department, battalion commandants, the commissioner of the police and the inspector general at the Burma Frontier Forces.¹⁴¹ And, despite its failure to warn of the outbreak, the BDB still retained its importance to the Government, directing its efforts to pursuing those nationalists who had made such a public impact in 1938. The BDB had to regain management of the information order after the events of 1938.

The Bureau had to do this in the context of the government's severe repression of political activity which was alienating the population even further from the state, and the continued denial to Burmans of any participation in their own political economy. Imperial Military Intelligence (MI2 (a)) observed in reviews of Burma from BDB reports that that 'anti-government agitators find a fruitful field in Burman resentment of economic dominance of Indians' in March 1939.¹⁴² The government was still rigged in favour of the Indian and European elite. The War Office reviews of Burma's political intelligence concerns in 1938 described efforts by the council of ministers, Burman representatives, to increase the Burmanisation of forestry companies and the share of the state in their

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan 1939-10 Jan 1940; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Dec 1938 - second half Dec 1939 Daily Situation Report in the Districts Inspector of Police in Burma, 15 Feb. 1939, 342.

¹⁴² TNA WO 106/3704A Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence, and predecessors, Correspondence and papers: War of 1939-45 Burma: Political Intelligence, MI2 (a), 24 Mar. 1939, 3.

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revenues. These policies were potentially 'vicious, especially if extended to all companies'.¹⁴³ Burman participation in the economic management of their country was anathema to colonial rule. As Burman frustrations engendered by such powerlessness became unmanageable giving way to strikes and the riot, the security forces cracked down in response.

Burmans held Ba Maw's parliament responsible for the repression they suffered and in November 1938, students, *Thakins* and other nationalists marched in protest against his government. Hutchings, the Indian Agent in Burma observed that Ba Maw's incumbency 'created an impression of a desire to administer law and order with firearms'.¹⁴⁴ Not only the *Thakins*, but other nationalist groups experienced their own share of repression. U Saw's *Myochit* Party 'threatened non-violent civil disobedience against the government if police repression were not addressed' following the heavy-handed use of force against his followers in December 1938.¹⁴⁵ When the government gave no reply, U Saw picketed the gates of the secretariat. Police groups charged the crowds with batons, after which they were relieved by armed troops.¹⁴⁶ The recourse to the use of military and paramilitary forces to contain disorder did nothing to alleviate the impression of a government all too quick to resort to violence to control the population.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 2.

¹⁴⁴ BL IOR M/5/21 Personal report of Government of India's Agent in Burma to Viceroy of India, Lord Zetland, 1939 8.

¹⁴⁵ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 12, Dec.1938, 4.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 11.

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APPENDIX III.

PHOTOGRAPH NO. 1.

(From "New Light of Burma" of 27th July.)



Figure 4. Monk beaten unconscious by the police during the riots.

BL IOR V/26/262/16 Burma Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee 1938-39, Final Report and appendices. Rangoon, 1939, Appendix III. xiii.

Hostility to the government was inflamed by police brutality towards Buddhist monks, who were particularly prominent protestors during the urban rioting (see figure 4).¹⁴⁷ The Frontier Forces and the Military Police were deployed to crack down on the riot during August 1938 after police efforts had proved a failure. Army headquarters noted the government's readiness to deploy these forces with great concern. The General Officer in Command (GOC) 'stressed the point that troops were used on the streets... the situation did not justify the action taken' as it gave 'the impression that the civil authorities [had] lost confidence in

¹⁴⁷ BL IOR V/26/262/16 Burma Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee 1938-39, Final Report and appendices. Rangoon, 1939, 231.

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their own police force'.¹⁴⁸ The GOC was justified in his impression: the civil authorities had indeed lost confidence in the police, as the BDB observed.¹⁴⁹ The police were incapable of performing their duties while an 'impenetrable barrier of prejudice, suspicion and distrust which separates them from all classes of people'¹⁵⁰ existed, the Riot Enquiry Committee noted. The BDB's own analysis of the role of the police during the riots noted the strong 'sympathies of some local subordinate officers with the aggressors. Burmese officers [were] unreliable'.¹⁵¹ The police were so inadequate that, at the height of disorder, Ba Maw managed to convince the governor to allow some of his *Dhama Tats* to be enlisted as police officers who acted as a politicised paramilitary 'similar to the European storm troops system'.¹⁵² *Thuggyis*, the appointed local law enforcers, had often sided with the rioters.¹⁵³ This is a familiar observation if we remember the events of the rebellion in 1930: as chapter two discussed, local headmen had sided with rebels at the first sign of trouble. Colonial rule was so fragile that local collaborators were quick to abandon the state at the first sign of disorder.

¹⁴⁸ BL IOR L/WS/1/231 War Staff 'WS' Series Files: File WS 2806 Internal Security: Burma, Telegram from the Headquarters of the Army in Burma to the Secretary to the Governor of Burma, 11 Feb. 1939, 9

¹⁴⁹ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 12, Dec. 1938, 10.

¹⁵⁰ BL IOR V/26/262/16 Burma Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee 1938-39, Final Report and appendices. Rangoon, 1939, 226.

¹⁵¹ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 9, Sep. 1938, 119.

¹⁵² BL IOR V/26/262/16 Burma Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee 1938-39, Final Report and appendices. Rangoon, 1939, 253.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 272.

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PHOTOGRAPH NO. 2.

(From "New Light of Burma" of 27th July.)

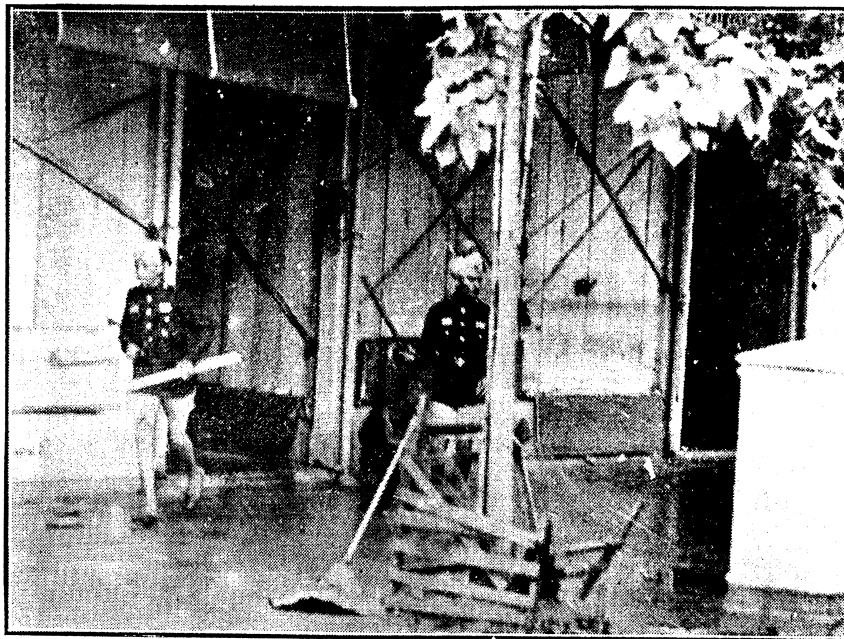


Figure 5. Indian police during the riot, accused in the papers of police brutality.

BL IOR V/26/262/16 Burma Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee 1938-39, Final Report and appendices. Rangoon, 1939, Appendix III. xv.

Where the state's management of the population was so grievously undermined and the provision of reliable information was disrupted by widespread disorder, police and military violence against protestors was the outcome as the state attempted to restore order. For its part, the BDB endeavoured to discover how it was that 'subversive activities have been allowed to be propagated as widely and unrestrainedly as they have been' during the 'year of revolution'.¹⁵⁴

Evidently the information order, that the Bureau had worked so hard to bring under state control, had escaped their management. As Stathis N. Kalyvas observes in his analysis of violence in civil warfare, when intelligence provision breaks down and informers do not come forward, indiscriminate violence is the

¹⁵⁴ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence Summary no. 2, Feb. 1939, 305.

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most likely outcome, as was the case in Burma in 1938.¹⁵⁵ Tumult was widespread even after the suppression of the riot; in November 1938 the BDB reported that the *Thakins* were organising a cultivators march on Rangoon.¹⁵⁶ Legal sanctions had little effect on nationalists as *Thakins* defied the applications of sections of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1932 that the government hoped would deter them and students in schools throughout central Burma went on strike in November 1938 in disregard of the law.¹⁵⁷ The Government ordered a Battalion of British Infantry to Rangoon after a clash between students and the police that became violent (see figure 5) – the civil administration was incapable of restoring order without military assistance. In December, *Thakins* picketed the office of the secretariat in protest against the government's repeated use of force, when they clashed with the police resulting in the death of one student.¹⁵⁸ Violence was escalating after the riots with no adequate police force to secure order. As Thomas' review of disorder in colonial Palestine during the 1930s remarks 'troop deployment was widely understood by rulers and ruled alike to signify the inability of the police to maintain order'.¹⁵⁹

The BDB was not abandoned as the primary means of ensuring control despite the increasing recourse to armed force to maintain order. The Military Headquarters in Maymyo confirmed as much in a review of military intelligence in Burma in June, in response to the disturbances in the country. Headquarters emphasised that the 'civil authorities' were 'responsible for the collection and record of any information concerning the civil population and any subversive elements'.¹⁶⁰ It was 'not desirable that the military institutes an intelligence system amongst the civil population concurrently with the civil system'.¹⁶¹ The army's deployment depended on intelligence from the BDB who 'should inform

¹⁵⁵ Stathis N. Kalyvas *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 147.

¹⁵⁶ BL IOR M/5/73, Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 11, 26 Nov. 1938, 8.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, Intelligence summary no. 12, Dec. 1938, 9.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 11.

¹⁵⁹ Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial disorder after 1914* (London: University of California Press, 2008), 231.

¹⁶⁰ TNA WO 203/5668 South East Asia Command: Military Headquarters Papers, Second World War The First Burma Narrative, Internal Security: Scheme for Burma, from the Office of Controller of Military Accounts, Burma, 19 Sep. 1939, 17.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*.

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Headquarters of the army in Burma directly of any developments which may lead to a situation requiring a demand for troops in aid of civil power'.¹⁶² Headquarters affirmed that the purpose of the BDB was to aid the security forces by providing them with intelligence on the population. The General Officer in Command and the General-Secretary of the Defence Department Rangoon Army noted that the instructions to the BDB were to the effect that the collection of 'information concerning communal as opposed to anti-government disturbances [was] not part of its duties'.¹⁶³ An ethnic riot was simply not political enough for the BDB to be concerned. The BDB's review of the riot considered that 'danger [did] not appear to be an organised overthrow' – more likely was the 'development of general unrest boiling over locally with a government too weak to take effective action at the outset'.¹⁶⁴ The remedy was 'a strong BDB with a realisation of hotspots and planned effective actions at the outset'.¹⁶⁵ This was similar to the assessment made by officials following the Saya San rebellion, who called for an effective intelligence bureau to be constructed to prevent disorder, as we have seen in chapter one. Ironically, given its failure to alert government of signs of disorder, which was the entire purpose of the Bureau, confidence in the BDB was in fact greater at the end of the 'year of revolution'. The Army, which had the strongest role in regaining control during the riot, requested that the BDB be the 'medium through which all classes of information be obtained', political or communal.¹⁶⁶ Callahan argues that the military was the first reserve for the enforcement of colonial order in times of insecurity; however, the army itself considered the BDB the primary means of enabling its force to be deployed effectively.¹⁶⁷ The riot renewed the colonial government's dependence on the BDB.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ BL IOR L/WS/1/231 War Staff 'WS' Series Files: File WS 2806 Internal Security: Burma, Headquarters in Burma, GOC, lessons from the recent riot, Information and Intelligence, 20 Sep. 1938, 5.

¹⁶⁴ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 12, Dec. 1938, 23.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ BL IOR L/WS/1/231 War Staff 'WS' Series Files: File WS 2806 Internal Security: Burma Headquarters in Burma, GOC, lessons from the recent riot, Information and Intelligence, 20 Sep. 1938, 5.

¹⁶⁷ Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 14.

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This dependency was a product of the obvious weaknesses of the colonial security forces, which were thrown into stark contrast by the outbreak of the riot. While the army, the military police and the frontier forces had been deployed, giving an impression of an eagerness to use violent force to suppress disorder, this did not extend from a reliance of the colonial government on the army to suppress dissent, as Callahan and Taylor's argue.¹⁶⁸ The army was in no condition to carry out its role of aiding internal security, being so undermanned and under-equipped. The War Office's reviews of Burma's political intelligence written during the riot observed that the 'military forces in the country are inadequate to cope with rebellion on any scale'.¹⁶⁹ Efforts to improve the coordination between the army and the BDB were made to ensure a more rapid flow of communication, ensuring the army could better operate as its minimal capacity.¹⁷⁰ The GOC expressed the view that if communication had been better, the riot could have been prevented without the requirement of such significant military assistance.¹⁷¹

Brigadier Cummings had voiced this same concern several years earlier during the Saya San uprising (discussed in chapter one). The same structural deficiencies that existed during the earlier rebellion continued to undermine internal security. Callahan contends that the colonial government's recourse to the army to suppress dissent was 'responsible for institutionalising the primacy of armed coercion in Burmese political affairs'.¹⁷² Certainly, the army was used to repress disorder during the riots and strikes, but with reliable intelligence its deployment would have been unnecessary. The GOC during the riot himself emphasised the primacy of intelligence over armed force like Cummings in 1932, condemning the failure of intelligence during a meeting in June at Mandalay - 'no report of what had passed at the meeting was available and it

¹⁶⁸ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence Summary no. 8, Aug. 1938, 118.

¹⁶⁹ TNA WO 106/3704A Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence, and predecessors, Correspondence and papers: War of 1939-45 Burma: Political Intelligence, MI2 (a), 28 Jul. 1938, 2.

¹⁷⁰ BL IOR L/WS/1/231 War Staff 'WS' Series Files: File WS 2806 Internal Security: Burma Headquarters in Burma, GOC, lessons from the recent riot, Information and Intelligence, 20 Sep. 1938, 5.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 9.

¹⁷² Callahan, *op. cit.*, 43.

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would seem that no CID officers or agents were present at it'.¹⁷³ The call out of forces was another indication of the fragility of colonial rule engendered by weak control of the information order. The only way to maintain the state's authority in such imperilled circumstances was with a functioning intelligence apparatus, a lesson learnt during the rebellion and confirmed by the riot.

The disorder discredited Ba Maw's coalition government and by extension the colonial authorities as well, which were 'fiercely assailed for repression' during and after the rioting.¹⁷⁴ In office, Ba Maw had been forced to compromise with Indian and European members of parliament to maintain the coalition; Ba Maw's 'anxiety for the stability of his government was on the increase' at the beginning of 1938 as he was unsure whether the 'Indian group would support him again as he failed to meet their demands for a revision of post and telegraph rates'.¹⁷⁵ In September 1938 as strife unsettled the parliament, the BDB considered that 'the adherence of European and Indian groups alone was saving the government'.¹⁷⁶ However, these alliances with the opponents of nationalists made Ba Maw an obvious target for nationalist anger. Although John F. Cady considers the Ba Maw government to have made significant progress on land and tax reform during his incumbency, nationalists were mobilised against him.¹⁷⁷ After an attempt on his life, Ba Maw was ousted from office by a vote of non-confidence in February 1939, a move, the BDB noted, was 'hailed with jubilation throughout the country'.¹⁷⁸ The *Thakins* purpose in staging strikes had been in part an effort to undermine Ba Maw's authority; they had thus been successful.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷³ BL IOR L/WS/1/231 War Staff 'WS' Series Files: File WS 2806 Internal Security: Burma Headquarters in Burma, GOC, lessons from the recent riot, Information and Intelligence, 20 Sep. 1938, 5.

¹⁷⁴ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 1, Jan. 1939, 308.

¹⁷⁵ Cady, *op. cit.*, 387 and BL IOR M/5/48 Burmese political activity, and political parties and associations BDB intelligence summary no. 1. 26 Jan. 1938, 46.

¹⁷⁶ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no., 9, Sep. 1938, 89.

¹⁷⁷ Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, 387.

¹⁷⁸ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 1, Jan. 1939, 309.

¹⁷⁹ BL IOR V/26/262/16 Burma Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee 1938-39, Final Report and appendices. Rangoon, 1939, 291.

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Hostilities continued into 1939, and as Ba Maw fell from power, students and young priests in Mandalay protested against the government. Cochrane reported that a thousand protestors 'some armed with dahs (knives)' were dispersed by the military in February.¹⁸⁰ Kachin riflemen opened fire and killed seventeen protestors.¹⁸¹ A few days later police charged the crowd that gathered for their funeral and a number were arrested. The deployment of extra police and the frontier forces was becoming typical by early 1939, especially in areas where strikes and the non-payment of taxes were rife. However, hostilities were not as widespread or as organised as they had been during the previous year; as Paul Kratoska observes, 'nationalist movements in Burma' were 'extremely divided', especially so after 1938.¹⁸² Even the *Thakins* had split into two mutually hostile factions, one following the more conservative, constitutional means of protest under Ba Sein, while others, Aung San most prominently, gathered under the wing of Kodaw Hmaing, a notable poet and a political radical.¹⁸³ Ba Sein was accused of having worked 'as a government agent some years ago' by his detractors, a claim that would greatly undermine his credibility as an anti-colonialist nationalist.¹⁸⁴ The Kodaw Hmaing faction was determined to oppose colonialism by any means. Rather than deterring them repression had exacerbated nationalists' anti-colonial antipathy. *Thakin* papers seized by police at Shwe Dagon Pagoda described their plans for a general strike, the purpose of which was to destroy the government, not merely to demand 'improved terms and conditions'.¹⁸⁵ Stewart, discussing the seized papers, warned that the 'Thakin organisation [was] a very serious menace to the peace and progress of the country'.¹⁸⁶ Disorder was traced to the plotting of the *Thakins* and forestalling their agitation was the primary concern of the BDB.

¹⁸⁰ BL IOR M/5/56 Burma Monthly Intelligence Summaries, Intelligence summary no. 2. Feb. 1939, 281.

¹⁸¹ BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Dec. 1938 - second half Dec. 1939, 6 Jan 1939-10 Jan 1940, Confidential report by Cochrane, Apr. 1939, 281.

¹⁸² Paul Kratoska, "Nationalism and Modernist Reform," in *The Cambridge History of South East Asia Volume Two Part One: From c. 1800 to the 1930s* ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 286.

¹⁸³ Ibid, Fortnightly report 25 Apr. 1938, 12.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, Fortnightly report Apr. 1939, 318.

¹⁸⁶ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 1, Jan. 1939, 313.

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The loss of control of the information order in 1939 did not provoke efforts by the Bureau to increase the number of informers as the rebellion had done, a phenomenon discussed earlier in chapter 2. By contrast, the riots led to the arrest of nationalists that the BDB and CID had been targeting since separation; numerous *Thakins* were taken into custody following police raids such as the one at Shwe Dagon, where eleven *Thakins* were apprehended under the Rangoon Emergency Security Act.¹⁸⁷ Indeed, so widespread were the arrests of Burman nationalists in Mandalay in February 1939 that they required the employment of a 'special scheme for dealing with disorder formulated by civil and Military Police authorities' as they expected a hostile reaction from other nationalists.¹⁸⁸ The government's response to the 'year of revolution' was to detain or otherwise inhibit the activities of the provocateurs of dissent. The riot provoked concern in the Indian government, and Stewart visited India to discuss 'intelligence in relation to the riots and primarily internal intelligence' with officials of the DIB.¹⁸⁹ The dissemination of subversive ideas throughout society which seemed to have occurred under the noses of the BDB was evidence of an intelligence failure and thus the Bureau's apparatus and operation came under renewed scrutiny. This was redolent of the earlier observations of colonial officials during the rebellion of the rapid transmission of information during rebellious outbreaks in Burma about which colonial officials knew little, something discussed in chapter one.¹⁹⁰

Anxious to restore its credibility, the BDB urged a clampdown on the sources of dissident ideas.¹⁹¹ Vernacular newspapers were shut down, U Saw was arrested as he marched at the head of a procession of *Galon Tats*, and *Thakin*

¹⁸⁷ BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan 1939-10 Jan 1940, Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Dec. 1938 - second half Dec. 1939, Fortnightly report, for the second half of Dec. 1938, 355.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, Fortnightly report, for the second half of Dec. 1938, 336.

¹⁸⁹ BL IOSM Mss Eur F125/114 Hope (Victor Alexander John), 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow Linlithgow collection: papers of Victor Alexander John Hope, 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow (1887-1952) as Viceroy of India 1936-43 Letters and telegrams regarding Burma 1937-39, letter from Monteath to Gilbert, 30 Nov. 1938, 129.

¹⁹⁰ BL IOSM Mss Eur E244/2, Papers of John Keith Stanford (1892-1971), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1919-38 Correspondence and papers from the office of the Deputy Commissioner, Myitkina report to the Commissioner, 127.

¹⁹¹ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 1, Jan. 1939, 305.

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leaders were arrested.¹⁹² The Home Secretary recorded the reasons for the aforementioned raid on Shwedagon Pagoda noting that the action was inspired by 'information that documents showing the existence of a criminal conspiracy to overthrow the government by force' were at the Pagoda.¹⁹³ MI2 (a) credited these arrests with a lull in anti-government violence; however, this was qualified by the observation that Ba Maw's departure and the incumbency of the new premier U Pu might have had a greater impact in quelling dissent.¹⁹⁴ Still the BDB and the colonial authorities in Burma were quick to jump to false conclusions, equating the internment of political dissidents with the restoration of order.

If 1938 was a year of failed revolution it was ultimately because the *Thakins* had yet to achieve hegemony among the mass of the working population. Stewart, for one, observed that they did not have the influence required to stage a general strike.¹⁹⁵ Other BDB officials were not so sure and saw *Thakin* influence behind every strike. The BDB's January 1939 intelligence summary warned that the 'widespread and practically unchecked agitation being carried on will lead to a violent clash with forces of government and the time must come when law and order will have to be rehabilitated'.¹⁹⁶ This was a result of the 'industrial population being engulfed against capitalism and the British connection'.¹⁹⁷ Again, Stoler's review of colonialism in Sumatra sheds light on colonial motives in Burma, as, in Sumatra, Stoler observes that the government devoted massive amounts of time and energy to 'the "political" nature of labour actions'

¹⁹² BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan. 1939-10 Jan. 1940; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Dec. 1938 - second half Dec. 1939, Fortnightly letter from Home Secretary's Office in Rangoon, 22 Dec. 1939, 10 and BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 1, Jan. 1939, 313.

¹⁹³ BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan. 1939-10 Jan. 1940, Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Dec. 1938 - second half Dec. 1939, Fortnightly report, for the second half of Dec. 1938, 370.

