

INCOMPATIBLE EDUCATION: THE STUDENT MOVEMENT IN BURMA DURING THE INTERWAR PERIOD

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Part I: Cultural Displacement

Before colonization, education in Burma centered around the Buddhist monastery. Schools and monasteries are so intertwined in Burmese culture that they share the same word.¹ Despite the lack of standardized regulations, monastery schools were an effective means of educating the populace. At the beginning of the English conquest, the literacy rate among Burmese men was estimated to be thirty percent. This figure, however, appears to be a modest approximation. H. Fielding, a British traveler who toured Burma extensively in the nineteenth century, claimed that “it is an exception to find a Burman who cannot read and write.”² Monastic education was a rite of passage for all Burmese boys and, as a result, the monks charged with instruction received “respect and admiration” in society.³ In fact, they held such a privileged and unassailable position that to question a monk’s teachings was to question their holiness and therefore, frowned upon.

Each village had its own monastery, where the local boys were taught the foundations of reading and writing and even more basic renditions of arithmetic, geography, and history.⁴ It cannot be overstated, however, how limited the depth of instruction was in non-religious subjects because the boys were only taught to the extent that it was useful to their study of Buddhism. Pupils were expected to memorize and recite extensive amounts of Buddhist literature. “The boys intone their tasks monotonously,” complained one British civil servant, “over and over again