¹⁹⁴ TNA WO 106/3704A Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence, and predecessors, Correspondence and papers: War of 1939-45 Burma: Political Intelligence, MI2 (a), 24 Mar. 1939, 3.

¹⁹⁵ BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan. 1939-10 Jan. 1940; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, Fortnightly report, Feb. 1939, 318.

¹⁹⁶ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 1, Jan. 1939, 304.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

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deflecting 'attention away from the investigation of labour conditions'.¹⁹⁸ The BDB acted in the manner of their counterparts in Sumatra when reporting on individuals considered likely to provoke an uprising among labourers and peasants rather than conceding that those labourers and peasants had any legitimate grievances. Unfortunately, the widespread disorder of 1938 seemed to confirm the Bureau's worst fears that an elite corps of organised agitators might provoke the masses into rebellion and, as a result, repression of conspirators was considered the appropriate solution.

The Burma-Yunnan road: the Japanese threat to internal colonial security

In 1938 the British finished constructing the Burma-Yunnan road which linked Burma to southern China. It was hoped that building a trade route to China would accrue revenue for the Empire, and this had been a central reason for Burma's conquest in 1885, alongside its importance as a buffer state against French imperial expansionism from Indo-China. Building the road was a slow process, however, and was only begun in earnest during 1937 in the teeth of opposition from Governor Cochrane.¹⁹⁹ The government of Burma was reluctant to pay for the road and by the time of its completion the riots' impact on state finances meant that there was little spare money available to prevent the road's condition from deteriorating rapidly.²⁰⁰ Strapped for cash, the government drafted in forced labour in Shan States to complete the road, which finally opened at the beginning of 1939.²⁰¹ American loans also aided this final burst of construction, resulting in increased American interest in events in Burma.²⁰² Imperial and American interest in the completion of the road did not stem solely from trade concerns, however. Security concerns dominated the construction of the road as colonial officials affirmed.

¹⁹⁸ Ann Stoler, "Perceptions of Protest: Defining the Dangerous in Colonial Sumatra," *American Ethnologist*, 12, no. 4 (1985): 642-658 at 652.

¹⁹⁹ BL IOSM Mss Eur D1080/4 Papers of Maurice Alfred Maybury, Burma Civil Service 1938-48, including diaries as sub-divisional officer Kawkareik 1940-42 An essay: "The Burma Road and the Burma-Yunann railway" c.1942, 6.

²⁰⁰ TNA FO 371/23477 Political: Far Eastern: China Burma-Yunnan Road 1939, extract from letter, 03 Jan. 1939, 315.

²⁰¹ TNA FO 371/22104 Position Regarding Burma-Yunnan Road, report on journey, 18 Feb. 1938, 204.

²⁰² TNA FO 371/23477 Political: Far Eastern: China Burma-Yunnan Road 1939, Extract from *The Times*, 14 Jan. 1939, 281.

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With 'war in Europe imminent' the 'importance of the Burma Road to British imperial defence planning in Asia increased'.²⁰³ Keen to buttress Chinese Nationalist forces in their war with Japan, the road was a critical strategic tool, designed to facilitate 'the transport of munitions to China', something that the British government considered essential when reviewing the prospect of war with Japan.²⁰⁴ The official declaration of war between Japan and China following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in July 1937 had stimulated renewed interest in the development of links to Yunnan, a province of Southern China referred to as a 'bulwark of the Indian Empire'.²⁰⁵ If we recall the observations made in chapter three, early intelligence warnings from the Delhi Intelligence Bureau about the rise of Communism in the Far East had alerted imperial security analysts, not least within the Committee of Imperial Defence, to the importance of Yunnan. Conversely, a Communist International meeting in Canton had warned of the threat British imperialism presented to Yunnan from Burma.²⁰⁶ Indian intelligence reported that the Communists hoped to establish an armed presence in Yunnan to counter the threat of the British Empire in Burma. British fears diminished when a leading figure in the anti-communist nationalist Chinese *Kuomintang* party, General Lung Yun, staged a coup in Yunnan in 1932, establishing a principality with an independent army and bringing what the British considered 'peace and a stable administration' to Yunnan.²⁰⁷ Lung Yun was greatly admired by the British, and the Burma Defence Bureau paid considerable attention to his efforts to organise more effective administrative control and, with it, more effective anti-Japanese resistance from his base in Yunnan.²⁰⁸ Monteath wrote to Cochrane praising Lung Yun's road-building projects, military training exercises and education reforms as well as his curtailment of banditry in the area.²⁰⁹

²⁰³ BL IOSM Mss Eur D1060/4 Papers of Maurice Alfred Maybury, Burma Civil Service 1938-48, including diaries as sub-divisional officer Kawkareik 1940-42 An essay: "The Burma Road and the Burma-Yunnan railway" c1942, 5.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 9.

²⁰⁶ BL IOR V/27/262/5 India. Intelligence Bureau: India and communism, Reprint, 1935. Simla, 66.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 67.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan 1939-10 Jan 1940, Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, Fortnightly report Aug. 1939, 175.

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If the British Empire was heavily invested in General Lung Yun, he, in turn, recognised just how vital was the completion of the road between Yunnan and Burma, sending many of his own men down to work as labourers on the project. The Foreign Office noted that his 'loyalty ensured completion of the road'.²¹⁰ By funnelling weapons to the Chinese Nationalist army through Lung Yun, the British hoped that the Japanese might get bogged down in China, which would give them a breathing space for conducting the war in Europe. An organised Communist military force was no longer a fear after 1937, but the Japanese Imperial Army was an increasing concern. The building of the Burma road therefore transformed the territory's importance to imperial security. Reviewing Burma's position in mid-1938 just prior to the opening of the road, the War Office Directorate of Military Intelligence considered the territory 'more likely to be a liability than an asset in the event of a major war'.²¹¹ However, the use of the road to support General Lung Yun nonetheless made Burma's security a vital imperial concern and one of interest to the United States as well.

This development did not go unnoticed by the Japanese. The British in no small part built the road to send a clear signal to Japan who 'should have no doubt as to our interest in it'.²¹² Earlier appraisals of Burma's vulnerability to attack had considered Japanese invasion highly unlikely, as Delhi Intelligence Bureau reports described in 1935.²¹³ However, the road escalated Burma's importance in Japanese planning and closing it became a priority for the Japanese Empire.²¹⁴ As the Japanese military further expanded its influence across South East Asia and blocked off China's lines of communication to the outside world, the necessity of closing China's link to the sea through Burma raised Burma's profile. The conflict in China was costly and dragged on throughout the 1930s;

²¹⁰ TNA FO 371/23477 Political: Far Eastern: China Burma-Yunnan Road 1939, Extract from The Times, 14 Jan. 1939, 281.

²¹¹ TNA WO 106/3704A Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence, and predecessors, Correspondence and papers: War of 1939-45 Burma: Political Intelligence, MI2 (a), 28 Jul. 1938, 2.

²¹² BL IOSM Mss Eur D1080/4 Papers of Maurice Alfred Maybury, Burma Civil Service 1938-48, including diaries as sub-divisional officer Kawkareik 1940-42 An essay: "The Burma Road and the Burma-Yunann railway" c. 1942, 9.

²¹³ BL IOSM Mss Eur F125/160 File of correspondence arising out of consideration in 1936 of the possibility of Japanese aggression against India, Burma, British Far Eastern Countries and Netherlands Indies, 05 Apr. 1936, 8.

²¹⁴ see Won, Z. Yoon, *Japan's Scheme for the Liberation of Burma: The Role of the Minami Kikan and the 30 Comrades* (Athens Ohio: University Center for International Studies, 1973).

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ending it as soon as possible was an urgent priority for the Tokyo government. For this reason, as soon as the road was completed, 'the Japanese began their secret activities in Burma'.²¹⁵ The purpose of these secret activities was no less than to undermine the security of the British colonial state and the BDB necessarily responded by devoting increasing resources to monitoring Japanese covert operations in the country.

Originally, in 1935, U Saw had been the Japanese Empire's best hope for undermining colonial security in Burma. The Japanese consulate in Rangoon, Kaneko, had met with U Saw on several occasions spending 3,000,000 Rupees 'framing the political activities' of U Saw.²¹⁶ U Saw's newspaper was pro-Japanese and the BDB observed that U Saw hoped to provide his *Galon Tats* with Japanese military training 'so that in event of war between British and Japanese he can help the Japanese'.²¹⁷

Kaneko's provocation of anti-colonial activity marked him as a target for surveillance by the CID in Burma for several months in 1937. By late 1938 Stewart had collected a substantial dossier on his activities which he forwarded to Monteath in India.²¹⁸ Governor Cochrane was especially agitated over Kaneko's influence on the opinions of Burmans regarding the use of the Burma-Yunnan road to transport arms to China.²¹⁹ The Burma-Yunnan road had not been discussed in parliament and was imposed against the wishes of Burman representatives. The colonial government was not afraid of the Japanese Empire's ability to launch conventional attack on Burma, not in 1938 at any rate; they were more concerned about the Japanese ability to provoke Burman hostility, which was piqued by the construction of the road.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 4.

²¹⁶ BL IOR M/5/47 Japanese Activities in Burma, Burma Defence Bureau Intelligence Summary no. 4, May. 1935, 75.

²¹⁷ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 6, Jun. 1938, 162.

²¹⁸ TNA FO 371/23566 Political Departments: General Correspondence from 1906-1966 Political: Far Eastern Japan: Japanese activities in Burma, CID reports in Note on the Activities of Japanese Council A.H. Seymour, Secretary to Governor of Burma, Defence department to Under Secretary of State for Burma, 06 Oct. 1939, 159.

²¹⁹ Ibid, Governor of Burma letter to Whitehall, 21 Mar. 1939, 152.

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Kaneko's anti-British activities escalated as the first ships carrying arms for China landed in the port of Rangoon in November of 1938.²²⁰ Information was received that Kaneko

had received official instructions from the foreign ministry of Japan to the effect that the Japanese government was prepared to spend any amount of money to prevent the Burma government from allowing the Chinese government to transport munitions through Burma. The manager of the Yokohoma Specie Bank in Rangoon had been instructed by the Japanese government to issue any amount required by [Kaneko] for carrying out this work.²²¹

Ba Maw later recollected that the Japanese approached him during his premiership, offering him money to ensure that the road was closed.²²² Meanwhile, hesitant discussions continued between the Cochrane and Monteath regarding possible action against Kaneko. Making demands on the government of Japan was considered problematic and Monteath felt that there was not enough evidence to make a case against Kaneko. While they deliberated, their problem was solved by the Japanese government's replacement of Kaneko as consul with Shigeyoshi Kuda.²²³ The Government in Tokyo stated that it had dismissed Kaneko for 'reckless expenditure', something that rendered the intelligence gathered about him more or less worthless.²²⁴

At least Kaneko's support for U Saw bore no fruit, and the BDB did not consider the *Galon Tats* by this stage to be a serious threat to colonial security.²²⁵ While the *Galon Tats* adopted a militant anti-colonial posture, they were simply not a credible threat to the colonial government - Kaneko's vast expenditure on U

²²⁰ Ibid, Burma Defence Dossier prepared on activities of Kaneko, Nov. 1938, 157.

²²¹ Ibid, Appendix D, 27 Feb. 1939, 172.

²²² Ba Maw, op. cit., 106.

²²³ TNA FO 371/23566 Political Departments: General Correspondence from 1906-1966 Political: Far Eastern Japan: Japanese activities in Burma, Appendix D, 27 Feb. 1939, 172.

²²⁴ BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan. 1939-10 Jan. 1940; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Dec. 1938 - second half Dec. 1939, Fortnightly letter from Home Secretary's Office in Rangoon, 22 Dec. 1939, 7.

²²⁵ BL IOR M/5/79 Information relating to 'Bangkok Conspiracy' to smuggle arms into Burma from Thailand with alleged view to start rebellion; involvement of Japanese; frontier routes, Burma Office, Whitehall, London, 11 Sep. 1940, 12.

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Saw and his *tats*' activities were wasted. The construction of the road, however, transformed the nature of Japanese activity in Burma. Japanese officials recognised the need to increase their intelligence gathering and covert operations in Burma if they were to engage with Burman groups that had more sway with the population than U Saw.²²⁶ This meant engaging with the *Thakins*, who, as we have seen, enjoyed much greater levels of popular support. Nationalists who cooperated with the Japanese would have access to all the means a modern sophisticated state was able to provide; intelligence, arms and training.²²⁷ Chapter five goes on to discuss the impact British repression had on Burmese nationalists who were driven to seek the assistance of the Japanese which had its roots in the events of 1938. What is worth recording here is Ba Maw's comment that the 'Burma-Yunnan road was responsible for bringing the Japanese to Burma' and thus anti-colonialist organisation began 'with the Japanese, who wrote history'.²²⁸

The BDB, meanwhile, noted that the *Thakins* were divided by the end of 'the year of revolution', with a number of their senior organisers imprisoned.²²⁹ They had not achieved the decisive influence over public opinion they required to mount an anti-colonial revolution. However, the intrusion of another state, Japan, into Burma's domestic affairs reinvigorated an element of the nationalist opposition who were still resolved to pursue armed conflict against the state. This would provide these more extremist *Thakins* with new opportunities to organise against the state without having to call on the support of peasant and worker organisations. Guha observes that in Indian intelligence reports 'militant nationalism was not a mass political phenomenon'. Nationalists in India 'relied for their striking power on conspiratorial methods and armed intervention by individual activists or tightly welded commandos'.²³⁰ Burman conspirators also turned to such tactics after the 'year of revolution' and, backed by the Japanese

²²⁶ Ba Maw, op. cit., 17.

²²⁷ Smith, op. cit., 58.

²²⁸ Ba Maw, op. cit., 106.

²²⁹ BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan 1939-10 Jan 1940, Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Dec. 1938 - second half Dec. 1939, Fortnightly report, for the second half of Dec. 1938, 370.

²³⁰ Guha, *Dominance without hegemony*, 135.

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Empire, would prove capable of dealing a severe blow to the British colonial state.

Richard J. Aldrich remarks that British intelligence gathering in the South and South East of Asia prior to World War Two was 'primarily colonialist...designed to address internal threats... narrowly focused on communists, agitators and nationalists'.²³¹ Aldrich observes this to be true of India, Malaya and Singapore and considers it a factor in the British failure to predict the scale of the impending Japanese attack. Instead of observing the scale and likely direction of Japanese attacks, the security services were too concerned with domestic threats, especially nationalism and local uprisings. His comments certainly ring true for Burma where the function of the BDB was indeed to confront domestic threats to colonial security - however, the Japanese were rapidly becoming a domestic threat through their influence among nationalist groups. Intelligence gathered on Burman nationalists was often entwined with intelligence on Japanese activities in the country after 1938.

Antony Best had taken this discussion further, reviewing British intelligence perceptions of Japanese unpreparedness to fight a war against the western powers prior to 1942.²³² The imperial security services did not consider the Japanese to have the necessary confidence, the strategic skills, or the material capacity for war on such a massive scale. Best considers this an intelligence failure on the part of the British imperial security services.²³³ The British did not anticipate the scale of the attack on their Far Eastern Empire. In Burma, the government failed to anticipate the Japanese reaction to completion of the Burma Road. The strategic thinking behind the construction of the Burma-Yunnan road had been to see the Japanese bogged down in conflict in China, making them reluctant to confront the British militarily. However, it provoked the Japanese to concentrate their efforts on undermining the colonial authorities in Burma. Burman nationalists who were inclined to work with the Japanese were

²³¹ Richard J. Aldrich, *Intelligence and the War Against Japan: Britain, America and the Politics of Secret Service* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 20.

²³² see Antony Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia 1914 – 1941* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

²³³ *Ibid*, 158.

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engaged in a political conflict with the state. Their aim was national independence. The struggle was not just between two Empires, Britain and Japan, but over Burma's long-term political future.

Conclusion

In 1938 an agglomeration of mutually reinforcing events shocked the colonial authorities and radicalised the nationalist opposition. The *Thakins* adopted a radical strategy, abandoning much of their former conservative philosophy. U Saw, meanwhile, developed a nationalist party, the *Myochits*, which began to expand their support base throughout the country. The subaltern groups, whether peasant smallholders, landless day labourers, or waged workers, failed by the separation government, vented their grievances in a series of strikes and protests. They allied their interests with the *Thakins*, who made efforts to turn the protests into a broader movement against colonialism and capitalism.

The colonial government, caught by surprise, cracked down severely on strikes. The frustrations of the poorest in society boiled over into communal rioting primarily directed against Indian Muslims, and again, the army and other security forces were called out to restore control. The BDB had failed to alert the government to imminent disorder, lacking the requisite information to do so, and never identifying the nature of subaltern grievances. The renewed series of strikes following the riot saw further restrictive measures taken against *Thakins* and other nationalists suspected of trying to provoke agitation against colonial rule, as well as instances of grievous violence. In addition to these events in central Burma, the development of the Burma-Yunnan road from north Burma into China to traffic arms to anti-Japanese Chinese forces catalysed Japanese interference in Burma's domestic politics. Yet, despite all of these shortcomings and worsening threats, the colonial state still emphasised its dependence on the BDB to preserve internal security following the worst of the disorder.

Harsh repression of political dissidents was becoming the norm by the end of 1938, enforced by emergency legislation and the widest interpretation of laws

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regarding criminal conduct. The security response, calling out the armed forces 'in aid of the civil' to help put down the strikes and the riot, was broadly seen as indicative of government failure, whether by observers in the country or by external observers based in India. A weak and corrupt police force failed to contain disorder, necessitating the deployment of other armed forces, paramilitary auxiliaries and the army. Recourse to troops and paramilitaries to maintain order was an indictment of the civil authorities and pointed up the inadequacy of the country's communications infrastructure which, as some commentators bemoaned, helped explain the lack of sufficient political intelligence-gathering capacity in the country. Ironically, these indications of failure did not provoke much soul-searching on the part of the BDB, but they did force the Bureau to admit that its knowledge of the indigenous population was extremely limited. The BDB therefore redoubled its attention on those nationalist groups who opposed the state and efforts were intensified both to divide anti-colonial opposition and to loosen its grip on the subaltern classes. The nationalists, however, could not be expected to abandon any of their aspirations for revolutionary overthrow.

Meanwhile, the colonial state did nothing to ameliorate the grievances of the indigenous population. Many of those grievances, particularly regarding the role of Indian settlers in Burma, were the same as they had been in 1930. Popular disdain for the separation parliament was made manifest in a series of marches and protests, which quickly became subsumed within a more organised nationalist movement. The nationalist *Thakins* had been developing their ideological platform and internal organisation since 1935 and their pro-labour, pro-peasant programme appealed to the rural poor and urban wage labourers who were, in turn, alienated from the 'new' state represented by the post-separation parliament. If the *Thakins* were thus accused of being behind the worst of the disorder, fears that the poor majority would adopt the *Thakins'* revolutionary ideology saw major repression directed towards protest movements.

The failure of the state's 'authority', as Crawford Young describes it, to control civil society left recourse to 'force' as the sole option for the country's colonial

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rulers.²³⁴ The colonial state was unable to compete with the appeal of the alternative political future that nationalist groups promised. Meanwhile, socio-economic developments and changing political affiliations within the poorest sections of Burma's society remained obscure to the intelligence services. For all the increased organisational capacity of the BDB, understanding the tendencies of Burman society and their likely outcomes were bound to remain a mystery so long as there was so little understanding of the imminent needs and long-term expectations of the indigenous population. Nevertheless, the BDB retained its role as an essential instrument of authority in suppressing disorder, as it had access to nationalist groups considered likely to contest the state's legitimacy, especially through its informers and agents working in nationalist circles. If 1938 highlighted the limitations of the BDB, it also impressed on its members the need for an internal reorganisation to enable the Bureau to counter the mounting threats posed to the survival of British imperial rule in Burma.

²³⁴ Young, *op. cit.*, 24.

Conspiracies against the state: intelligence concerns in the lead up to the Japanese occupation of Burma: 1939-1942

Introduction

From 1939, following the tumult of 1938, until 1942, when the Japanese army invaded and the British colonial government collapsed, the state in Burma was subjected to increasingly violent agitation from nationalist Burmans, and was further imperilled by the escalating conflict in the Far East as Japan intensified its attacks on European colonies in Asia. 1938, the 'year of revolution' had ended badly for the government. The civil authorities had failed to maintain political control through use of civil police forces alone, resulting in the call out of the armed forces.¹ In the aftermath of all this, Sir Walter Booth-Gravelly became Governor in February 1939. It was a highly symbolic appointment: he had been special commissioner for the rebellion in 1931 and defence counsellor and overseer of the BDB on separation.

Booth-Gravelly's appointment also exemplified the strong continuity of personnel in government since the rebellion, and as former overseer of the Bureau he was likely to place a high premium on intelligence received. The population at large reviled the administrative establishment and those working for it. The parliament had little legitimacy left and was further undermined by the persistent refusal of the British colonial administration to concede full independence to Burma.² Taylor observes that colonial intransigence convinced the *Thakins* that there was no room for compromise with the British, pushing them further into the arms of the Japanese.³ Meanwhile, on Burma's borders, the government was threatened by the ever-expanding Japanese Empire which pressured Britain to close the Burma-Yunnan road along which arms shipments to Japan's enemy, Chiang-Kai Shek persisted. The Japanese exerted this pressure in two

¹ BL IOR L/WS/1/231 War Staff 'WS' Series Files: File WS 2806 Internal Security: Burma, Telegram from the Headquarters of the Army in Burma to the Secretary to the Governor of Burma, 11 Feb. 1939, 9.

² BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 12, Dec. 1938, 12

³ Robert H. Taylor, "The Burmese communist Movement and Its Indian Connection: Formation and Factionalism," *Journal of South East Asian studies*, 14, no. 1 (1983): 95 – 108 at 101.

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contrasting ways: through official diplomatic protests and by instigating a programme of covert operations against the colonial government.⁴ Britain's entry into the war in Europe in September 1939 weakened the Empire's authority in the East; the *Thakins* had long proclaimed that they would use a breakout of war to bring down British colonialism in Burma.⁵ The final period of colonial rule before the Japanese occupation was thus one of domestic political weakness and acute strategic vulnerability.

In these circumstances, the colonial authorities relied all the more on a functioning BDB to alert them to future threats, and the Bureau expanded its activities in 1939 to meet the government's growing requirements. The BDB's failure to manage the information order in Burma had been instrumental in the 'year of revolution', and the Bureau took measures to improve its performance. Harsh repression and arrests, assisted by the army, had quelled the worst of the violence, and the authorities continued to detain nationalist organisers under the Defence of Burma regulations which were broadly interpreted to suit a number of offences. This had a grave impact on nationalist groups which were severed from their labour and peasant support bases, and they were further undermined by factionalism. Gramscian analysis argues that where the state fails to achieve hegemony, authoritarian methods are a logical outcome, and this was the result in Burma after 1938.⁶ Unable to achieve the consent of the people, preventative arrests and the use of force were favoured methods. The BDB informed the state of those individuals of particular concern – and by 1939 no other branch of state had such information about nationalist activists as the BDB and its agents. Informers working amongst nationalists provided intelligence about local militants throughout the year. As these points suggest, the BDB adopted a more assertive *modus operandi* after the 'year of revolution' employing its agents to inform it of anti-government conspiracies, expanding its presence on the country's borders, and its grip over the dissemination of

⁴ see Jan Becka, *The National Liberation Movement in Burma during the Japanese Occupation Period (1941-1945)* (Prague: Oriental Institute in Academia Publishing house of the Czechoslovakia Academy of Sciences, 1983), 23-66.

⁵ BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan. 1939-10 Jan. 1940; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Dec. 1938 - second half Dec. 1939, Fortnightly report Aug. 1939, 171.

⁶ Thomas R. Bates, "Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 36, no. 2 (1975): 351 – 366 at 354.

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political information within Burman society especially through increased censorship.

If the separation of nationalist groups, especially the *Thakins*, from peasant and worker associations prevented them from achieving decisive influence amongst the wider population, it did not bring *Thakin* dissent to an end - suppressing widespread protests and arresting leading agitators had not diminished nationalists' frustrations and *Thakins'* 'subversive activities' and 'intensive propagandising' continued well into 1939.⁷ The threat of violence had not subsided after 1938 and the BDB remarked that it was 'doubtful if any government can control by any means the anti-government movement growing in practically all districts'.⁸ The 'year of revolution' had convinced the colonial government that it faced a crisis of control and it cracked down more vigorously on opponents who it feared would provoke rebellion. For once these fears were justified. Following their failures in 1938 a number of nationalist groups expressed the desire to overthrow the government by violence during 1939-1942. The increasing availability of weapons and logistical support to Burman nationalists from Japan made these conspiracies a real threat, not merely whimsical expressions of frustration by agitators.

Meanwhile, the army also failed in its efforts to open up its ranks to Burmans. In 1939 troops were still largely composed of Indians and ethnic minorities from Burma's frontier regions. This fact is well known: Robert H. Taylor and Mary P. Callahan point out that opening up the army to Burman membership in 1937 did not lead to any significant increase in Burman participation in the armed forces.⁹ More significant, Taylor and Callahan go on to argue that the army in Burma was the most vexing aspect of colonial occupation for nationalists, and it stimulated nationalists' desires to form a parallel Burman army to confront the colonial army which oppressed them. Among nationalists a 'latent desire' was

⁷ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 4, Apr. 1939, 242 and *ibid*, Intelligence Summary no. 1, Jan. 1939, 304.

⁸ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 4, Apr. 1939, 231.

⁹ Robert H. Taylor, "Colonial Forces in British Burma: A National Army," in *Colonial Armies in Southeast Asia*, eds. Karl Hack and Tobias Rettig (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 197 and Mary P. Callahan *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), 14.

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building in the pre-war years 'to bear arms in defence of the nation... during the years of British denial of Burman military prowess' Taylor argues, noting that there was an increase of British colonial troops in Burma during 1939-42.¹⁰ According to this analysis, the army bears great responsibility for stimulating the rise of violent subversion of the colonial state. However, it is vital to remember that the state's approach to nationalists was always mediated by the information they had on those nationalists, which was derived from the BDB. The army relied on information from the BDB as they acknowledged in internal memos.¹¹ Suppressing nationalist subversion was an intelligence led operation following the 'year of revolution'. Dividing nationalists from each other and their support base was a priority in maintaining security in 1939. The intelligence services were the primary mechanism here, providing information on subversive groups and directing the government's attention to Burman nationalists who were suppressed.

The BDB following the 'year of revolution'

The violence of the population's expression of anger in 1938 had shocked the government. The suppression of disorder and cessation of organised hostility did not ensure security for colonial rule. Booth-Gravely declared an end to the State of Emergency, declared during the riots, in July 1939, qualifying his decision with the 'unconfirmed report' from Insein district that 'Thakins are advising paddy field tenants not to deliver up any paddy to land owners after the harvest this year but to store paddy secretly among villages as a reserve against next years and refuse to work in the fields'.¹² The Governor's fear that the *Thakins* would continue to work to subvert the state undermined the colonial government's confidence that security had indeed been restored after the previous year's upheaval. Paralleling this, the outbreak of war with Germany in 1939 made the security of the British Empire in the Far East a more pressing concern for the government of Burma. Intelligence on Japan's preparations for

¹⁰ Taylor, "Colonial Forces in British Burma: A National Army," 205.

¹¹ BL IOR L/WS/1/231 War Staff 'WS' Series Files: File WS 2806 Internal Security: Burma Letter from HQ Army in Burma, WKM Leader, Lieutenant-Colonel. General Staff to Secretary to Governor of Burma, Defence department Rangoon, 20 Sep. 1938, 38.

¹² BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan 1939-10 Jan 1940, Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Dec. 1938 - second half Dec. 1939, Fortnightly report Jul. 1939, 228.

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war and the likelihood of an attack was more urgently required than ever. As the last chapter discussed, anxieties over the inadequacies of intelligence in East and South East Asia had provoked the development of more sophisticated intelligence apparatuses in the region. As a node of the Imperial intelligence network the BDB was expected to provide intelligence on developments in Burma and surrounding countries. Back in London, the Secretary of State for Burma in the Indian Office provided intelligence reports to the War Cabinet based on the Burma Defence Bureau's intelligence reports that he received.¹³ The British coalition Government's understanding of the threats to imperial security in Burma thus also stemmed from the Burma Defence Bureau's reports.

As part of its expanding intelligence gathering efforts BDB manpower was increased along the border with Yunnan, China and Thailand. In January 1941 the number of second-grade officers of the bureau working along the borders with China and Thailand was doubled.¹⁴ This resulted in a major increase on information on Thai political activity, as well as more detailed coverage of events in Yunnan, in BDB reports. Monteath had discussed intelligence improvements in Yunnan with Lord Linlithgow in August 1939 and observed that they 'knew very little of how intelligence systems are built up', a surprising admission given Monteath's involvement with the early stages of the planning of the BDB.¹⁵ However, one requirement was that the 'directing authority should make up its mind what categories of information it desires from a given area and employ agents to see what they can find, each under the particular category allotted to him'.¹⁶ With this instruction in mind, the Bureau systematically augmented its operations in 1939 and, in July, at the Headquarters of the Army in Burma in Maymyo, the GSO stated that the army desired the BDB to acquire information in Yunnan by conducting 'political,

¹³ TNA Cabinet Office (CAB) 68/1/6 –Burma at the outbreak of War. First Fortnightly Report by Secretary of State, covering period to 11 Sep. 1939, 1.

¹⁴ BL IOR M/4/2074 Mar 1938 - May 1947 Defence: Burma Defence Bureau Letter to Lord Zetland Viceroy of India from Governor of Burma Cochrane, 10 Mar. 1938, 6.

¹⁵ BL IOSM Mss Eur F125/114 Hope (Victor Alexander John), 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow Linlithgow collection: papers of Victor Alexander John Hope, 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow (1887-1952) as Viceroy of India 1936-43 Letters and telegrams regarding Burma 1937-39, Monteath to Linlithgow, Aug. 1939, 132.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

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economic and subversive activities', putting intelligence to a much more aggressive use.¹⁷

The military required the BDB to coordinate their acquisition of information on events in Burma, and also sought more up-to-date assessments of intelligence requirements in response to the previous year's rioting. Military and civil intelligence thus became more closely enmeshed as the 'military wanted their own organisation in Burma for obtaining necessary information – [the] BDB [were the] best people to run it'.¹⁸ Building up an intelligence organisation independently of the BDB would have been a difficult task, requiring finance and manpower that the military did not have. The military got 'most information from the Bureau'.¹⁹ Not just inside Yunnan, but also throughout Thailand and inside Burma, the Bureau increased its covert operations by infiltrating its agents into underground nationalist networks. This was quite a departure. The Riot Enquiry Committee and India's Agent in Burma, Hutchings, had harshly condemned the inadequate intelligence capacity in Burma in 1938 (described in chapter four).²⁰ Nevertheless, as the security forces and Governor had made clear, the BDB was the sole guarantor of control. Nationalist conspirators had, of course, been accused of inciting political violence in Burma since the rebellion and the strife of 1938 had only further persuaded the authorities of the necessity of the Bureau's role to report on, and even actively undermine, seditious activity.

During the 'year of revolution', the colonial authorities had deployed the security forces in Burma to stamp out both labour and peasant protests and a major outbreak of communal rioting. The mainstay of colonial rule at the local level, the headmen, were in a 'deteriorating position' in 1939, much as they had been

¹⁷ BL IOR M/5/81 Burma's responsibilities for military intelligence Note on Burma's responsibilities for Military Intelligence – Secret document from the Defence Department, 07 Jul. 1939, 3.

¹⁸ Ibid, Letter from HQ Army, Burma, Maymyo Detective Lieutenant Colonel WKM Leader GSO II to BPT O'Brien MC Burma Office Whitehall London, 11 Jul. 1939, 1.

¹⁹ Ibid, Note on Burma's responsibilities for Military Intelligence – Secret document from the Defence Department, 07 Jul. 1939, 3.

²⁰ BL IOSM Mss Eur F125/114 Hope (Victor Alexander John), 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow Linlithgow collection: papers of Victor Alexander John Hope, 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow (1887-1952) as Viceroy of India 1936-43 Letters and telegrams regarding Burma 1937-39, Letter from the agent of India in Burma, Hutchings to the Viceroy of India Linlithgow 22 Oct. 1939, 181.

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in the years leading up to rebellion (discussed in chapter one).²¹ A sense of fragility and underlying threats to order pervaded these final years and repression continued well into 1939 – in February labour and peasant marches against the government were met by the Burma Rifles, who shot fourteen marchers dead.²² Repression of protest marches in 1938-39 was followed by more targeted activity against nationalists deemed subversive, beginning with the raid on Shwedagon pagoda in January 1939, an event discussed in chapter four, which led to the discovery of tracts that allegedly described ‘a criminal conspiracy to overthrow the government by force’, and which were used to justify the arrest of eleven *Thakins*.²³

The Bureau's heightened use of covert infiltration, censorship and the targeting of political opponents, indicates an increasingly aggressive use of intelligence to secure political stability. Peter Jackson remarks that the use of covert operations to achieve political aims is a typical feature of intelligence services' activity as ‘intelligence networks often offer the best... means of acquiring the information needed for planning and executing of secret interventions’.²⁴ In colonial Burma, Burman agents of the BDB were placed in known nationalist networks and labour and peasant organisations and were thus the best placed to carry out covert operations and this they did most notably when an arms smuggling conspiracy to provide weapons to Burman nationalists seeking to overthrow the government began in 1935, and continued into 1939. A covert BDB operative, Maung Lun Pe, infiltrated the conspiracy and undermined it from within. Japanese agents working in Burma and Thailand also promised Burman nationalists arms to help support an uprising against British rule. Originally liaising with U Saw in 1935, a figure who proved a fruitless conduit, the Japanese began to work with other nationalists in 1938-39.²⁵ As we saw earlier,

²¹ BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan. 1939-10 Jan. 1940, Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Dec. 1938 - second half Dec. 1939, Agenda for Commissioners' conference 12 Jul. 1939, 251.

²² Ibid, Fortnightly report, first half of Feb. 1939, 329.

²³ Ibid, Fortnightly report, first half of Jan. 1939, 370.

²⁴ Peter Jackson in "Historical reflections on the uses and limits of intelligence," In *Intelligence and Statecraft: The Use and Limits of Intelligence in International Society*, eds. Peter Jackson and Jennifer Siegel (Connecticut: Praeger, 2005), 17.

²⁵ see file BL IOR M/5/79 Information relating to ‘Bangkok Conspiracy’ to smuggle arms into Burma from Thailand with alleged view to start rebellion; involvement of Japanese; frontier routes, for a full account of the arms smuggling campaign.

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the *Tats* had proved of little help to Japanese plans for rebellion against the British, so Japanese agents sought out other political agitators who were increasingly frustrated with the colonial government. It fell to the BDB alone to alert the government to these activities.

According to the BDB intelligence, Maung Lun Pe was 'himself well into the conspiracy' by 1939.²⁶ Travelling through Thailand and Burma, he met with Tokyo government agents as well as *Thakins* who were planning to secrete arms along the Thai/Burma border in readiness for an armed uprising against the government. Maung Lun Pe had won the trust of conspirators, who showed him details of the conspiracy and invited him to Japan.²⁷ He was even trusted to pass messages between the Japanese embassy in Bangkok and *Thakins* in Burma and relayed all his information to the Bureau. Richard J. Aldrich's analysis of British intelligence in pre-war Thailand notes that 'these revelations caused excitement in Washington as well as London'.²⁸ At the very top level, then, imperial and allied security appraisals of Japanese activity in South East Asia utilised intelligence provided by the BDB's covert operatives. The use of undercover operatives may have been extended even wider than Maung Lun Pe's travels; the post-war intelligence administration in Burma in 1946, for instance, reviewed the case of Eric Hamada, a Japanese Christian who claimed to have worked for the BDB before the war. C. G. Stewart, then head of the Bureau, had allegedly sent him to Japan to undertake undercover work.²⁹ If true, this points to the expanding use of covert operations by the BDB that extended far beyond Burma's borders, all of which indicates that the BDB had a major role in protecting the boundaries of the country in the lead up to the war.

As we have already seen, censorship also heightened after the 'year of revolution'. The colonial authorities had faced massive criticism within Burma's vernacular press following the riots, so much so that the Riot Committee Inquiry

²⁶ Ibid, Burma Office, Whitehall, London, 11 Sep. 1940, 4.

²⁷ Ibid, 16.

²⁸ Richard J. Aldrich, *The Key to the South: Britain, the United States and Thailand during the Approach of the Pacific War* (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 317.

²⁹ BL IOR M/4/2445 Claim of Private Eric Clarence Hamada alias Hamasaki to have worked as an Agent for Director of Defence Bureau, Rangoon, 1940-41, Telegram from Governor of Burma to Secretary of State for Burma 22 May 1940, 5.

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considered the press to have been a major factor in escalating the unrest itself, and the BDB, and the agent of India in Burma, Hutchings, likewise condemned the excesses of the vernacular newspapers.³⁰ Military intelligence observed that several 'violent attacks' were made 'on the government in the press'.³¹

Comparing the state of the press of India with that of Burma, Hutchings considered that the 'violent writing against the government' in Burma 'would not be tolerated in India'.³² These facts evidently spurred the BDB to clamp down on the presses, and in August a Publicity and Propaganda Bureau was put in place, its purpose being to oversee a shift to a more 'moderate' tone in the press.³³ By the end of the year the BDB reported that the 'tone of the Burmese press with regard to the war' was much improved.³⁴ This proved a somewhat cosmetic improvement, however – as Bayly notes of the presses in colonial India, they 'speeded up the velocity and range of communication among existing communities of knowledge' but they did not replace the means of communication entirely.³⁵ Suppression of the presses in Burma did not end the dissemination of nationalist ideas - it merely drove their forms of communication underground. Censorship was in this sense counter-productive. It 'denied information to the government' and compelled its opponents to find new ways to communicate beneath the radar of the BDB's gaze.³⁶

Censorship did not apply to newspapers alone, but also included the interception of letters. By late 1940, as subversive plotting against the government increased, intercepted letters sent between nationalists became a 'major intelligence source'.³⁷ Even letters 'written in invisible ink' were seized

³⁰ BL IOR V/26/262/16 Burma Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee 1938-39; Final Report and appendices. Rangoon 1939 Final report of the Riot Enquiry Committee, 275.

³¹ TNA WO 106/3704A Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence, and predecessors, Correspondence and papers: War of 1939-45 Burma: Political Intelligence, MI2 (a), 24 Mar. 1939, 3.

³² BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 1, Jan. 1940, 305.

³³ BL IOR M/5/56 Burma Monthly Intelligence Summaries, Intelligence summary no. 9, 30 Sep. 1939, 82.

³⁴ Ibid, Intelligence summary no. 12, 31 Dec. 1939, 5.

³⁵ C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 243.

³⁶ Ibid, 341.

³⁷ BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence Summary no. 10, Oct. 1940, 34.

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from known *Thakin* activists.³⁸ However, by late 1941 the Delhi Intelligence Bureau observed from BDB reports that the Japanese were circumventing letter interception, perhaps by the use of a 'secret code'.³⁹ The vigorous police repression of the preceding two years had cut off sources of intelligence and informers alone no longer provided sufficient information to provide the basis for detailed BDB reports, forcing the bureau to rely on intercepted letters for key intelligence about *Thakins'* intentions.

The nature of informers had changed little since the rebellion, when intelligence gatherers were exhorted to 'be friendly with those who stand to lose if the country is disturbed'.⁴⁰ Members of the Bureau were directed not to reveal their sources (see Appendix A), and thus there are few archival details available regarding the informers employed by the BDB. However, Walter Ian James Wallace, Secretary to the Defence Department for the Government of Burma, who later escaped to India from the Japanese occupation in 1942, did forward details of informers working for the BDB to S. D. Jupp, the new head of the intelligence bureau for Burma in Simla. Wallace recorded that there was 'little record of past records' of intelligence sources.⁴¹ However, his notes on these informers are revealing: 'U Lun Pe', the 'wealthiest and most influential Burman of the district... U Poe Lun, business manager... U Toe Lun, wealthy timber merchant... U Maung Maung... well off' were all informers with whom Wallace had worked, and, as these pen portraits indicate, all were persons who derived significant material benefits from colonial rule.⁴² As Bayly observed, pro-colonial individuals were unlikely to be trustworthy as intelligence sources and were always likely to interpose their own interests on the information they reported to

³⁸ BL IOR M/5/76 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 8, Aug. 1941, 77.

³⁹ BL IOR L/PJ/12/508 Delhi Intelligence Bureau's reports on activities of Germans, Italians and Japanese in India, 15 Nov. 1941, 234.

⁴⁰ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932 Hints for guidance of civil officers in the event of outbreak of disturbances in Burma by G.S. Carey, Commissioner in Sagaing Division, 582.

⁴¹ BL IOSM Mss Eur E 338/4 Papers of Walter Ian James Wallace, Indian Civil Service, Burma 1928-47 Notes and correspondence kept by Wallace when secretary to the defence department, Government of Burma at Simla, mainly relating to conditions in Burma from 1939 to 1942, 31.

⁴² BL IOSM Mss Eur E 338/4 Papers of Walter Ian James Wallace, Indian Civil Service, Burma 1928-47 Notes and correspondence kept by Wallace when secretary to the defence department, Government of Burma at Simla, mainly relating to conditions in Burma from 1939 to 1942, 31.

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colonial officials.⁴³ In addition, as nationalists grew more radical and became more used to operating in clandestine associations, informers such as these were less likely to gain privileged access to nationalist circles.

Even at this late stage the BDB still considered a repetition of the Saya San rebellion to be the greatest threat to colonial security and closely followed conspiratorial developments among nationalist groups, expecting them to provoke another such uprising. The perception of protest and nationalism instilled in the Bureau by the rebellion persisted throughout intelligence reports and assessments in 1940-41. Stewart remarked in a BDB report for April 1940 that 'at an interview with an agent believed reliable, Ba Maw stated that if the *Thakins* foment a rebellion, he would support them'.⁴⁴ Indeed, despite its widening remit, the Bureau's very existence was still predicated on the need to avert another Saya San rebellion.⁴⁵ This perception became an impediment to accurate intelligence prediction. Erik J. Dahl describes this nature of intelligence failure as a result of 'a deadly lack of imagination among intelligence analysts', in his analysis of the terrorist attack on the US Marine Barracks in Beirut in 1983.⁴⁶ Intelligence analysts, Dahl remarks, 'lacked the focused imagination that would have been necessary to anticipate this innovation on the part of the enemy'.⁴⁷ In Burma, during 1939 to 1942, the intelligence bureau could only foresee another Saya San rebellion provoked by a group of conspirators – they did not have the imagination to perceive the entirely different nature of future attacks. Even in January 1942, the month of Japan's invasion, the BDB received 'unconfirmed reports' that 'old rebel leaders of the Tharawaddy area collected men to organise a rebellion', which could hardly have been the most

⁴³ C. A. Bayly, "Knowing the Country: Empire and information in India," *Modern Asian Studies*, 27, no. 1 special issue: How Social, Political and Cultural Information is Collected, Defined, Used and Analysed (1993): 3 – 43 at 4.

⁴⁴ BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 4, Apr. 1940, 90.

⁴⁵ BL IOR M/1/93 - Safeguards for control of Special Branch (Criminal Investigations Department) and Intelligence Letter from Sir Hugh Stephenson Governor of Burma to Under Secretary of State for India and Burma Sir David Monteath, 04 Nov. 1936, 1.

⁴⁶ Erik J. Dahl, "Warning of terror: Explaining the Failure of Intelligence Against Terrorism," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 31-55 at 48.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 51.

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pressing threat to the government when the Imperial Army of Japan was crossing its borders.⁴⁸

By this point the BDB had amassed a great deal of information on seditious plans but lacked the 'focused imagination' to foresee how nationalists would execute those plans. Discussing U Saw's conspiratorial manoeuvrings in 1941, Stewart noted that 'associations of this kind are always potentially dangerous in Burma but it is impossible for anyone not on the spot to indicate the extent of danger as it depends on varied and unknown factors... the 1930 rebellion and anti-Muslim riots in 1938, not to mention [the] Sagaing and Henzada rebellions earlier in [the] century prove... how difficult it is to forecast developments'.⁴⁹ Writing in early July 1941, Stewart was making observations which he hoped to discuss with Indian Political Intelligence (IPI) in London. The BDB was by this stage struggling to explain events in Burma to outside observers unfamiliar with Burma's history or political development. The rebellion was here referred to as an indication of how unpredictable the Burmans were, and by extension their likeliness to rebel again. A key purpose of the intelligence services is to reduce the factor of unpredictability; yet the BDB considered unpredictability to be an inherent feature of Burmese political activity and not, therefore, an indictment of their intelligence gathering capability.⁵⁰

The view that rebellion was something intrinsic to Burman culture certainly permeated official thinking. In August 1941, the agent of India in Burma, a Mr Hutchings, sent a report on uprisings in Burma to the Governor of India collated from BDB reports and other sources. In this memorandum Hutchings suggested that there was a 'natural and traditional disposition in the Burman towards rebellion', a familiar refrain if we recall the comments of colonial officials on the outbreak of the Saya San rebellion (discussed in chapter one).⁵¹ Hutchings also

⁴⁸ BL IOR M/5/76 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1941-Mar 1942 Intelligence summary no. 1, Jan. 1942, 12.

⁴⁹ Ibid, Intelligence summary no. 7, Jul. 1941, 95.

⁵⁰ Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 115.

⁵¹ BL IOSM Mss Eur F125/115 Hope (Victor Alexander John), 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow Linlithgow collection: papers of Victor Alexander John Hope, 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow (1887-1952) as Viceroy of India 1936-43 Letters and telegrams regarding Burma 1940-1943, Hutchings to Laithwaite, enclosed report on uprisings in Burma, 13 Aug. 1941, 301.

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noted that 'a chief who has had close relations with Thailand for years past said recently to Mr. Griffiths that the Thais had said to him that the Japanese have Upper Burma ready for rebellion'.⁵² A groundswell of discontent was expected to undermine authority at any moment – the administration could not imagine any other kind of threat of equivalent scale. This is indicative of the lack of understanding that the BDB, and the colonial government it reported to, had of the population in Burma. Colonial knowledge of the country had changed little since the rebellion and a wide gap still existed between the colonial state and civil society.

Not all were so blinkered. The DMI in Burma, writing in November 1941, a couple of months before Japan invaded, considered the BDB's analyses to have been 'consistently gloomy for many years past... in some cases their prognostications have been realised but on the whole they have hitherto proved unduly pessimistic' in his review of events in Burma.⁵³ For his part, the DMI considered the BDB's warnings about nationalist plots to have been overblown: 'in contrast to this, reliable and responsible sources report that, from the local point of view, internal and economic prospects are satisfactory'.⁵⁴ However, the DMI conceded that it 'would require little to start a rebellion in the Tharrawaddy-Thayetmyo area – adequate plans to deal with it in its early stages must exist'.⁵⁵ Evidently, fatalism was by this stage deeply ingrained in the BDB, an attitude resulting from its long-term pre-occupation with nationalist hostility. Following the 'year of revolution' Stewart wrote that he considered civil disobedience campaigns unlikely as 'the Burmese were not capable of organising in such a

⁵² *Ibid.*, 301a.

⁵³ TNA WO 106/3724 Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence, and predecessors: Correspondence and Papers: Burma: Pre-Occupation Intelligence, Brigadier DMI, based on summaries of BDB, Burma Military information summaries and DIB special reports, Nov. 1941, 6.

⁵⁴ TNA WO 106/3704B Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence, and predecessors: correspondence and papers, Burma: Political Intelligence, DO Letter from Burma, 02 Nov. 1940, 16.

⁵⁵ TNA WO 106/3724 Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence, and predecessors: Correspondence and Papers: Burma: Pre-Occupation Intelligence, Brigadier DMI, based on summaries of BDB, Burma Military information summaries and DIB special reports, Nov. 1941, 6.

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fashion', later saying of the *Thakins* that they were 'not capable of organising civil disobedience'.⁵⁶

Certainly, the repression of mass protest movements both in late 1938 and continuing into 1939 as well as the roundups of *Thakins* had made it difficult for nationalists to resume mass protest campaigns.⁵⁷ Yet as chapter two described, civil disobedience was not such a major threat to the government: even if it was illegal, it still acknowledged the law and sought to change policy by peaceful pressure. Burma's colonial officials were, of course, well aware of the effectiveness of Gandhi's civil disobedience campaign in India, but Stewart again took comfort in his presumption that the Burman temperament 'not suited' to Gandhian principles.⁵⁸ Ironically, the view that peaceful protest seemed unlikely only compounded official fears of more violent rebellion, still deemed the inevitable result of nationalist organisation.

The BDB therefore adopted a more aggressive outlook as the government's sense of security diminished. Never having understood the culture and conditions in which the majority Burman population lived, and faced with the increasingly violent tendencies of radical nationalist groups of which they knew much more, the Bureau directed its attentions to any activity which might spark widespread resistance to the government. The Bureau's efforts to build up networks of agents within the indigenous information order over the previous years were utilised, not only to inform the authorities of developments in civil society, but also more actively to counter the organised arms smuggling by their nationalist opponents.

⁵⁶ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 12 Dec. 1938, 1 and BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 12 Dec. 1940, 3.

⁵⁷ BL IOR M/5/6 Governor's reports, 29 Jan.-20 Dec. 1940; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, first half Jan. 1940-second half Dec. 1940, Fortnightly letter for the first half of Nov. 1940, 23.

⁵⁸ BL IOR M/5/55 Burma Monthly Intelligence Summaries, Intelligence summary no. 12, 31 Dec. 1938, 4.

Nationalism

Historical reviews of Burmese nationalism in the 1930s note a shift in the tactics and ideology of nationalists by 1939. Adas observes that the 'tactics adopted by followers of Saya San had little influence on the Thakins and other nationalist leaders who eventually won independence', and Sarkisyanz similarly records that the Thakin manifesto 'repudiated the sporadic and spontaneous 'royalist' peasant revolts of 1930/1931' which they felt themselves to have 'outgrown'.⁵⁹ Taylor remarks that nationalists abandoned their strategy of rejection of the modern state and worked instead to seize the levers of power, manipulating them for their own ends.⁶⁰ For all the BDB considered a popular rebellion along the lines of 1930 still a threat, this was decreasing in probability in 1939. Smaller groups of educated, radicalised nationalists instead assumed a more prominent role in anti-state activity in the immediate pre-war period. The BDB, however, still considered repression of nationalism broadly defined to be a universal panacea when dealing with dissent: in 1940 bureau staff noted that locking up 'numerous Thakin leaders set back activity amongst the labourers'.⁶¹ Interning *Thakins* and other nationalists became the predominant means of securing colonial order as it was assumed that it prevented them from spreading seditious ideas among the working population. Based on BDB reports of seditious speeches and other subversive nationalist activities, the bureau congratulated itself in June 1940 that the 'removal by prosecution and internment of leading firebrands among the Thakins is having a sobering effect'.⁶² Unbeknown to bureau personnel at the time, as police repression increased, plans for a nationwide uprising along the lines of the 1930 rebellion

⁵⁹ Michael Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion: Millenarian Protest Movements against the European Colonial Order* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 180 and Erik Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1965), 181.

⁶⁰ Taylor, op. cit., 151.

⁶¹ BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 7, Jul. 1940, 52.

⁶² *Ibid*, 49.

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gave way to other, more covert conspiracies, plans fostered by U Saw, Ba Maw and Aung San among others.⁶³

Despite the BDB's expectations, targeting key nationalist leaders with the aim of eliminating their influence among the subaltern groups could not eradicate the threat of violence against the state – it merely drove the source of the threat more deeply underground. Nationalists no longer aimed to mobilise the masses in protest marches, and plans for a general strike were abandoned. Ba Maw and U Maung Maung noted that *Thakin* Aung San (see figure 6), a key underground organiser against the British, moved away from the tactics of civil disobedience after the 'year of revolution', and instead prepared to wage a war against the colonial state with foreign – i.e. Japanese - support.⁶⁴ The BDB's priorities had to shift towards concentration on this new danger, countering the activities of cells of nationalists bent on destruction of the colonial state through collaboration with the Japanese. The Bureau had some success in this, when in November 1940 they arrested leaders of the Burma Freedom Bloc (BFB), a nationalist group headed by Ba Maw, which was suspected of planning an armed attack on key government installations.

Ba Maw had quickly returned to organising opposition to colonial rule after his departure from the office of premier and formed the BFB in September 1939. The Bloc incorporated a number of *Thakins*, with Aung San appointed General Secretary.⁶⁵ According to the BDB's October 1939 intelligence summary, 'Aung San and other intelligentsia supported the Freedom Bloc' and had begun covertly organising against the state.⁶⁶ Yet the BDB had little to say about the BFB's original aims, noting only that it was 'failing' by the end of the year.⁶⁷ Ba Maw's memoirs suggested that the BFB was established to 'use the opportunity

⁶³ BL IOR M/5/76 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 4, Apr. 1941, 133 and BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 11 Nov. 1940, 26..

⁶⁴ U Maung Maung, *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma 1920-1940* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1980), 224 and Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma: Memoirs of a Revolution 1939-1946* (London: Yale University Press, 1967), 20-60.

⁶⁵ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 10, Oct. 1939, 48.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 54.

⁶⁷ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 11, Nov. 1939, 24.

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of war to win independence'.⁶⁸ This seemed to be confirmed in February 1940 when the BDB received intelligence from 'sources usually well informed' that Dr Ba Maw was following Japan's Greater East Asia ideas, which proposed a conspiracy against the government to hand power to the Japanese, a plan for which members of the BFB were arrested under Defence of Burma regulations.⁶⁹

This plan was discussed in greater depth in the BDB's reports precisely because it tallied so well with their intelligence projections of an elite-inspired rebellion against the government, and in consequence a number of leaders of the conspiracy were arrested.⁷⁰ Jan Becka describes the BFB as the heart of a mass movement in 1940 to 'abolish the 1935 constitution' which resulted in 'wholesale arrests of Burmese nationalists on the charge of sedition or other political offences'.⁷¹ Intelligence reports on the BFB conspiracy described plans for assassination and armed attacks on strategic centres of government.⁷² Ba Maw himself was arrested in December 1940 for reading out an anti-war proclamation, and he would remain under house arrest until the Japanese takeover.⁷³ Despite his incarceration, he remained a centre of intrigue, facilitating meetings between Japanese agents and Burman radicals. Responding to such moves, the DMI expressed concerns regarding the receptiveness of various nationalist groups to Japanese 'blandishments', naming the *Thakins*, the Sinyetha Wunthanus and the Myochit party as the most suspect.⁷⁴ Ba Maw led the Sinyetha Wunthanus while U Saw headed the Myochit Party. Ba Maw's Sinyetha Party was reported to be forming a 'secret

⁶⁸ Ba Maw, op. cit., 40.

⁶⁹ BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 6, Jun. 1940, 69 and Intelligence summary no. 10, Oct. 1940, 26

⁷⁰ BL IOR M/5/76 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 5, May 1941, 120.

⁷¹ Becka, op. cit., 66.

⁷² BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no.10, Oct. 1940, 26.

⁷³ Ba Maw, op. cit., 38.

⁷⁴ TNA WO 106/3724 Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence, and predecessors: Correspondence and Papers: Burma: Pre-Occupation Intelligence, Telegram from the Foreign Office to New York, 11 Nov. 1941, 13.

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organisation' for 'subversive activity in support of Ba Maw' in late 1941.⁷⁵ Evidently, conspiracies against the state were flowering.

The BDB had agents working in Ba Maw's circle and information about the Burma Freedom Bloc was provided through BDB sources.⁷⁶ Later accounts of the *Thakins'* conspiracies attest to the concern the colonial security services caused nationalists. A contemporary of Aung San, *Thakin* Bo Let Ya (see figure 6), described his fear that the intelligence services would intercept letters detailing their plans for revolutionary overthrow in 1941.⁷⁷ Bo Let Ya recalls that he had to be careful while working underground in Rangoon in 1940, as 'British intelligence was vigilant'.⁷⁸ Historian Louis Allen also records that in late December 1941 escaped Thakins who were conspiring against government with the Japanese were required to have a password to enter fellow conspirators' homes, as Japanese operatives were fearful of *Thakins* being British intelligence agents.⁷⁹ Resentment of informers was rife among nationalists and when members of the All Burma Student Union met in January 1941 they forbade the presence of police observers who were sure to take notes of the proceedings.⁸⁰ No prosecution for seditious speeches could be made as a result. Evidently the constant repression of students and other nationalists under the Defence of Burma rules caused mounting resentment. The BDB also recorded a mass meeting to protest against the detention of nationalists under Defence of Burma regulations in July 1941, under whose terms individuals were held without trial.⁸¹ Protesters urged that those accused be tried in a court of law and released if no evidence against them was found.⁸²

⁷⁵ BL IOR M/5/76 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 11, Nov. 1941, 30.

⁷⁶ BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 6, Jun. 1940, 69.

⁷⁷ Bo Let Ya in U Maung Maung ed. *Aung San of Burma* (The Hague: 1962), 43.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 55.

⁷⁹ Louis Allen, *Burma the Longest War 1941-1945* (Suffolk: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1984), 27.

⁸⁰ BL IOR M/5/76 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 2, Feb. 1941, 177.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, Intelligence summary no. 7, July, 1941, 94.

⁸² *Ibid*, Intelligence summary no. 8, Aug. 1941, 93.

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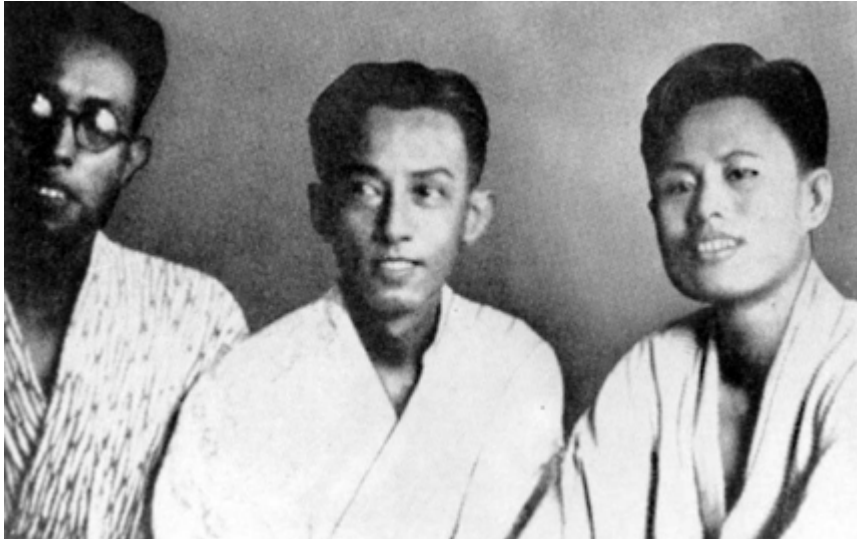


Figure 6. Thakins Bo Letya, Bo Setya and Aung San in Japan in 1941.

http://irrawaddymedia.com/articlefiles/9488-Aung_San.gif

Cracking down on widespread movements within civil society spurred these opponents of colonialism to seek other means of instigating political change. The authorities considered repression worthwhile: frequent arrests throughout 1940 'depleted' Thakin ranks and, according to the Rangoon Government's Home Secretary, left them at a 'low ebb'.⁸³ However, Hutchings observed that the police in Burma were still inadequate to the task of arresting *Thakin* leaders: the 'recommendations of the riot enquiry committee that police need to be much strengthened in numbers and equipment have never been acted upon' and 'some leaders will certainly escape arrest'.⁸⁴ The BDB noted that Aung San had slipped through the net already in June 1940.⁸⁵ Responding to these concerns, the Home Secretary assessed the status of the police in 1940 finding that 'last year most of the time the police have been taken up with political trouble so that

⁸³ BL IOR M/5/57 Burma Monthly Intelligence Summaries, Intelligence summary no. 6, 30 Jun. 1940, 71 and BL IOR M/5/6 Governor's reports, 29 Jan.-20 Dec. 1940; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, first half Jan. 1940-second half Dec. 1940, Fortnightly report for the first half of Nov. 1940, 23.

⁸⁴ BL IOSM Mss Eur F125/115 Hope (Victor Alexander John), 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow Linlithgow collection: papers of Victor Alexander John Hope, 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow (1887-1952) as Viceroy of India 1936-43 Letters and telegrams regarding Burma 1940-1943, Hutchings to Laithwaite, enclosed report on uprisings in Burma, 13 Aug. 1941, 301a.

⁸⁵ BL IOR M/5/57 Burma Monthly Intelligence Summaries, Intelligence summary no. 7, 31 Jul. 1940, 58.

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surveillance and preventative measures have suffered severely'.⁸⁶ The riot was the 'political trouble' referred to here, which had distracted the police from their efforts to monitor criminal activity. Not only the police, but all security forces were by this point chronically exposed, threatened by a Japanese attack, which was expected to 'throw up local leaders everywhere' as part of a 'widespread revolt which... would occupy part or all of our regular Defence forces'.⁸⁷

Increasingly preoccupied by this new wave of *Thakin* radicalism, the BDB paid great attention to signs of divisions within *Thakin* ranks. The Home Secretary reported to Booth-Gravelly in November 1940 that the *Thakins* were disorganised and cut off from student groups, the peasantry and industrial workers.⁸⁸ Their factionalism became more entrenched over subsequent months, Booth-Gravelly noting examples of violence between members of opposing factions.⁸⁹ However, repression and division did not eliminate the sentiments of those *Thakins* bent on the revolutionary overthrow of the government; quite the reverse: it hardened their resolve. 'Information from several sources' at the end of 1939 noted that 'Thakins still expect help (arms) from the Japanese'.⁹⁰ The BDB were aware that repression had fomented this new radicalisation, noting that the 'muzzling' of *Thakins* had driven their 'propaganda underground' in May 1941.⁹¹ This propaganda, intercepted by the BDB, advocated the increased gathering of military intelligence for use by *Tats* trained for military action.⁹²

Symptomatic of the retreat into more deeply clandestine activity was the formation of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in August 1939, something

⁸⁶ BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan 1939-10 Jan 1940, Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Dec. 1938 - second half Dec. 1939, Fortnightly report for the second half of Dec. 1939, 9.

⁸⁷ BL IOSM Mss Eur F125/115 Hope (Victor Alexander John), 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow Linlithgow collection: papers of Victor Alexander John Hope, 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow (1887-1952) as Viceroy of India 1936-43 Letters and telegrams regarding Burma 1940-1943, Hutchings to Laithwaite, enclosed report on uprisings in Burma, 13 Aug. 1941, 301b.

⁸⁸ BL IOR M/5/6 Governor's reports, 29 Jan. - 20 Dec. 1940; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, first half Jan. 1940 - second half Dec. 1940, Fortnightly report, for the first half of Nov. 1940, 23.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹² BL IOR M/5/76 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1941-Mar 1942 Intelligence summary no. 5, May 1941, 120.

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about which the BDB, for all its profound anti-Communism, knew little.⁹³ Literature produced by the Party was reportedly 'distributed through the usual communist subterranean methods' far from the reaches of the state's usual informants.⁹⁴ Brigadier Dorman-Smith, appointed Governor of Burma after Booth-Gravely in January 1941, only noted the Party's existence in February 1941, following which it was proscribed and its leaders arrested, a move which supposedly 'disorganised the party'.⁹⁵ Leading communists were arrested in December 1941 under Defence of Burma regulations, yet in June of that year, police officers had been alarmed to discover that a wing of Insein jail, near Rangoon, had been converted into a 'school for communism'.⁹⁶ In September 1941, the communist faction of the *Thakins* issued thousands of leaflets calling for Burmans to rise up against the government and form a people's republic, and tracts such as this were an alarming new feature of post 1938 politics in Burma.⁹⁷ Martin Smith's history of Burma considers the Bureau's ignorance of the covert formation of the CPB an obvious case of intelligence failure.⁹⁸ Certainly, the BDB received no information about the inaugural meeting of the CPB, but had long been alert to the influence of communism on nationalist movements and the *Thakins'* often communist-tinged declarations denouncing imperialism and capitalism.

As early as 1937 the BDB had observed the movement of Malayan Communist Party members into Burma and the negotiations taking place with Indian Communist Party members to set up a communist party of Burma in the country.⁹⁹ During the riots in 1938 the BDB further observed that 'British

⁹³ Robert H. Taylor, "The Burmese communist Movement and Its Indian Connection: Formation and Factionalism," *Journal of South East Asia Studies*, 14, no. 1 (1983) 95 – 108 at 99.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, Intelligence summary no. 5, May 1941, 117.

⁹⁵ BL IOR M/5/76 Governor's reports and private letters to Secretary of State, 25 Jan.-16 Oct. 1941; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, first half Jan. 1941-second half Feb. 1942, Fortnightly report for the first half of Feb. 1941, 117 and Fortnightly report for the second half of Oct. 1941, 27.

⁹⁶ BL IOR M/5/76 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 1, Jan. 1942, 32 and 106.

⁹⁷ BL IOR M/5/76 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 4, Apr. 1941, 69.

⁹⁸ Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Oxford: Zed Books, 1993), 56.

⁹⁹ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 1, Jan. 1938, 304.

communists organised with the Burmese to form a Marxist party'.¹⁰⁰ Dorman-Smith, described the Student's union as 'definitely communist' in September.¹⁰¹ The CPB was just one of a number of underground organisations that proclaimed its opposition to the colonial government and their dedication to its overthrow. In 1940, before they had discovered the existence of the CPB, the BDB considered that the *Thakins* were 'lessening' their 'relationship with communism' in light of its conflict with the values of Buddhism.¹⁰² The BDB considered earlier intelligence appreciations of the *Thakins* to have been too quick in calling them communist.¹⁰³ Seen in this light, the frequent use of the term 'communist' in earlier intelligence reports reflects the zealotry of the intelligence services which had been overly ready to apply the term to any nationalists thought to be agitating against the state.

Despite this, as the number of conspiracies proliferated and nationalist subversion increased, the BDB's reports of nationalist activities continued to attribute communist proclivities to them. Nationalist schemes were frequently described in terms of their ultimate objective to replace the colonial state with an alternative means of political organisation. There were numerous such activities, as, in January 1939, *Thakins* 'intensive propaganda among peasants' was reported to be developing associations among local cultivators along 'communistic lines'. Later that year the Burma Freedom Bloc was also described as moving 'further and further to the left'.¹⁰⁴ Aung San's manifesto for the *Thakins* was described as similarly 'communistic' in July 1939.¹⁰⁵ Booth-Gravely noted that the *Thakins* and the All Burma Students Union had the same aim, that of 'armed resistance and revolutionary change in the political and

¹⁰⁰ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 5, May 1938, 153.

¹⁰¹ BL IOR M/5/7 Governor's reports and private letters to Secretary of State, 25 Jan.-16 Oct. 1941; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, first half Jan. 1941-second half Feb. 1942, Fortnightly report for the second half of Sep. 1941, 41.

¹⁰² BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries Intelligence summary no. 9, Oct. 1940 34.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 2 Feb. 1939, 242 and BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan. 1939-10 Jan. 1940; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Dec. 1938 - second half Dec. 1939, Fortnightly report for the second half of Nov. 1939, 25.

¹⁰⁵ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 7, Jul. 1939, 132.

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economic system'.¹⁰⁶ Opponents were more often described in terms of their political strategies, and repression was increasingly justified in these terms. Again, analogy with Stoler's work sheds light on colonial motives for the targeting of nationalists. In Colonial Sumatra "extremist" agitators had to be "wiped out" and repression was a legitimate response'; likewise, in Burma, the state embarked on a project of wiping out extremist agitators they feared would provoke new types of revolutionary, communist-inspired disorder.¹⁰⁷

The BDB's description of *Thakins* and other nationalists in terms of their political inclinations and subversive ideas legitimised their repression under the Defence of Burma laws, sweeping legislative restrictions of which by mid-1941 the BDB was confident the *Thakins* were afraid.¹⁰⁸ Suppressing widespread protest by armed force had cowed the majority of protestors in 1938-39 and only the most dedicated revolutionaries continued their work. These hardcore nationalists were portrayed as violent and threatening; the BDB, for instance, described the 'sinister' interest of the *Thakins* in organised labour in May 1940, after a reliable source reported on the *Thakins* intention to agitate for a civil disobedience campaign among labourers.¹⁰⁹ The BDB reported that the *Bama Letyon Tats*, in other words, the *Thakins* tats, urged their members to 'cut anyone, even the governor, if ordered to do so' and after the arrests of prominent *Thakin* leaders in early 1941, the BDB warned that 'the Thakin heart is as black as ever' and they were likely to be a problem if released.¹¹⁰

Intelligence reports recorded a number of conspiracies hatched in these final years, all advocating violence against the colonial government. The BDB recorded that a *Thakin* 'who may or may not be reliable is stated to have said

¹⁰⁶ BL IOR M/5/6 Governor's reports, 29 Jan. – 20 Dec. 1940; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, first half Jan. 1940 - second half Dec. 1940, Fortnightly report for the second half of Dec. 1941, 3.

¹⁰⁷ Ann Stoler, "Perceptions of Protest: Defining the Dangerous in Colonial Sumatra," *American Ethnologist*, 12, no. 4 (1985): 642-658 at 652.

¹⁰⁸ BL IOR M/5/58, Burma monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 4, 30 Apr. 1941, 88.

¹⁰⁹ BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 5, May 1940, 76.

¹¹⁰ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 12, Dec. 1939, 11 and BL IOR M/5/58 Burma Monthly Intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 2, Feb. 1941, 89.

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that should the events of 1938-39 be repeated the party would try to obtain control of the Thanmani Tats'.¹¹¹ Other, less prominent groups similarly advocated violent overthrow of the government. The All Burma Students Union exhorted its members to pursue 'fifth column activities' in January 1940 and the colourfully named Red Dragon Book Club called for their members to 'follow the methods of Irish republicans in assassinating the governor'.¹¹² But it was the *Thakins* who continued to be the most active and, at a meeting in Rangoon in October 1939, the BDB claimed that *Thakin* leaders, 'urged violence à la Ireland Home Rule', advocating 'terrorism and assassination' and alerting the audience to the presence of CID officers.¹¹³ Their hostility to CID officers likely stemmed from the fact that CID personnel would report on their utterances, leading to further censorship and repression. This was not the first time CID reporters had been targeted by protestors - in January 1939 the BDB recorded that reporters at workers' rallies had been 'forbidden to return' due to the 'violent and dangerous' nature of the protests.¹¹⁴ Continuing rural impoverishment was also considered to contribute to the *Thakins'* propensity towards violence. The BDB, for instance, received a report of villagers planning to 'rise with the *Thakins*, armed with home-made guns purchased from the Kachins after 'agrarian agitation and demands for rent reduction were not met'.¹¹⁵ There was even another pretender to the Burmese throne in Shwebo in May 1939, echoing the Saya San rebellion, and the BDB considered the 'prompt action by Shwebo police' to have 'prevented the activities of the pretender turning into anything more serious'.¹¹⁶

U Saw's *Myochit* Party was not far behind the *Thakins* in subversive plotting and the security services followed its activities assiduously. There was no fear of the *Thakins* and *Myochit* Party uniting however, as they were bitterly opposed to one another and the BDB recorded instances of violence between the two

¹¹¹ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 11, Nov. 1939, 32.

¹¹² BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 11, Nov. 1940, 15 and BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 8 Aug. 1939, 113.

¹¹³ Ibid, Intelligence summary no. 10, Oct. 1939, 60.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, Intelligence summary no. 1, Jan. 1939, 323.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, Intelligence summary no. 9, Sep. 1939, 88.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, Intelligence summary no. 5, May 1939, 186.

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factions long before U Saw was elected premier. In December 1939 U Saw urged his followers to 'wipe the Thakins out' and the BDB recorded instances of their *Tats* fighting one another.¹¹⁷ By the beginning of 1941, when U Saw was premier of the government in Burma, he was allegedly organising his *Tats* for rebellion against the government.¹¹⁸ Even when he belonged to colonial institutions he mobilised his forces for their overthrow. The *Galon Tats* had increased in number since their formation in 1938, and Stewart noted that U Saw had been planning to make himself dictator of Burma since then.¹¹⁹ In July 1938, Stewart considered that U Saw's 'real aim in raising the Galon Tats organisations is to claim the part of Minister of Defence when the time comes' i.e. on Japan's invasion.¹²⁰ The BDB observed that U Saw hoped to expand his *Galon Tats* as much as possible in 1940, and, 'in due course he will recommend to governor that these be recognised and then use them by rising in mutiny'.¹²¹ Stewart was unable to say whether these associations would be dangerous, as the 'extent of danger' depended on 'varied and unknown factors'.¹²² Various groups were planning for violent revolution independently of one another, creating confusion in the prediction of likely outcomes. The groups may have shared a common purpose, the overthrow of colonial government, but there was no organisational unity among them.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, Intelligence summary no. 12 Dec. 1939, 10 and Intelligence summary no. 6 Jun. 160.

¹¹⁸ BL IOR M/5/76 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1942 Intelligence summary no. 5, May 1941, 133.

¹¹⁹ BL IOR M/5/48 Burmese political activity, and political parties and associations Burma Monthly intelligence summary no. 6, 01 Jul. 1938, 11.

¹²⁰ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 8, Aug. 1938, 110.

¹²¹ BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1940 Intelligence summary no. 5, May 1940, 71.

¹²² BL IOR M/5/76 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 5, May 1941, 133.



Figure 7. U Saw, nationalist and Premier of Burma, 1940-1941.

http://www.executedtoday.com/images/U_Saw.jpg

The nationalist conspirators may have sought instigate a rebellion and announced as much, but these threats were not realised. The Kodaw Hmaing faction of the *Thakins* instructed all its sub-associations to 'launch a vigorous anti-constitution and anti-ministry drive', calling for 'men to lay down their lives' in August 1939.¹²³ This did not transpire. The reasons are not hard to find. The *Thakins* were divided, bitterly factionalised and with a number of their most influential members in prison. Furthermore, their popularity had waned and they were unable to remobilise mass support as they had done in the 'year of revolution'. Booth-Gravelly reported in May 1940 that at the fifth annual conference of the central *Dobama Asi Ayon* held at Tharawaddy members were 'authorising the executive committee to prepare for local disobedience [but] could not until unity and discipline have been attained among the masses': without this unity, plans for rebellion were to no avail.¹²⁴ As we have seen, the BDB was attuned to any signs of division between the *Thakins*, peasants and workers, and in June 1939 bureau staff noted happily that the 'passing of the tenancy and land alienation acts has robbed the Thakins of a principle plank in

¹²³ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 8 Aug. 1939, 107.

¹²⁴ BL IOR M/5/6 Governor's reports, 29 Jan. – 20 Dec. 1940; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, first half Jan. 1940 - second half Dec. 1940, Fortnightly report for the first half of Jun. 1940, 164.

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their anti-government platform'.¹²⁵ In October of the following year the BDB recorded that government timber depot strikers' 'faith in *Thakins* was lost'.¹²⁶

In June 1939, in response to the 1938 rioting, a Commissioner was appointed to 'investigate whether Indians displace Burmans and take their jobs'. This was a measure that the BDB considered was 'well received' because it prevented nationalist groups from exploiting these grievances within their anti-colonialist agenda.¹²⁷ The BDB also reported in mid-1940 that the 'cultivators were keen to get on with ensuring next season's food supply' which was 'more important than attending to the *Thakins*' ideology'.¹²⁸ The imbrications of interests between the *Thakins*, the peasantry and the labouring classes of 1938 had ended, and with it the threat of organised rebellion subsided.

However, as we have seen, this forced the conspirators to turn instead to Japanese aid to achieve the violent overthrow of the government. This returns us to the case of U Saw who still considered himself the centre of all Japanese underground activity in Burma in 1939, remarking to a British counsellor at a social function that any money coming from Japan to foster agitation in Burma 'would come through me' before 'suddenly checking himself, added "I mean I would hear about it"'.¹²⁹ Despite his boasting, other nationalists were seeking out Japanese assistance by then. Maung Lun Pe, the BDB undercover agent involved in the arms conspiracy had visited an arms factory disguised as a mine along the Thai-Burma border in mid-1940. This mine was to be used as a 'point of preparation for the invasion of Burma from Thailand' by the Japanese.¹³⁰ Maung Lun Pe also met *Thakins* and other Burman nationalists affiliated to Ba

¹²⁵ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 6, Jun. 1939, 154.

¹²⁶ BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 11, Nov. 1940, 17.

¹²⁷ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 7, Jul. 1939, 156 and 154.

¹²⁸ BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 6, Jun. 1940, 61.

¹²⁹ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 7, Jul. 1939, 159.

¹³⁰ BL IOR M/5/79 Information relating to 'Bangkok Conspiracy' to smuggle arms into Burma from Thailand with alleged view to start rebellion; involvement of Japanese; frontier routes, Burma Office, Whitehall, London, 11 Sep. 1940, 4.

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Maw.¹³¹ In this atmosphere of increasing insecurity the government took still more steps to censor and detain those nationalists still at large.

By December 1941, when the Japanese invasion began, leaders of all the largest nationalist groups were in prison, including Ba Maw, U Saw, prominent *Thakin* leaders, and leading Communists. The pre-war months had been fraught with internal political insecurity, and the mood was captured by Dorman-Smith who wrote to Monteath in October, commenting that 'pongyis and laymen from various parts of the country' were 'stirring up communal trouble and anti-government and anti-British feeling' and 'armed police patrols were out in Rangoon as a precaution'.¹³² Ill feeling towards the arrests of leading *Thakins* was not 'likely to be translated into action' in Dorman-Smith's view, but, characteristically, he stated that he was 'keeping in close touch with the Defence Bureau'.¹³³ Dorman-Smith regarded internal turmoil as 'all part and parcel of a conspiracy to overthrow the existing ministry by creating a situation so serious that ministers will not be able to control it'.¹³⁴

Labour problems also persisted until the occupation, making it 'difficult to mobilise for war purposes', and sharpening colonial antipathy towards the *Thakins*, deemed the root of these industrial troubles.¹³⁵ Dorman-Smith received information from the ex-President of Tavoy, one of the first places the Japanese invaded in January 1942, indicating that a fifth column of *Thakins* had 'led the Japanese forces around ours'.¹³⁶ Dorman-Smith considered this an exaggeration, but used the information to 'strengthen his hand against the *Thakins*'.¹³⁷ The *Thakins* were thus repressed to the very end. In December 1941, however, they were not attempting to incite rebellion alone but were an auxiliary force for a successful Japanese invasion. On the invasion the *Thakins*

¹³¹ Ibid, note by Monteath, 11 Sep. 1940, 30.

¹³² BL IOR M/3/896 Subversive and espionage activities in Burma: Arrests and detainments under Defence of Burma Rules Governor of Burma to Secretary of State for Burma, 14 Oct. 1941, 24.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ BL IOSM Mss Eur E215/1 Papers of Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, Governor of Burma 1941-46, Copies of daily situation reports to Leo Amery (1873-1955), Secretary of State for Burma, 1940-1945, 27 Jan. 1942, 49.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 93.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

that assisted the Japanese invasion were not trying to provoke rebellion, but instead assisted the Japanese in placating the local population. In January 1942, reports from Tavoy stated that *Thakins* were disseminating pro-Japanese propaganda and setting up an administration in the district; they were also trying to persuade the population of the Japanese occupation's legitimacy.¹³⁸

In these last stages, the BDB were at least better attuned to the conspiratorial nature of the threats the colonial authorities faced. They had guessed the whereabouts of Aung San, who was most active in seeking out Japanese support, and had reasonably accurate information on the *Thakins* who were involved in conspiracies with the Japanese, even if they did not have exact details of the mechanics of the collaboration between them, or the Japanese who were involved.¹³⁹ The BDB's failure was located in its inability to understand which of the rising nationalist conspiracies posed the greatest threat to government and in what form. There was an ambiguity in the threat indicators to hand, a frequent feature of intelligence failures as Steve Chan observes.¹⁴⁰ A great number of student, nationalist, or other radical groups advocated violence against the government. However, in immediate pre-invasion Burma, conspirators were a threat, not because of their influence among subaltern groups, but because of their ability to organise and draw upon external sources of support from the Japanese. The BDB's inability to make this distinction was its failing.

Alienated from society: the failure of the administration and the armed forces to appeal to Burmans

The BDB took a great interest in the functioning of parliament after separation, focusing particularly on the stability of the Burman premier's cabinet and the

¹³⁸ BL IOR M/3/896 Subversive and espionage activities in Burma: Arrests and detainments under Defence of Burma Rules, Governor of Burma to Secretary of State for Burma, 30 Jan. 1942, 9.

¹³⁹ TNA FO 371/27774 [F8461/129] Political Departments: General Correspondence from 1906 – 1966: POLITICAL: FAR EASTERN: General: Japanese Activities and Singapore Conference Secret Note By the BDB 'Japanese Conspiracy with Thailand against Burma', Feb. 1941.

¹⁴⁰ Steve Chan "The intelligence of stupidity: Understanding failures in Strategic Warning," *The American Political Science Review*, 73, no. 1 (1979): 171-180 at 172.

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population's receptiveness to the rule of government. Acts of non-cooperation, popular protests, riots, civil disobedience and assassination attempts against the administration were all what might be termed 'counter-hegemonic' acts, which rejected the colonial state.¹⁴¹ Ba Maw, supposedly a socialist with the interests of the poor at heart, had ended his incumbency in disgrace. He was widely loathed and faced several assassination attempts plus a highly effective protest campaign that sought to drive him out of office.¹⁴² Colonial efforts to win the consent of the people through the formation of a more representative parliament had failed. After Ba Maw, the colonial authorities were more prepared to resort to forceful measures to bring the population and dissenters into line; police were better armed and frequently used teargas to suppress protestors.¹⁴³ Once forceful measures had been utilised and some measure of control restored, the BDB was once again required to aid the government to maintain stability following the year of revolution by employing surveillance and intelligence to help prevent the outbreak of major disorders. Monitoring developments in parliament was one part of these activities and news from parliament featured prominently in monthly BDB intelligence reports.

After the fall of Ba Maw, the BDB recommended that U Pu, a member of the United Party, a parliamentary political party, be persuaded to head the new ministry due to his 'financial difficulties'.¹⁴⁴ In this instance, the BDB exploited intelligence to ensure that a pliable candidate was placed in the administration and U Pu became premier in early 1939. Military Intelligence reviews of Burma's internal political scene suggested that U Pu's government was 'not likely to remain in power for long'.¹⁴⁵ The new premier was deeply unpopular and faced repeated votes of no confidence in parliament where U Saw and his followers worked to undermine him.¹⁴⁶ His ministry was not notable for anything other

¹⁴¹ Guha, *Dominance without hegemony*, 128.

¹⁴² BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 1, Jan. 1939, 309.

¹⁴³ BL IOR M/3/619 Use of Tear Gas against rioters in Rangoon, 13 Jun. 1939, 3.

¹⁴⁴ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1939 Intelligence summary no. 1 January 311.

¹⁴⁵ TNA WO 106/3704A Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence, and predecessors, Correspondence and papers: War of 1939-45 Burma: Political Intelligence, MI2 (a), 24 Mar. 1939, 3.

¹⁴⁶ BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries Intelligence summary no. 8, Aug. 1940, 37.

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than the increasing repression the *Thakins*; typical in this regard, *Thakins* protesting against government were faced with a baton charge at the end of 1939.¹⁴⁷ U Pu was a conformist who sought to suppress the activities of 'political dissidents' during his incumbency.¹⁴⁸ Nonetheless, he retained power until September 1940 when a vote of no confidence finally drove him from office. While his successor, U Saw, receives more attention in historical literature, the heightened repression of political dissidents typical of U Saw's time in office had already begun under U Pu.

U Saw had accepted a position in U Pu's ministry in April 1939, which made him a 'hypocrite' in the eyes of many.¹⁴⁹ Having spent so much time protesting against Ba Maw's administration and calling for the overthrow of the colonial state, he proved content to collaborate with colonial rule when he saw an opportunity to increase his own power. Taylor's review of U Saw's rule considers that the 'assumption that political representatives of pre war Burma were puppets is erroneous'.¹⁵⁰ He contends that politicians had significant freedom of action, and cites U Saw in particular. Certainly, U Saw, after successfully conspiring to bring U Pu down, did not serve as a puppet of the British. And he used his time in power to direct a campaign of suppression against his nationalist opponents, especially the *Thakins*. However, U Saw still evidently conspired to foment a rebellion against the government using his expanded *Galon* army, at least if intelligence reports are to be believed, rather than upholding the principles of the parliamentary constitution.¹⁵¹ As this indicates, throughout his term in office U Saw was subject to major surveillance operations. The Burma Office, the Burma Secretariat and the Foreign Office compiled an extensive dossier on U Saw during the course of 1941 that was

¹⁴⁷ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 12, Dec. 1939, 3.

¹⁴⁸ BL IOSM Mss Eur D1080/4 Papers of Maurice Alfred Maybury, Burma Civil Service 1938-48, including diaries as sub-divisional officer Kawkareik 1940-42 An essay: "The Burma Road and the Burma-Yunann railway" c. 1942, 23.

¹⁴⁹ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 3, Mar. 1939, 237.

¹⁵⁰ Robert H. Taylor, "Politics in Late Colonial Burma: The Case of U Saw," 161.

¹⁵¹ BL IOR M/5/76 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 5, 31 May 1941, 133.

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largely based on reports from the BDB.¹⁵² According to this report, U Saw considered the British to be on their way out of Burma, and the BDB observed that he was preparing his *Galon Tats* to establish a republic in the country under Japanese supervision in June 1941.¹⁵³

Cady argues that U Saw 'abandoned a large part of his former nationalism' on accepting office.¹⁵⁴ However, the major surveillance operations directed against him suggest otherwise; he did not renounce nationalism on accepting office, far from it. After all, only a few months prior to accepting a position in U Pu's administration, his *Galon Tats* had marched in uniform at a procession of over 10,000 protestors which was dispersed by the Burma rifles.¹⁵⁵ However, his acceptance of office did discredit him with a number of nationalists and, like Ba Maw, he faced a number of assassination attempts.¹⁵⁶ The Foreign Office's embassy in Rangoon also put together a file on his activities based on local BDB reports, in which they referred to informers working for the CID who reported on U Saw, and secret agents in Upper Burma who reported on U Saw's efforts to form *Myochit* Associations throughout the country.¹⁵⁷ On the strength of intelligence received, a special officer from the CID was sent to upper Burma to determine the truth behind U Saw's alleged activities.¹⁵⁸ Meanwhile, until November 1941 prominent *Myochit* Party members were kept under surveillance because of their pro-Japanese sympathies and activities.¹⁵⁹ Despite this, U Saw used his powers as premier to enhance the *Myochit* Party's version of Burman nationalism and eliminate competing views. The widespread suppression of the *Thakins* under U Saw in 1940-42 marked an escalation of the scuffles between the *Galon Tats* and the *Thakin tats* that had been so

¹⁵² TNA FO 643/56/1 Burma Office, Burma Secretariat, and Foreign Office, Embassy, Rangoon, Burma: General Correspondence, 1941-1946, Secret Special Report on a private meeting held by the Japan-Burma Association, 12 Sep. 1940, 1.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 2.

¹⁵⁴ John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1965), 421.

¹⁵⁵ BL IOR M/5/5 Governor's reports, 6 Jan 1939-10 Jan 1940; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, second half Dec 1938 - second half Dec 1939, Confidential report by Cochrane for Apr. 1939, 337.

¹⁵⁶ BL IOR M/5/6 Governor's reports, 29 Jan-20 Dec 1940; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, first half Jan 1940-second half Dec-1940, Fortnightly letter for the second half of Nov. 1940, 15.

¹⁵⁷ TNA FO 643/56/1 Burma Office, Burma Secretariat, and Foreign Office, Embassy, Rangoon, Burma: General Correspondence, 1941-1946, Secret Special Report on a private meeting held by the Japan-Burma Association, 12 Sep. 1940, 2.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

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frequent before U Saw's premiership.¹⁶⁰ Far from rejecting nationalism, U Saw agitated for Burma's independence in new, more dangerous ways while he was premier.

Booth-Gravelly's announcement of dominion status for Burma at the end of 1939 had alienated Burman nationalist opinion, as it was 'incompatible with internal desire' for complete independence.¹⁶¹ An information officer with the India Office, Captain Edwin Thomas Cook observed that U Saw was 'determined on freedom [he] will stop at nothing'.¹⁶² Refusal to grant full independence rendered the colonial authority even less legitimate in the eyes of most Burmans. U Saw tried to exploit this, working to undermine the colonial government with a view to securing a powerful position on the collapse of the British Empire in Burma. He finally contacted the Japanese in January 1942 while in Lisbon, having travelled to the UK to press Churchill on Burma's independence.¹⁶³

The BDB had inconsistent information regarding U Saw's complicity with the Japanese. At the inception of his premiership the BDB observed that he was 'trying to infiltrate pro-Japanese members into parliament'.¹⁶⁴ However, the BDB's report on Japanese activities in Burma in 1939 had noted that U Saw was felt to have 'failed' the Japanese, who were casting around for other Burman nationalists to aid them.¹⁶⁵ Dorman-Smith, and the Foreign Office considered U Saw's links to the Japanese to have been severed even at the end of 1941, a couple of months before the Japanese invasion. A Foreign Office report noted that the Japanese considered U Saw a 'renegade who may be

¹⁶⁰ see Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*, 181, as well as BDB reports for those years and BL IOR M/5/56 Burma Monthly Intelligence Summaries, Intelligence summary no. 9, Sep. 1939, 124.

¹⁶¹ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 1, Jan. 1939, 12.

¹⁶² BL IOSM Mss Eur E215/37 Correspondence and telegrams about events in Burma between Captain Edwin Thomas Cook, Alec Houghton Joyce (b 1894) Information Officer, India Office and Ralph Deakin (1888-1952), Foreign Editor, *The Times*, Oct. 1941.

¹⁶³ TNA FO 371/31776 Political Departments: General Correspondence from 1906-1966 Activities of U Saw, Prime Minister of Burma, telegram from the Commander in Chief of the Middle East to the War Office, 20 Jan. 42, 3.

¹⁶⁴ BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries Intelligence summary no. 12, Dec. 1940, 2.

¹⁶⁵ BL IOR M/5/47 Japanese Activities in Burma, Burma Defence Bureau intelligence summary no. 9, Sep. 1939, 69.

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done away with' and even on his detention remarked that U Saw had 'greatly assisted the government in suppressing Japanese and pro-Japanese groups in Burma'.¹⁶⁶ The BDB was probably referring here to U Saw's orders for the arrest of U Wizaya in upper Burma, a prominent nationalist who had delivered a speech attacking his premiership.¹⁶⁷ U Wizaya was a key intermediary in the Japanese arms smuggling conspiracy, and had frequently met with the BDB agent who had infiltrated himself into the conspirators' circle.

Nevertheless, U Saw was ultimately detained on the basis of 'conclusive' information regarding his contact with the Japanese in January 1942 that was 'unproducible for reasons of paramount importance'.¹⁶⁸ The Foreign Office did not want to endanger its sources of intelligence on U Saw, many of which derived from the BDB.¹⁶⁹

However, earlier reports that U Saw was mobilising his forces for rebellion were overstated. For the remaining four months of British colonial rule following U Saw's arrest and internment, a more compliant Burman, Sir Paw Tun, held office as prime minister. By the time the Japanese invaded Rangoon and forced the evacuation of the government and the BDB to Maymyo in April 1942, U Saw's *Galon Tats* had become so weakened after his arrest that, according to final in situ BDB reports, they simply 'melted away'.¹⁷⁰ U Saw may have attempted to contact the Japanese, but he was not actively facilitating their invasion; by contrast, the *Thakins*, U Saw's mortal enemies were doing that. In this connection, the BDB failed to make the distinction between U Saw's conspiracies and the *Thakins* who were allied to Ba Maw. BDB reports on U

¹⁶⁶ TNA FO 643/56/1 Burma Office, Burma Secretariat, and Foreign Office, Embassy, Rangoon, Burma: General Correspondence, 1941-1946, Secret Special Report on a private meeting held by the Japan-Burma Association, 12 Sep. 1940, 6 and TNA FO 371/31776 Political Departments: General Correspondence from 1906-1966 Activities of U Saw, Prime Minister of Burma, telegram from the Commander in Chief of the Middle East to the War Office, 20 Jan. 42, 3.

¹⁶⁷ TNA FO 643/56/1 Burma Office, Burma Secretariat, and Foreign Office, Embassy, Rangoon, Burma: General Correspondence, 1941-1946, Secret Special Report on a private meeting held by the Japan-Burma Association, 12 Sep. 1940, 2.

¹⁶⁸ Records of the Prime Minister's Office (PREM) 4/50/2 Telegram from the Foreign Office to Cairo, 27 Jan. 1942, 129.

¹⁶⁹ See FO 643/56/1 Burma Office, Burma Secretariat, and Foreign Office, Embassy, Rangoon, Burma: General Correspondence, 1941-1946.

¹⁷⁰ BL IOR M/5/76 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 3, Apr. 1942, 4.

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Saw's cooperation with Ba Maw, from sources they considered 'reliable', suggested that U Saw would aid a Japanese invasion. But this intelligence proved to be mistaken according to Dorman-Smith, who remarked that 'in fact, U Saw has encouraged me to keep Ba Maw where he is'.¹⁷¹ U Saw made a number of anti-government statements and expressed a desire for freedom from colonialism but his plans were not as concrete or advanced as those of *Thakin* conspirators.

While insecurity was at its peak, the BDB still retained its position as the first line of defence against internal sedition, whereas the army was neglected and was still judged inadequate to the task of maintaining internal security. As observed, Taylor argues that the colonial army alienated the population and 'the unwillingness of the army to recruit men from Burma proper was interpreted by Burmese nationalists as part of the "divide and rule" strategy of the imperialists'.¹⁷² The army was indeed popularly perceived as an 'occupation' force rather than an organisation dedicated to 'national defence', a fact that Dr Thein Maung, a member of the House of Representatives, highlighted in a highly critical report in February 1940.¹⁷³ Until this perception of the army was changed, Maung considered, Burmans would not be willing to join it. The BDB also conceded that the *Thakins'* long-running campaign since late 1938 to persuade Burmans not to join the army had been highly effective. The 'anti-recruitment drive of the Thakins' took effect in spite of press demands for volunteers in 1939.¹⁷⁴ For their part, the colonial forces were still mistrustful of the Burmese. When considering an increase in Military Police garrisons in late 1940, senior Burma Army officers recorded their concerns that an 'excessive Burmanisation' would lead to a 'deterioration' in the standard of their forces.¹⁷⁵ It

¹⁷¹ Ibid, Intelligence summary no. 6, Jun. 1942, 105 and BL IOR M/5/7 Governor's reports and private letters to Secretary of State, 25 Jan. 16 Oct. 1941; Home Secretary's fortnightly reports, first half Jan. 1941-second half Feb. 1942, letter from the Governor, 10 Jul. 1941, 69.

¹⁷² Taylor, "Colonial Forces in British Burma," 198.

¹⁷³ BL IOR M/3/688 Defence: organization and conditions of service of Burma Volunteer Forces: Burma Auxiliary Force, Burma Territorial Force, Shan States Territorial Force, 26 Feb. 1940, 1.

¹⁷⁴ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 11, Nov. 1939, 155.

¹⁷⁵ BL IOR M/3/750 Civil and Military Police in Burma; proposed arrangements in event of separation from Burma from India; proposed defence force; transfer of personnel from Burma Frontier Force to Burma Military Police 19 Oct. 1939 - 3 Apr. 1941, 7.

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seems, then, that the army and other security forces alienated Burmans, often quite deliberately.

However, even at the peak of its presence in Burma in the build-up to the war, the army was not a powerful instrument of control that could be relied on to maintain order. Even the Commander in Chief of the Army, in an internal security review submitted in October 1941, merely two months before Japan's declaration of war, considered that in the event of widespread disorder an expanded police force was needed rather than a greater military presence.¹⁷⁶ The Commander in Chief felt that the army could not deal with another rebellion should a Japanese invasion occur more or less simultaneously.¹⁷⁷ The army 'did not even have the capacity to deal with a limited outbreak of 1938'.¹⁷⁸ The Commander in Chief's contention that another rebellion was in the offing is not surprising given the army's continued reliance on the BDB for all its intelligence requirements. The BDB provided the army with its information, framing the army's perception of the population.

Up until the final days of evacuation from Rangoon, Burma's army remained too weak to meet the tasks required of it, despite its increases in manpower. The defence of Burma was removed from the responsibility of the Commander in Chief in the Far East to that of the Commander in Chief in India in December 1941, once the Joint Intelligence Committee's (a part of the Cabinet Office that from 1936 had been responsible for directing imperial intelligence organisations) review of Burma's defence was complete.¹⁷⁹ Dorman-Smith pressed London for more military support in December 1941, saying that Burma's defence was 'our Achilles heel' given its crucial position vis-à-vis Malaya/Singapore.¹⁸⁰ Chiang-Kai-Shek's offer of Chinese troops to help defend against the Japanese was rejected as 'politically unacceptable' as it would have

¹⁷⁶ BL IOR M/3/896 Subversive and espionage activities in Burma: Arrests and detainments under Defence of Burma Rules, Governor of Burma to the Secretary of State for Burma, 7 Oct. 1941, 28.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ TNA CAB 121/680 Special Secret Information Centre: Files: Defence of Burma, Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 12 Dec. 1941, 3.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 5.

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further alienated Burman opinion.¹⁸¹ On the invasion of the Japanese, Governor Dorman-Smith observed with telling understatement that the army in Burma was 'not as experienced in jungle warfare as are the enemy'.¹⁸²

As Douglas Ford's review of British intelligence on Japan before the war points out, 'poor intelligence alone was not the primary cause for Britain's weak position in the Far East'. A number of other obstacles impeded an adequate British defence.¹⁸³ Burma's defences were weak and the country was chronically isolated and exposed. The army was neither capable of external defence nor of maintaining internal security. Indeed, the dominant tactic employed to suppress nationalist activity during the final years before the Japanese occupation was that of arresting nationalists under the Defence of Burma regulations, something that fell to the police.

BDB intelligence on Japanese covert operations in Burma 1939-1942

As we saw in chapter three, the BDB had been alerted to Japanese activity in Burma since 1934, long before war with Europe broke out. Part of the BDB's original remit was to gather intelligence on 'Pan-Asiatic Japanese movements directed to overthrow or embarrass the government of Burma' (see Appendix A).¹⁸⁴ It was with this relatively lengthy experience behind them that in January 1941 the BDB compiled a report on Japanese activities in Burma, remarking that the tariffs and quotas in western colonies and the unequal naval treaty had provoked Japanese Imperial aggression.¹⁸⁵ The Japanese Empire had a profound cultural and political influence within Burma, undermining the stability of the state. Japanese agents, working from the embassy in Rangoon, utilised

¹⁸¹ TNA FO 371/28119 Political Departments: General Correspondence from 1906-1966: Burma Thai frontier, Sep. 1941, 12.

¹⁸² BL IOSM Mss Eur E215/1 Papers of Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, Governor of Burma 1941-46, Copies of daily situation reports to Leo Amery (1873-1955), Secretary of State for Burma, 1940-1945, 27 Jan. 1942, 88.

¹⁸³ Douglas Ford, "Planning for an Unpredictable War: British Intelligence Assessments and the war against Japan, 37-45," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 27, no. 1, (2004): 136 - 167 at 137.

¹⁸⁴ BL IOR M/1/93 - Safeguards for control of Special Branch (Criminal Investigations Department) and Intelligence Under Secretary of State for Burma D. T. Monteath to Chief Secretary to Governor of Burma H. H. Craw, 18 Feb. 1937, 4.

¹⁸⁵ BL IOR M/5/47 Japanese Activities in Burma, Burma Defence Bureau intelligence summary no. 12, Dec. 1940, 12.

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their common ethnicity and religious beliefs to influence Burman nationalism. This gave them a distinct advantage in manipulating opinion in Burma for intelligence and covert operations. And as we have seen in chapter four, the building of the Burma-Yunnan Road saw Japanese covert activity heighten and become more decisive. The headquarters for the 'Japanese intelligence system for Indo China, the South Pacific and Burma [was] moved from Singapore to Bangkok' in October 1939, making Japan an increasingly pressing concern for the BDB.¹⁸⁶

In 1942, Ba Maw, as head of government under the Japanese occupation, reviewed intelligence reports written by the BDB that had been seized after the Japanese occupation. He observed that the BDB had been well informed of the activities of Japanese diplomats in Burma who were working to undermine the British, but noted that the Bureau had failed to detect the underground activities of Japanese agents in Burma, which operated beneath the Bureau's radar.¹⁸⁷ The government was not helped by the lack of public support in Burma for the British in the war. Nicholas Tarling states that 'the British had to win support [within Burma] as their position deteriorated'.¹⁸⁸ They failed to do so and continued to alienate the population through their failure to acknowledge the depth of Burman political grievances. The Foreign Office observed that Burmese nationalist cooperation could not be taken for granted after U Saw's failure to obtain dominion status.¹⁸⁹

Won Z. Yoon's history of the *Minami Kikan*, led by Colonel Keiji Suzuki, the covert organisation which trained Aung San and his comrades in guerrilla tactics for the war against the British, states that the plans of the Japanese for Burma fluctuated, with the final decision to use covert nationalist cells to undermine the British taken quite late, in January 1942.¹⁹⁰ Original plans to aid

¹⁸⁶ BL IOR M/5/74 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 11, Nov. 1939, 40.

¹⁸⁷ Ba Maw, op. cit., 111.

¹⁸⁸ Nicholas Tarling, *Britain, SouthEast Asia and the Onset of the Pacific War* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 189.

¹⁸⁹ TNA FO 371/27844 Political Departments General Correspondence from 1906-1966, Foreign Research and Press Service, Balliol College Oxford, 4 Nov. 1941, 12.

¹⁹⁰ Won Z. Yoon. *Japan's Scheme for the Liberation of Burma: The Role of the Minami Kikan and the '30 Comrades'* (Athens Ohio: University Center for International Studies, 1973), 41.

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an uprising in July 1941 were cancelled by the Japanese government, as they feared that it would interfere with their plans to launch surprise attacks on the United States and its allies.¹⁹¹ However, as Yoon notes, Colonel Suzuki, who operated a practice of 'rule from below', eventually led the *Minami Kikan* with Tojo's approval in January 1942.¹⁹² The BDB had no intelligence about his activities, or the existence of the *Minami Kikan*, although they had quite accurate intelligence on the activities of Burman nationalists belonging to the *Minami Kikan*. They noted in February 1941 that Aung San, who had a prominent position in the *Minami Kikan*, was missing, and was believed to be working with the Japanese.¹⁹³ Suzuki's tactics of underground organisation coincided with the rush into more conspiratorial activity by radicalised nationalists in Burma in response to the repression meted out by the colonial government post-1938. Following the crackdowns on nationalist activists, as Jan Becka observes, nationalists 'could only continue in conditions of conspiracy and the trend to co-operate with the Japanese increased'.¹⁹⁴ The assertions of the BDB that arresting leading nationalists had pacified discontent thus proved inaccurate as these tactics had forced nationalists to seek other avenues of protest, assisted by the Japanese.

Japan's official response to the completion of the Burma-Yunnan road was to press the British to close it, which Churchill did so for three months in early 1940.¹⁹⁵ This angered the US administration, which had provided loans to support the road's construction and was eager to see it used more effectively to support Chiang Kai Shek.¹⁹⁶ After the road had been reopened, the Foreign Office recorded that a 'usually well informed' British Agent working in Lashio, Shan States, had met with US military and government representatives and

¹⁹¹ U Maung Maung, *Burmese Nationalist Movements 1940-1948* (Edinburgh: Kiscdale publishers, 1989), 29.

¹⁹² *Ibid*, 36.

¹⁹³ TNA FO 371/27774 [F8461/129] Political Departments: General Correspondence from 1906 – 1966: POLITICAL: FAR EASTERN: General: Japanese Activities and Singapore Conference Secret Note By the BDB 'Japanese Conspiracy with Thailand against Burma', Feb. 1941.

¹⁹⁴ Becka, *op. cit.*, 66.

¹⁹⁵ Tarling, *op. cit.*, 166.

¹⁹⁶ TNA FO 371/23477 Political: Far Eastern: China Burma-Yunnan Road 1939, Extract from *The Times*, 14 Jan. 1939, 281.

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discussed the road.¹⁹⁷ The Americans commented to the agent that they hoped to take over the Kunming to Chungking stretch of the road to secure its operation.¹⁹⁸ Clearly the road's strategic traffic was becoming a prominent factor in conflict in the Far East, and Burma's strategic significance correspondingly increased in importance after 1939 as the War Cabinet observed.¹⁹⁹ Information from the BDB on Japan's activities in Burma and on its borders thereby assumed an added importance in the broader context of imperial security.

Japanese agents working in Burma meanwhile pursued their own efforts to contact members of the Burman nationalist underground regarding the road, and the BDB had relatively high quality information about their activities thanks to censorship seizures, informants and their own covert operatives.²⁰⁰ Papers seized in September 1939 from a Japanese member of the consulate in Rangoon working with the BFB revealed a list of 'payments to agents, reporters and informers'.²⁰¹

By this stage, the Japanese also had a parallel organisation to the BDB working in Burma, a dedicated intelligence apparatus with informers and agents. In August 1940 the Japanese consulate in Rangoon was expanded and the Japanese consul was reportedly in touch with Ba Maw's wife in order to lend aid to the Burma Freedom Bloc's conspiracy.²⁰² Other prominent Japanese conspirators associated with the conspiracy were arrested under the Defence of Burma regulations and deported.²⁰³ The BDB had a great amount of information on this conspiracy, which appears to have been highly organised and perhaps would have been viable had the BDB not reported its existence. Ba Maw recorded that Aung San was unable to meet *Thakin* followers and that he could

¹⁹⁷ TNA FO 371/27844 Political Departments General Correspondence from 1906-1966, Foreign Research and Press Service, Balliol College Oxford, 4 Nov. 1941, 3.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ TNA CAB 121/680 Special Secret Information Centre: Files: Defence of Burma, Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 12 Dec. 1941, 3.

²⁰⁰ BL IOR M/5/47 Japanese Activities in Burma, Report from the Director of the Intelligence Bureau, 19 Sep. 1939, 47.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 48.

²⁰² BL IOR M/5/47 Japanese Activities in Burma, Burma Defence Bureau Intelligence summary no. 10, Oct. 1940, 25.

²⁰³ BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 10, Oct. 1940, 25.

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only contact close friends.²⁰⁴ Yet, even after the BFB was destroyed, dedicated revolutionaries continued to work despite the depletion of their ranks.

The Japanese were quick to encourage these underground conspirators. Hutchings noted in correspondence with Governor Linlithgow in India that the 'Japanese consulate's own intelligence and capacity for conveyance of information must not be underrated'.²⁰⁵ The Japanese flooded the country with propaganda rendering British counter-propaganda ineffective and exposing its inadequacy. The Japanese also broadcast a great deal of radio propaganda to Burma, even using Arabic to appeal to the Islamic population.²⁰⁶ The British response to this was to do nothing for 'fear of reprisals' even in late 1941.²⁰⁷ The Japanese had also spent years building up cultural exchange programmes, opening cinema clubs, and forging links between the Buddhist clergies of both countries.²⁰⁸ The colonial government did nothing to counter this. Fuji Nagai, a Japanese priest working in Burma had been encouraging Burman priests to provide military training in parallel with their 'brethren' in Japan since 1938.²⁰⁹ Nagai was only arrested for espionage under the Defence of Burma regulations in late 1941 just a couple of months before the Japanese invaded.

The BDB noted alongside their report of Nagai's arrest that the bureau's 'evidence concerning espionage activities of certain members of Japanese consulate [was] unreliable and substantially incorrect'.²¹⁰ In this climate of uncertainty all Japanese living in Rangoon were arrested a couple of months before war broke out.²¹¹ Antony Best remarks that British intelligence was quick

²⁰⁴ Ba Maw, *op. cit.*, 131.

²⁰⁵ BL IOSM Mss Eur F125/115 Hope (Victor Alexander John), 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow Linlithgow collection: papers of Victor Alexander John Hope, 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow (1887-1952) as Viceroy of India 1936-43 Letters and telegrams regarding Burma 1940-1943, Hutchings to Laithwaite, enclosed report on uprisings in Burma, 13 Aug. 1941, 301a.

²⁰⁶ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence Summary no. 11, 15 Nov. 1938, 48.

²⁰⁷ TNA CAB 121/680 Special Secret Information Centre, Defence requirements of Burma, Mar. 1941 – Mar 1943, 26.

²⁰⁸ BL IOR M/5/47 Japanese Activities in Burma, Burma Defence Bureau Intelligence summary no. 10, Oct. 1940, 29.

²⁰⁹ BL IOR M/5/55 Burma Monthly Intelligence Summaries, Intelligence summary no. 10. Oct. 1938, 54.

²¹⁰ BL IOR M/5/76 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 9, Sep. 1941, 68.

²¹¹ *Ibid*, Intelligence summary no. 12, Jan. 1942, 25.

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to adopt racial stereotypes of the Japanese before the war and BDB reports on Japanese activity conformed to this pattern, describing the Japanese as 'psychological quasi-mystic militarists'.²¹² The FECB was similarly prejudiced and reported Japanese activity in Burma to the Secret Intelligence Services in terms that depicted 'every Japanese' as a spy. Japan was in the grip of a 'spy mania' in which popular 'psychology' was that of 'slavery to the Emperor'.²¹³

For all its sweeping generalisations, the BDB had little reliable information about the precise nature of the Japanese threat to the country. The Bureau failed to estimate the means, the scale or the timing of Japan's attack on Burma in 1941, but the failure was not, ultimately, the BDB's responsibility. As Best and Aldrich observe, the British had a weak strategic intelligence apparatus.²¹⁴ Ford further observes that British defences were so weak that intelligence failure regarding Japanese activity was not alone to blame.²¹⁵ The whole edifice of imperial administration was in a parlous condition by the time the Japanese invaded. The Japanese were easily able to infiltrate the information order that the BDB had failed to manipulate. Even the Burman communists were ready to work with the Japanese to gather intelligence according to BDB intelligence reports.²¹⁶ The BDB's failure was to understand the nature of the threat to Burma in 1939-42 stemmed in large part from the fact that the Bureau was still cognitively biased towards expectations of rebellion. It is no surprise that the final BDB reports before their flight from the country to Simla in Northern India reported that the level of crime was the same as it had been during the rebellion.²¹⁷ Even after the Japanese takeover, the rebellion remained the criteria used for understanding the Burman population. Contingency planning and projections

²¹² Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia*, 3 and BL IOR M/5/47 Japanese Activities in Burma, Burma Defence Bureau intelligence summary no. 12, Dec. 1940, 9.

²¹³ TNA Records of the Security Services (KV) 3/295 Records of the Security Service: The Security Service: Subject (SF Series) Files: Japanese security services home organization. Japanese intelligence activity in the late 1930s and 1940s. 1936 Jan 01 – 1945, Dec. 1941, 31.

²¹⁴ see Best, *op. cit.*, 158 and Aldrich, *op. cit.*, 20.

²¹⁵ see Ford, *op. cit.*, 137.

²¹⁶ BL IOR M/5/75 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 11, Nov. 1940, 20.

²¹⁷ BL IOR M/5/76 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 3 Feb. 1942, 5.

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had been built around the likelihood of rebellion repeating itself and the BDB still found it hard to imagine anything else.

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The BDB adapted its tactics in response to the 'year of revolution' and the increasing threat of war on Burma's borders. A branch of state that was originally intended to prevent the outbreak of peasant rebellion expanded its operations significantly in 1939. BDB intelligence about nationalist activity was all the more important as larger numbers of nationalists suspected of provoking dissent were rounded up and arrested. The function of the BDB was no longer primarily to relay information about local political intelligence within Burma's civil society to intelligence users, in the manner of the intelligence cycle described in chapter two. Rather, by 1939 the BDB was at the forefront of efforts to tackle political dissidents more directly. It was also instrumental to governmental efforts to sustain political control through heightened censorship, propaganda and covert operations, all of which were expanded after 1939. The nationalists' challenge to colonial rule in 1938 provoked a major state reaction in which BDB intelligence played a central role, providing the evidential basis on which the Rangoon government framed its response to radical nationalism.

The BDB's perceptions of dissident activity were still coloured by the Saya San rebellion even at this late stage. The Bureau had been established as a response to the rebellion which retained its influence over intelligence thinking long after its end. When considering future security threats, the BDB, and all the security agencies within the imperial administration remained as preoccupied as ever with the threat of popular rebellion. In fact, by 1941, intelligence perceptions differed little from those of 1930, with the simplified view of the Burmese as predisposed to rebellion predominating in intelligence analyses, as had been the case following the uprising of 1930. However, the rise of nationalist groups since the rebellion, some of which had been making concerted efforts to work with peasant and labour organisations, were a more recent development requiring a more sophisticated understanding of local

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political trends on the part of the Bureau. Yet with the Bureau's reluctance to acknowledge Burman grievances, and the increasing move towards clandestine operations among nationalist organisations, the BDB had little to inform government about crucial new developments in Burman society.

Instead, as uncertainty grew, the BDB delivered increasingly alarmist accounts of nationalists to justify their repression. The political inclinations of activists were deemed evidence of their malicious intentions towards the state. The BDB noted the rise of a number of nationalist groups, none of which had any great following, but all expressing pointed hostility to the state. There were frequent scuffles between these groups and they were divided by ideological differences. U Saw led the largest of the *tats* but was not the greatest threat. All hostile nationalist groups were subject to surveillance and imprisonment.

Even in his role as Prime Minister, U Saw was subject to unrelenting surveillance operations by the CID. U Saw had little faith in the continued rule of British imperialism and was planning for a national government of which he would assume charge on the final collapse of colonial rule. In office, he mobilised his supporters to attack other nationalists and ensure that his own brand of nationalism predominated. When the British refused to grant Burma full independence, U Saw moved to undermine colonial rule and secure a position for himself under the Japanese.

The army in Burma remained institutionally weak and popularly loathed in the years 1939 – 1942. Although it was expanded when it became apparent that Japan was likely to invade, it was still inadequate to the tasks for which it was required, whether maintaining internal security or defending the borders of Burma. Very few Burmans joined the army. The *Thakins* considered it an institution of colonial oppression and worked to undermine it. Although Taylor's analysis of the role of the army in colonial Burma considers the influence of the army on nationalists to have been the primary factor in stimulating subversion and anti-colonial mobilisation, the repression of nationalists through arrests

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based on intelligence was the preferred means of suppressing radical activity before the war.

The BDB's control of the information order was also undermined by the covert work of Japanese agents in Burma. Where the Burman population was alienated by colonial rule, the Japanese worked to win their sympathies. Establishing cultural and religious contacts, Japanese covert operatives managed to infiltrate the Burman information order to better effect than the BDB. The nationalist movements, although fragmented and driven underground by police repression, found ready support for their plans from the Japanese and were able to organise against the British in secret, largely beyond the scrutiny of the BDB.

Repression through arrests, and the resulting fragmentation of nationalist groups had not staved off the threat of colonial overthrow. The conspirators that concerned the BDB most were not the *Thakins* per se, but, as Ba Maw observed, a small fraction of the '*Thakins*' who enjoyed little public backing but who were nonetheless able to call on the support of the Japanese Empire.²¹⁸ They were not leading the population in rebellion against the British but acting as a fifth column for an organised modern army, far superior to that of the colonial defence forces in Burma

²¹⁸ Ba Maw, op. cit., 132.

Conclusion

Throughout the twelve-years from 1930 to 1942 analysed in this thesis, the Saya San rebellion loomed large, setting the parameters for official thinking about security in Burma. A stimulus to the development of a new intelligence bureaucracy certainly, the uprising had other far-reaching effects on security analysis and the underlying assumptions that informed it. The expectation of further popular rebellion became the key criterion underpinning intelligence assessment of the colonial population whose fundamental purpose became to prevent renewed disorders on anything like the scale of Saya San. If, on the one hand, the uprising confirmed the colonial government's notion of the population as inherently disloyal and potentially rebellious, it also drove the emphasis on preventive strategies of policing that relied on early warning of dissent. Intelligence, then, was key. But security analysis never existed in a political vacuum. As it became more evident that the state could not continue to govern the Burman population without conceding more extensive indigenous participation in the institutions of local and central government, the colonial authorities, the Governors of India, Burma and their counterparts in the Indian Office in London, acted fast to safeguard their rule and impose checks on any faltering steps towards democratisation or limited self-government. The emergence of the Burma intelligence bureau took place in this context. Secreted in the upper echelons of the colonial state, it was harnessed to government efforts to limit the scope of political reform. Bureau predictions of popular dissent were used not only to facilitate police and military repression but to provide convincing evidence that reforms should neither proceed too far nor too fast.

The Saya San rebellion had confirmed the state's failure to engage with the information order and manipulate the flow of information throughout the country. The rebels had successfully communicated dissentient ideas throughout indigenous civil society unhindered by the state and thus brought the information order under their control. District officers, police and military agencies had failed to intercept the communication of these ideas before the outbreak of disorder. Rebels had erected a firewall between themselves and the state, assassinating government agents and informers, employing their own

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secret informants, and spreading rumours to confuse the government, assisted by a vernacular press that gave vent to the mounting popular hostility to colonial rule. In order to reassert imperial control it was first essential to break the rebels' control of Burma's information order. The colonial authorities directed all their initial efforts towards this goal – especially utilising brigades from India forcibly to break the rebels' hold over dissident territory. By burning villages and relocating populations from rebel-held areas the army disrupted the rebels' ability to disseminate ideas amongst the population. However, this alone was not enough: it merely broke the rebels' hold on the information order; to prevent any recurrence of dissent the colonial state had to assert its own control over that information order. This required the presence of reliable information gatherers among the population to intercept communication of dissentient ideas and report to the government. An intelligence bureau was developed as an ad hoc measure during the rebellion and informers and spies were hired to work in territories to report on the rebellion's course. The civil administration worked to bring the information order under its control once the army had broken the rebels' territorial mastery. Yet these were merely temporary measures that did not long survive the end of the rebellion. The colonial government recognised that in the place of such expedients a more permanent intelligence organisation was vital to help restore the long-term security of British rule.

The most appropriate response to the rebellion – understood in terms of the most effective means to restore imperial authority – pre-occupied the upper echelons of colonial government throughout the years 1932 to 1935. Policy-makers were, to some degree, beginning to take heed of Burma's political development, as a political entity distinct from India; hence the decision to separate the administration of the two colonies in 1932. The new administration in separate Burma made provision for greater representation of indigenous Burmans in the government, ceding greater participation to elected Burman representatives. Yet, this was also something of a cosmetic exercise. Senior officials were still determined to safeguard unfettered British dominance over colonial affairs, something that required that the upper reaches of colonial government remained closed off. An intelligence bureau helped serve this purpose, a fact quickly acknowledged by the Governors of India, Burma and

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their colleagues in the India Office, all of whom endorsed the new intelligence bureau's construction.

Developing an intelligence bureau that was itself exclusively staffed by British personnel and which was dedicated to the preservation of old-style imperial authority was, of course, antithetical to the Bureau's notional purposes: namely, to create an intelligence machine capable of gathering information throughout the country, processing it, and reporting it back to government, all of which required deeper engagement with, and understanding of the population it was monitoring. Put differently, the Bureau's elite composition and elitist outlook undermined its capacity to work amidst the dependent population. The intelligence cycle of gathering, processing, analysing and reporting on politically sensitive information from within Burman society was compromised both by the intelligence bureau's limited reach and by the ideological presumptions about continued British imperial mastery shared by its leading members. If bureau reports indicated that the population was likely to rebel again in response to the provocations of nationalists and radicals, they failed to acknowledge the popular grievances that made radical nationalism increasingly attractive in the first place. Rather, security intelligence was exploited to justify repressive measures, not to highlight the urgent requirement to reform.

The elitist and anti-democratic nature of the intelligence apparatus in colonial Burma became even more starkly apparent on Burma's separation from India in 1937. The intelligence agency established that year, the Burma Defence Bureau (BDB), was secreted away from the new parliament in the Defence Department, answering only to the Governor. Indeed, it operated to ensure the governor could arrogate to himself the legislative and police powers required to stem disorder should the experiment in parliamentary government fail. In this context, the governor relied on the intelligence bureau to provide the raw evidence needed to justify a new authoritarianism.

Previous chapters have tried to explain a resultant paradox about the construction of this broader intelligence bureaucracy. For it seems beyond dispute that the new security agencies generated an unprecedented fund of

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information about Burma's indigenous population as officials probed the socio-economic hardships and cultural animosities that informed political grievances against the colonial government. Yet, at the same time, the very fact that intelligence gathering was still framed by reference to the Saya San rebellion, fundamentally distorted the ways in which the information collected was interpreted and acted upon. Convinced, as ever, that Saya San was the result of provocation by a small elite of conspirators, bureau intelligence about broader economic and social affairs was made to fit a predicted scenario in which agitators sought to provoke a renewed rebellion among the subaltern groups in Burma society most severely affected by these issues.

By 1937 Burman nationalists were being targeted more closely than ever as the catalysts to possible rebellion. All other security forces framed their perspective on the population with reference to the BDB's intelligence reports. As the thesis has tried to show, this factor alone makes a study of intelligence in colonial Burma crucial to understanding the nature of the colonial state: army, police and paramilitary auxiliaries expected the BDB to provide the necessary intelligence to enable them to act pre-emptively with a minimum use of resources, which, on separation were extremely sparse.

The brittle nature of the intelligence-gathering project was exposed in 1938 by recurrent unrest among labourers and peasants, who increasingly allied with nationalists in outright opposition to British colonial rule. Burmans were, at the time still afflicted by much the same economic problems as they had been in 1930, and, despite the more elaborate intelligence gathering bureaucracy, colonial officials still had little understanding of the extent to which Depression-era economic crisis was less cyclical than structural. The combination of strikes and riots, which made 1938 the worst year for Burma's colonial security forces since 1930 left the colonial government persuaded that the Burmese were rebellious by nature, and Burman nationalists equally convinced that the colonial state was impossible to work with. As for the BDB, the year's events confirmed the Bureau's conviction that the indigenous population was predisposed to rebellion and that a coterie of conspirators could ignite violence nationwide. Hence, the Bureau condoned the targeted repression of leading

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agitators, considering the severance of the ties between nationalists and subaltern groups to be the best means of preventing further disorder. As Horowitz observes, repression by the security forces merely forced popular frustrations to seek another outlet, a shift confirmed by the inter-ethnic rioting between Burmans and Indian immigrants, Muslims especially, which caused major damage to private property and state finances.¹

Yet, although the BDB failed to predict the 1938 disorders accurately, necessitating the deployment of troops to restore order, the government did not rely on the military thereafter as a means of control in preference to the Bureau. The crisis in fact renewed the government's dependence on the BDB as the first line of defence against a hostile population. Colonial confidence was shaken as it had been during the rebellion and this sense of vulnerability was heightened by the increasing threat from Japan, aggrieved by the increasing importance of the Burma Road as a strategic lifeline to Nationalist China. Despite this looming external threat, domestic disorder still held priority in government security policy and efforts to repress local dissidents superseded those to secure the country's borders from external attack.

The final years of British colonial rule in Burma before the Japanese invasion in 1942 were marked by a mutual antagonism between the colonial state and Burman nationalists. Conspiracies to attack the government mushroomed as nationalists, disaffected with the colonial state and believing Britain vulnerable after the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939, abandoned goals of mobilising the masses in protest against the government and adopted a more ambitious strategy of revolutionary overthrow of the state. The BDB expanded in response during these final years, increasing its manpower, broadening its scope of operations across East Asia and its surveillance of nationalist activities at home. The suppression of agitators by applying colonial criminal law to restrict the movements of dissidents, plus the recourse to internment as a means to shut down opposition, continued unabated as the predominant means of preventing disorder. Nationalist activism retreated underground to escape colonial harassment and, in some ways, even flourished in these more restricted

¹ Donald R. Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (London: University of California Press, 2002), 134.

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circumstances. A number of new nationalist groups in addition to the *Thakins* arose during these final years – the Communist Party of Burma was formed, so, too, the Burma Freedom Bloc, led by Ba Maw, the *Galon Tats* and the Japanese-sponsored *Minami Kikan* which led the invasion of Burma; these groups had few members but they dedicated themselves to armed revolutionary overthrow of the state, forming an underground network of conspirators that desperately worked to conceal their activities from British intelligence. Japan's increasing interest in Burma's domestic affairs, sharpened by its desire to close the Burma-Yunnan road in 1939, gave succour to these nationalist groups some of which began to count on arms and intelligence assistance of their own from Imperial Japan. It is remarkable then, that even at this late stage the BDB's intelligence prognostications could only foresee a repeat of the Saya San uprising, and, even when faced with an imminent Japanese invasion, the Bureau concentrated its attentions on those nationalists considered most likely to provoke another 1930-style rebellion.

Throughout the twelve years of intelligence reform between 1930 and 1942, the Governors of Burma and India and the Under Secretary of State for Burma made it plain that the stability of the colonial government in Burma depended on intelligence. Intelligence gathering was a primary activity for colonial officials, in particular those police officers and district commissioners who gathered information about events in their districts and liaised with local indigenous officials who were expected to fill in the gaps in colonial knowledge about indigenous opinion. It follows that the colonial state in 1930s Burma must be understood not by reference to the external sources of power that sustained its rule, the army in particular, but by examining its internal efforts to understand, interact with, and control the indigenous population.² State power was only as strong as the informational links forged with the population of Burma, which meant engaging with members of the population who were able and willing to provide information such as local village headmen, informers, and tax collectors. If these links were weakened and information was not forthcoming from the indigenous population, colonial rule was imperilled. A new paradigm of

² John Lonsdale, "State and Social Processes in Africa: A Historiographical Survey," *African Studies Review*, 24, no. 2/3, Social Science and Humanistic Research on Africa: An Assessment (1981): 139-225 at 151.

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intelligence gathering in Burma was in process following the Saya San rebellion as the state developed a centralised intelligence apparatus to manage the collection of information throughout the country. The stability of the colonial state in Burma hung by the thin thread of intelligence collection. Thomas observes that colonial states in the Middle East and the intelligence they relied on were so entwined that such states were 'intelligence states', and this term is justifiably applied to the colonial state in Burma during the years covered in this thesis.³

Whereas the official report on the Saya San rebellion had dismissed economic grievances as the root cause of disorder, instead attributing the unrest to the agitation of a few conspirators, material hardship was integral to the unrest, from frustrations over debt, tax, and restricted land ownership, to worsening inter-communal hostility and anger at Indian immigration which displaced Burman workers. Moreover, these concerns did not disappear after 1930 but remained more or less constant throughout the decade ahead. While intelligence was increasingly gathered about such matters, it was exploited only inasmuch as it was judged useful in helping to predict potential unrest. Nowhere in government was such socio-economic information cited as evidence of the urgent need for reform.⁴ Unwilling to concede that colonial rule had made the iniquities between rich and poor worse, the government employed its intelligence bureau as a security agency not a think tank.

In dismissing the economic grievances of the subaltern groups the security services shifted the blame for the uprising onto nationalist conspirators who were thought to have provoked the uprising. Guha, examining the Raj, and Ann Stoler reviewing the plantation economy of the Dutch East Indies, provide analogies for Burma, describing the colonial state as overly quick to scapegoat external provocateurs for the actions of subaltern groups, unwilling to concede that legitimate popular grievances against colonial rule could be behind

³ Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial disorder after 1914* (London: University of California Press, 2008), 2.

⁴ BL IOR M/4/2074 Defence: Burma Defence Bureau Pamphlet Internal and Frontier Intelligence, Issued under the authority of the Governor of Burma, Rangoon 1937, (see Appendix A), 3.

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disturbance.⁵ The colonial intelligence services viewed their role in dialectical terms as a struggle with their nationalist opponents – just as the nationalists tried to persuade labourers and peasants to rise against the state, the intelligence services worked to intercept their communications, repress their activities, and prevent any such occurrence. As Stoler observes, colonial intelligence reports often reveal more about the insecurities of colonial rule than exactly corresponding to events within society.⁶

By 1938 Burma's anti-colonial opposition had made significant advances. The various groups of nationalists, *Thakins*, *Galon Tats*, students *et al*, competed with each other to win popular backing, focusing, as in India, on disaffected subaltern groups denied any voice in colonial decision-making.⁷ In Burma, the *Thakins* worked closely with peasant and labour organisations and were thus better situated than the government or other nationalist groups to mobilise mass opposition. The BDB was, in this sense, correct: it always represented the *Thakins* as the group most likely to instigate rebellion, and BDB personnel were among the most vocal supporters of approved of large-scale arrests and internment.

Prior to 1938, the nationalists had made efforts to tailor their aims to suit the immediate priorities of an impoverished population and agitated for civil disobedience, forming associations with subaltern groups and providing charitable relief for peasants and workers unable to obtain any welfare support from the state.⁸ The suppression exacted against nationalists and their rural backers in 1938 severed the links between them. The BDB correspondingly became more assertive and utilised the agents it had placed in nationalist circles to undermine any recrudescence in anti-state activity.⁹ But if a peasant-based uprising against the state was unlikely in the short term, BDB perceptions

⁵ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, (Bombay Calcutta Madras: Oxford University Press, 1983), 186; Ann Stoler, "Perceptions of Protest: Defining the Dangerous in Colonial Sumatra", *American Ethnologist*, 12, no. 4, (1985): 642-658 at 655.

⁶ Stoler, 'Perceptions,' 655.

⁷ For the Indian analogy, see Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without hegemony: history and power in colonial India* (London: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁸ BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, 1938 Intelligence Summary no. 10, 26 Oct. 1938, 67.

⁹ BL IOR M/5/79 Information relating to 'Bangkok Conspiracy' to smuggle arms into Burma from Thailand with alleged view to start rebellion; involvement of Japanese; frontier routes, 1940.

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of all oppositional activity in Burma from 1939 to 1942 were still informed by the spectre of another rebellion.

In these final years the threat to the state had transformed far beyond that of rebellion as Imperial Japan aided Burman nationalists who aimed to overthrow the colonial government. If, as Ford remarks, a Japanese invasion was inevitable given the strategic weakness of the British in the East, BDB intelligence, no matter how good, could have done much to prevent it. As it was, the Bureau attended more to the threat of domestic subversion than to the strategic threat to the country's borders. The government of Burma, up until the very end, continued to suppress nationalists they considered likely to provoke rebellion in the country, and still obsessively described disorder in the country with reference to the rebellion of 1930. As Thomas observes of colonial government in the Middle East

The prospect of simultaneous engagement against Germany, Italy and Japan created insoluble strategic dilemmas for French and British imperial defence planners. By contrast, the preservation of colonial state control in the face of mounting internal opposition as war drew nearer presented challenges that seemed both more familiar and more manageable.¹⁰

There were echoes of the same internal preoccupations in Burma. Even as the Japanese invasion began, indeed partly because of it, the rhythm of arrests of *Thakins* quickened, something that provided one of the few crumbs of comfort for Governor Brigadier Dorman-Smith in January 1942.¹¹

Where, then, does this leave us? The increase in the volume of information on the population of Burma following the establishment of the BDB, its bureaucratic expansion and the placement of informers in nationalist circles, represented a vast improvement on the state's management of the information order – or so it seemed. However, the events of 1938 drove home to intelligence officials that

¹⁰ Thomas, *op. cit.*, 303.

¹¹ BL IOSM Mss Eur E215/1 Papers of Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, Governor of Burma 1941-46, Copies of daily situation reports to Leo Amery (1873-1955), Secretary of State for Burma, 1940-1945, 27 Jan. 1942, 93.

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their understanding of political trends, public opinion, and possible sources of dissent was less sophisticated than they thought.¹² It was, perhaps, unrealistic to expect a dedicated intelligence bureaucracy that had only been in existence for five years by 1938 to rectify the previous neglect of systematic intelligence gathering over forty-seven years of colonial occupation.

As we have seen, the upshot was that the state's dependency on a functioning intelligence bureau was renewed after every crisis, first in 1930, then again after the disorder of 1938. Colonial officials reiterated their dependency on an intelligence bureau that would aid the prevention of widespread disorder.¹³ In 1938 the imperilled position of the colonial state, and the hostility of the population towards it, confirmed officials' reliance on intelligence, a dependency borne of weakness. Intelligence was the best means of sustaining order despite what Fred Cooper terms the 'thinness' of colonial rule, meaning, in essence, the absence of a more substantial administrative presence.¹⁴ The tendency to invest limited resources in intelligence and not much else is also of a piece with the Indian colonial government's reluctance to make resources available for much greater police expenditure in the province of Burma before 1930.¹⁵ It took the rebellion to force the hand of the colonial government, only then reversing the denial of resources which, before 1930, had delayed the development of an intelligence apparatus.¹⁶ However, a constant refrain throughout administrative papers, internal police reviews and military correspondence was that the security forces' slender budgets and scant manpower resources necessitating improvements in intelligence capability. The army was under resourced, short of

¹² BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 12, Dec. 1938, 22.

¹³ See particularly the archive sources BL IOR L/WS/1/231 War Staff 'WS' Series Files: File WS 2806 Internal Security: Burma Headquarters in Burma, GOC, lessons from the recent riot, Information and Intelligence, 20 Sep. 1938, 5, BL IOR M/5/73 Burma Defence Bureau monthly intelligence summaries, Intelligence summary no. 12, Dec. 1938, 23 and TNA WO 203/5668 South East Asia Command: Military Headquarters Papers, Second World War The First Burma Narrative, Internal Security: Scheme for Burma, from the Office of Controller of Military Accounts, Burma, 19 Sep. 1939, all papers reviewing the status of intelligence gathering in the country and reiterating the various branches of government's dependence on intelligence.

¹⁴ Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge and History*, (London: University of California Press, 2005), 184.

¹⁵ BL IOR L/E/7/1559, File 1555 Dangerous drugs – Illicit Traffic – Creation of a Central Intelligence Bureau, 11 Feb. 1929 – 10 Jan. 1931, 74.

¹⁶ BL IOR L/PJ/6/2020 correspondence, despatches and telegrams on the Burma Revolt, 1930 - 1932 Extract from the Official Report of the Burma Legislative Council Debates 20 Feb. 1931, 200.

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front-line men and material; likewise the police, who were ill-educated, corrupt and under-armed, and this continued to be the case throughout the 1930s.

An operating intelligence bureau could hardly effect a dramatic turn around in the colonial government's fortunes in Burma – it was expedient but it was not a solution to the fundamental unpopularity of colonial rule. This fits the pattern of intelligence development observed by Bayly in nineteenth century colonial India, where crises of colonial control provoked panicked reactions: 'far from being rational responses to the needs of the modern state, "knowledge panics" sent official agencies through parabolae of growth. New agencies were formed. They built up huge data bases and armies of informants.'¹⁷ The Saya San rebellion catalysed the development of a specialist apparatus and a great increase in the amount of paperwork generated. However, these were superficial measures and did not minimise the friction between the state and the population.

As Taylor observes, policy making in 1930s Burma was still broadly directed from India – Burma's political concerns had only been particularly attended to after 1924.¹⁸ Separation had little impact on the economic power of Europeans and Indians, a fact confirmed by Ba Maw's experience as premier. The structures of political and economic control barely altered, while the new mechanisms of collaboration developed by the colonial government on separation only further alienated the population. The parliament became a target for nationalists, students and other agitators to attack. The colonial state in 1930s Burma's underwent what Gramsci termed a 'passive revolution', whereby the state made an effort to modernise itself while preserving its political and economic power.¹⁹ The BDB played a vital role in this 'passive revolution', its purpose being to enable the repression of popular agitation while ensuring that the crux of colonial power was not threatened.

¹⁷ C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 38.

¹⁸ Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 121.

¹⁹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, eds. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971) and John Anthony Davis, *Gramsci and Italy's Passive Revolution* (London, Barnes and Noble, 1979), 46.

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Indian concerns still predominated, separation notwithstanding, unsurprising given that those same officials that had run Burma as a province remained in situ after separation. Likewise, the BDB was, as Indian intelligence officials observed, broadly a replica of the Delhi Intelligence Bureau (DIB).²⁰ Indeed, it was only in its inclusion of a member of the military that the BDB structurally differed from the DIB. There were, however, important differences in the nature of intelligence gathering in the two countries. Indian nationalists proved more amenable to the structures of collaboration in the subcontinent and utilised the intelligence services to advance their nationalist agenda. Guha remarks, and a review of the relevant archives confirms, that members of the Indian Nationalist Congress Party were willing to compromise with capital and land ownership in India.²¹ By contrast, the gulf separating Burma's colonial state from its domestic population was wider – and harder to bridge.²² BDB personnel faced an enormous task in trying to do so.

How could an intelligence bureau developed by a state that was so alienated from the population function when its operation required information from local indigenous contacts? In fact, the links formed with society following the Saya San rebellion were tenuous and unreliable; local police reports throughout the 1930s noted persistent resistance to the colonial administration, and at times of disorder, both in 1930 and again in 1938, headmen – the primary source of information for the state - neglected their duties.²³ Those informers the BDB used to gather information on local events were often prosperous individuals who would lose out if the colonial state were to fail.²⁴ In a country where indigenous capitalism and business were so under developed and the greatest

²⁰ BL IOR L/MIL/7/19520 Changes in Imperial military intelligence arrangements after separation of Burma Letter from Director of Intelligence in India, JM Ewart to Laithwaite, Private Secretary to the Viceroy 01 Sep. 1937, 20.

²¹ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without hegemony: history and power in colonial India* (London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 132.

²² BL IOR L/PJ/7/1071 Expansion of the Central Intelligence Bureau, Expansion of the Central Intelligence Bureau 24 November 1932 – 5 December 1942 Letter from Secretary to Governor General – Under Secretary of State for India 12 May, 1942, 16.

²³ BL IOSM Mss Eur E244/2, Papers of John Keith Stanford (1892-1971), Indian Civil Service, Burma 1919-38 Correspondence and papers from the office of the Deputy Commissioner, Myitkina report to the Commissioner, 127 and BL IOR V/26/262/16 Burma Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee 1938-39, Final Report and appendices. Rangoon, 1939, 253.

²⁴ BL IOSM Mss Eur E 338/4 Papers of Walter Ian James Wallace, Indian Civil Service, Burma 1928-47 Notes and correspondence kept by Wallace when secretary to the defence department, Government of Burma at Simla, mainly relating to conditions in Burma from 1939 to 1942, 31.

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threat to the state was from peasant and labourer uprisings, these sources of information were perhaps bound to fall short.

This analysis of the intelligence services in Burma reveals much about the development of intelligence in a colony where scant attention had been given to the population's basic needs throughout so much of its history of colonial occupation. In a backwater colony like Burma, the state's priorities were to hold the line as best it could in the face of rising opposition – indeed, we might see a functioning intelligence bureau as just the last in a long line of security expedients. Future studies of Burma examining the nature of colonial rule in the country with reference to the state's management of the information order would broaden our understanding of the ways in which colonial rule was upheld. A study of the nature of the information order in the country prior to the 1930 rebellion, for instance, might tell us about the antecedents of Saya San. Similarly, a study that shifted the focus post-1942 when, following the Japanese invasion, the BDB relocated to Simla in India might reveal how the colonial intelligence bureau functioned in wartime and how integral it was to British plans to restore post-war imperial control. The BDB was certainly crucial after the war's end, but its actions during the turbulent years of civil war and insurgency lie outside the framework of this thesis and remain another fertile ground for further study of the role of intelligence in colonial Burma. Comparative studies with other colonies, especially 'backwater' colonies like Burma, might also indicate how typical the features of the BDB were. Like Burma, security bureaucracy in the North Western Frontier region, another volatile area on the fringes of the Indian sub-Continent, was, for example, separated from the Delhi Intelligence Bureau in the inter-war years, even though the region remained enmeshed in the provincial structures of the Indian Raj. At a more theoretical level, the ways in which intelligence is affected by the insecurities and prejudices of the political actor gathering the raw information, and the resultant understanding of the state in question's opponents, while central to this thesis, merits further study in intelligence research of other places and other times.

For its part, this thesis has tried to show that the colonial state and the intelligence-gathering project in Burma in the 1930s were entwined to the extent

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of mutual co-dependency. As the state expanded in Burma, intelligence grew alongside it to serve the new state structure that emerged in the 1930s. The colonial authorities relied on intelligence to provide them with the means of preventing serious disorder and thus the state relied on intelligence to sustain its rule. More than this, intelligence served to justify the colonial state's rule, depicting the population as ignorant of its own best interests, politically volatile and therefore tempted into violent opposition. Armed with this information – whether accurate or not - the government was able to justify its repressive activities. The result, as we have seen, was not assured stability but the exact reverse: hardening opposition and incipient rebellion which the stresses of the Second World War would lay bare.

Glossary

Glossary

The term Burman is used throughout the text to refer to the majority ethnic population of the country whereas Burmese refers to any member of the population within the frontiers of colonial Burma.

<i>Ahpwe</i>	Secret Society
<i>Athins</i>	Societies
<i>Dahs</i>	Knives
<i>Galon</i>	A mythical bird which featured prominently in Burman resistance movements
<i>Kayaingok</i>	Local village official with policing duties
<i>Tats</i>	Armies
<i>Taungok</i>	Similar figure to a Kayaingok with a lower ranking
<i>Thakin</i>	Master
<i>Thuggyi</i>	Locally appointed police officers
<i>Pongyi</i>	Monk
<i>Sangha</i>	Clergy

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Appendix A

Pamphlet

Strictly confidential

When an officer is transferred this pamphlet should be handed over by him personally to his successor.

Internal and Frontier Intelligence.

(Issued under the authority of the Government of Burma)

Rangoon

Superintendent, Government, Printing and Stationery, Burma.

1937

Appendices

Preface

This Pamphlet of Hints for the compilation of Internal and Frontier Intelligence Reports is issued by the authority of the Defence Department of the Government of Burma.

It has been compiled by officers of the Burma Defence Bureau for the assistance of officers generally and more particularly of officers serving in districts lying on the East Frontier of Burma.

C. G. Stewart, M.A., O.B.E., Director, BDB Rangoon September 1937.

Appendices

Internal and Frontier Intelligence.

Part 1.

The Burma Defence Bureau, which, together with the Intelligence Branch at the Headquarters of the Army in Burma, may be regarded as the Burma link in the chain of Imperial Intelligence Organizations, was instituted with effect from the 1st of April, 1937.

2. The duties laid upon the Bureau are described in Rule 4 of the Rules for the Defence Bureau which reads as follows:-

“The primary responsibility of the Bureau will be to keep the Governor informed of all subversive movements directed against British Rule or against the Government of Burma, or against both. The second responsibility of the Bureau will be to keep the General Officer Commanding Army in Burma similarly informed. In particular, it will be its duty to collect, collate and communicate information concerning all subversive movements such as Communism, Terrorism, Civil Disobedience, the Thakins and other Anti-Government youth movements, the pan Asiatic Japanese movement and indeed all movements the object of which may be to overthrow or embarrass the Government established in Burma. * * * * *

Information on the subjects noted above will be collected by the Bureau through its Officers and Agents and will also be extracted from the reports of other government Officers and Intelligence Organizations”.

3. From the last sentence of the above rule it will be gathered that the Bureau will collect information through its Officers and Agents and will also make use of the reports of other Government officers.

4. As regards information from Frontier districts, orders directing the compilation of reports on matters affecting the frontier areas have been issued by the Local Government from time to time. These orders should be regarded as being still in force, and indeed unless they are faithfully observed, the Defence Bureau will be unable to discharge its obligations for its own officers are too few in number to collect the information for themselves. Furthermore, the employment in frontier or “reserved” areas of a number of selected officers and the conditions of tranquility that have prevailed there for some time make it for the present unnecessary for the Bureau to employ paid Agents for the collection of intelligence there and it is hoped that a perusal of

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this Pamphlet will assist officers concerned to embody in their monthly or other reports all the information that the Government requires.

5. Certain of these officers have asked for advice as to how a system of intelligence should be worked up and how information and informers or agents should be dealt with. In the past few years efforts have been made with the material already available to build up an intelligence system in Burma. Conditions in frontier districts are not entirely identical with those in Burma but the material to be dealt with is much the same and it ought to be possible to build up in the Shan States and on the frontier a system analogous to that which has been involved in Burma. part of the Intelligence Branch Circular No. 231-I.B.S., dated the 6th of February, 1933, issued by the Criminal Investigation Department to all districts, is therefore relevant and is given below (with slight amendments) as it shows the method of approach to the problem as it affects Burma.

“There are many directions in which, without going beyond the ordinary administrative activities of a district, it is easily within the power of any reasonable acute and observant officer - if he is interested in and has a proper conception of his work - to learn many things which have a bearing on the social and political condition of the people.

(a) Ninety per cent of the population of Burma are engaged in agricultural pursuits. Anything therefore which has an effect on crops and on the return which agriculturalists obtain from their labours has an intimate relation to the social well-being of a large portion of the population. The failure of the crops in a district may easily mean a decrease of lakhs of rupees in the income of the inhabitants of that district for the year; there may be serious floods; serious losses from vermin; insufficiency of rain; epidemic among plough cattle; plague or small-pox among the people causing scarcity of labourers; trouble through alienation of land, through non-resident landlords, through an untimely influx of Indian or Chinese labour; there may be murmuring that rates of land revenue are too high and that landlords are demanding an excessive portion of the crop; produce prices - or the share that is left to the producer - may be unremunerative or there may be next to no demand for his produce at all and he may be left with paddy, sesamum, ground-nuts, beans chillies, cotton, sugar cane, rubber, tea, potatoes, opium, cotton-cloth, paper, etc., on his hands unsold, and thus have no money to pay his labourers,

Appendices

taxes, etc.

(b) In an industrial area there may be depression and a large number of labourers, skilled and unskilled, may be thrown out of employment.

In the past, few Police Officers have paid much attention to these matters have paid much attention to these matters, arguing, perhaps - if they reflected on the situation at all - that these conditions were local and of too little importance to be worth reporting. This is a fallacy. The condition of the individual or the single unit is perhaps not of very great importance, but the condition of the whole is and Government must be informed of the condition of units (districts in this case) so that it may judge of the condition of the whole province. There are at present agencies whereby Government is kept informed of certain aspects of the life of the province [crime, crops, disease (of cattle, crops or people), litigation, revenue and taxation, weather, commodity, prices and trade, agitation, labour and wages, sale of land, communal disputes, etc.], but these aspects are disconnected and the reports or returns of the agencies concerned are apt to be delayed. There is also no co-ordination of the information available. What Government requires therefore is a monthly Intelligence Report dealing with all aspects of the life of the people as they may affect the peace and order of the whole province.”

Mutatis Mutandis, these principles apply with equal force to conditions on the frontier and it is part of the duties of frontier officers to collect and supply the information required.

6. Although it is true that conditions in frontier areas are at present peaceful, it is equally true that on a number of occasions in recent years the peace of the frontier has been disturbed and “intelligence” has been at a premium. This in itself gives a reason for organising and at all times maintaining an efficient and dependable intelligence system. In frontier areas the material for this at hand and is already to some extent organised.
7. The types of information that officers should collect and send in are broadly indicated in Rule 4 quoted above but may be divided into “General Intelligence” and “‘Internal-Security’ Intelligence.” The first category would include in its scope reports on any matters (political, social or economic) which might be regarded as an indication or cause of possible unrest or discontent. The second category is self-descriptive and would include reports on matters connected not only with the internal security and peace of the

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area concerned but also with the protection of the area from outside aggression or interference, i.e., from beyond frontier.

8. The information required by the Bureau may be brought under the heads given below, but these heads should not be regarded as exhaustive.

(4) A - General Intelligence.

N.B. - Anything abnormal should be reported as a matter of course.

I.- Economics.

(a) Commercial exploitation or oppression by *Sawbwawas*, *Hengs*, chiefs or other officials of the people under them.

(b) Exploitation by trading concerns, whether firms or individuals, and whether in British territory or trans-frontier, if British subjects are thereby affected.

II.- TAXES.

(a) Organized resistance to taxation.

(b) Serious illicit taxation or collections which are covering open discontent.

(c) A refusal by villagers to submit taxes through the usual channels.

(d) Real inability to pay the taxes which are demanded.

(e) Unsympathetic and high-handed methods employed by tax-collectors.

(f) Formation of associations of tax-payers and any extreme or defiant views expressed at their meetings.

(5) ADMINISTRATION.

III.-

(a) Lack of respect on the part of villagers towards *Sawbwawas*, Chiefs and others in authority and cases of deliberate insult.

(b) Boycott of *Sawbwawas*, Chiefs, etc., and a refusal to bring cases before them for settlement according to custom.

(c) Payment of tribute to or undue respect to pretender and other persons not of recognised standing.

(d) Propaganda advocating independence or any change in the established regime.

(e) Non-co-operation on the part of villagers.

(f) The development of inter-tribal or inter-village feud.

(g) The development of communal friction or communal boycott.

B.- "INTERNAL-SECURITY" INTELLIGENCE.

N.B. - Anything abnormal should be reported as a matter of course.

Appendices

I.- CRIME.

II.- OTHER POSSIBLY SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITIES OR EVENTS.

(6)

- (a) Subversive propaganda, whether against local officials, *Sawbwas* or Chiefs or against Government.
- (b) Dissemination of dangerous rumours. All rumours, however absurd and unreasonable, should be reported. (The effect of such rumours on superstitious and untutored minds is what matters.)
- (c) Change in the attitude of the people towards Government officers, *Sawbwas*, Chiefs, etc. Cases of hostility whether sporadic or general, towards Military or Police or mutiny should be reported. These are often the only indication of impending trouble.
- (d) Suspicious fraternization between border people or their chiefs or elders, with trans-border officials or tribes.
- (e) Alliances with trans-border states or groups.
- (f) Disputes between Chiefs and their subjects.
- (g) Bad feeling among members of Chief's families which may lead to feuds.
- (h) Movements and activities of suspicious foreigners or suspicious visitors - native or foreign -, preachers, agitators, politicians, engineers, prospectors, photographers, salesmen, globe-trotters, etc. Reports should be made when foreigners ask persistent questions regarding the administration or resources of the country.
- (i) Unexplained construction of village or other defences.
- (j) The advent of or a belief in the approaching advent of a "Minlaung" or pretender.
- (k) Unusual manufacture or purchase of guns, *dahs*, crossbows, poisons, matches, sulphur, gunpowder, "panjis", etc., or the collection of or trade in such articles.
- (l) Exploitation of natural phenomena, e.g., earthquakes, meteoric storms, eclipse, etc., as super-natural events.
- (m) Rumours regarding or the appearance of persons credited with or claiming supernatural powers, e.g. Bandaka, leader of the Shwebo rebellion in 1927, or Saya San, leader of the Tharrawaddy rebellion of 1930-32.
- (n) Arrival of tattooers, "se-sayas", alchemists, magicians, etc., who attain more than local influence and "awza".

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(o) Unusual tattooing - (The design or designs should be given.) or unusual sale of charms, "Inns", "Mantras" etc. Particular notice must be taken of charms, tattooing, etc., for invulnerability.

(7)

(p) Formation of Volunteer Associations, Youths' Associations, "Armies", e.g., U Maung Gyee's Green Army, Dr. Ba Maw's "Dahma Tats", Fire-Brigades, etc., and their affiliation to, or sympathy with political factions.

(q) Formation of secret societies or any unusual growth of religious societies or peculiar sects.

(8)

PART II.

The Principles of information.

FOR THE GUIDANCE OF OFFICERS EMPLOYED ON INTELLIGENCE WORK.

1. *Object*, - The objects of an Intelligence Service are -

(a) To acquire detailed accurate and timely information about the potential enemies of Government; about organizations whose object is, or whose activities may lead to an organized breach of the peace.

(b) To distribute such information - in time to ensure the most effective employment of police, military police, troops and administrative officers.

(c) All information must as far as possible be completely labelled -

SOURCE (See below).

PLACE.

DATE.

DEGREE OF RELIABILITY.

DEDUCTION.

The importance of this principle cannot be over emphasised. The adoption of the correct technique is the only means the Defence Bureau has of ascertaining the source or origin of similar reports received from difference

(9)

and possibly widely separated collectors. Two reports of the same occurrence, if not properly labelled, may appear to be confirmatory and may thus lead to false deduction.

3. *Note regarding sources* - The name of an informer should normally never be given away. As a rule, the source should be given but names should not be

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mentioned e.g. "A trader from..... area", "a Myochit villager", "an officer of the Forest Department", etc. Under any special and unusual circumstances the Director or the Deputy Director of the Defence Bureau may demand the name of an informer, (See Burma Gazette - Rules 3 and 4 - Reforms Department Notification No. 8, dated 25th February 1937.) In such unusual circumstances the informer's identity will be most carefully guarded by the Bureau and the information will not be used without revealing the source of the information.

4. Note regarding place of occurrence. - In order that it may be possible to identify the place where any incident or event referred to in an Intelligence Report occurred, the latitude and longitude of all places mentioned, other than well-known headquarters and big towns, should be given.¹

¹ BL IOR M/4/2074 Defence: Burma Defence Bureau Pamphlet Internal and Frontier Intelligence, Issued under the authority of the Governor of Burma, Rangoon 1937.

Appendices

Appendix B

No.

29F36

(Home and Political Department)

RANGOON

Maymyo, The.....4.....November.....1936.

Secret

My dear Monteath,

Reference your most secret D.O.

No. P.&J. (B) 714, dated the 10th October 1936.

The Special Intelligence Bureau to which you refer was formed as a result of experience gained during the rebellion in 1931-32. It was realised that the Criminal Investigation Department, as it then existed, concentrated mainly on the detection and prevention of crime in the ordinary sense of the term and that it was not equipped for investigation of political problems, nor in particular of the subversive action of certain political societies. While the rebellion was active a Police Officer of the rank of District Superintendent of Police was placed on special duty to investigate the movements of certain individuals who were known to have fomented the trouble and to discover the relation of the various political societies to the rebel leaders. When the rebellion ended the authorities, both Civil and Military, considered that it was essential to have a permanent organisation whose duty it would be to obtain and co-ordinate information as to the activities of those societies which had been responsible for the rebellion and of any new societies which might be formed for similar and subversive purposes. With this object the Defence Bureau was formed with a District Superintendent of Police at its head, and the officer who had been placed on this work during the rebellion was selected for the purpose. With him was associated a military officer of the rank of G.S.O.III who had had considerable experience as an army intelligence officer both in Burma proper and on the frontier

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frontier, and he was also given a staff of one Deputy Superintendent of Police, two Inspectors and four Sub-Inspectors to carry out necessary investigations and to maintain touch with the Department's agents in the districts. This Bureau has been operating since the 27th May 1933 and has, it is believed, provided reliable information of the activities and intentions of the various political associations.

2. When Separation was decided on, the future organisation of the Bureau was discussed with Director of the Intelligence Bureau in India and Sir Horace Williamson came over here to advise, both as to its constitution and as to its relations with India and London. The old Bureau had worked in close liaison with the Criminal Investigation Department and had been under the head of that Department. As a result of the discussion with Sir H. Williamson it has been decided that the old Bureau shall be replaced by a new organisation entirely divorced from the Criminal Investigation department and controlled by the Governor through the Defence Secretary. At the head of the Bureau there will be a Superintendent who will rank as a Deputy Inspector-General if a Civil Police Officer or as a G.S.O.I if a military officer, and as assistant he will be given, if he is a Police officer a G.S.O.II, and if he is a military officer a Policeman of the rank of District Superintendent of Police. He will be given a separate clerical staff and also an investigating staff similar to, or perhaps a little stronger than, that now employed by the Bureau. A draft of Rules establishing this Bureau and laying down its duties and responsibilities has been drawn up and has received the approval of the Governor. It is proposed to establish the Bureau on a separate footing with effect from the 1st January 1937, so that it may be in complete working order when Separation takes place
place on the 1st April
3. The criminal investigation department, which will be under Ministerial control, will continue to function as at present, and it will be part of its duty to supply to the Superintendent of the Bureau any information of a political or subversive character which it may receive. It is hoped that there will be no falling off in the efficiency of the Criminal Investigation Department, and unless there is a serious deterioration in this respect it

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is not intended to increase the strength of the Bureau to any great extent. This course has been adopted on the advice of Sir H. Williamson whose view was that the Bureau should not be used to supplant the Criminal Investigation department so long as the latter works efficiently, but that it should be a nucleus on which a more extensive organisation could be constructed if occasion arose.

4. The new Bureau will have continuous liaison with India and it is also intended that it should have direct correspondence with London and other centres. It is understood that arrangements to this effect are being made.

Yours sincerely,

/H. H. Craw

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² BL IOR M/1/93 - Safeguards for control of Special Branch (Criminal Investigations Department) and Intelligence, 5 – 7.

Appendices

Appendix C

Governors of India, 1930-1942: Years in office:

The Lord Irwin: 3 April 1926 – 18 April 1931.

The Earl of Willingdon: 18 April 1931 – 18 April 1936.

The Marquess of Linlithgow: 18 April 1936 – 1 October 1943.

Governors of Burma, 1930-1942: Years in office:

Sir Charles Alexander Innes: 20 December 1927 – 20 December 1932.

Sir Hugh Landsdown Stephenson: 20 December 1932 – 8 May 1936.

Sir Walter Booth - Gravely: February 1939 – January 1941.

Sir Reginald Hugh Dorman-Smith: January 1941 – 31 August 1946.³

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/List-of_colonial_heads_of_Burma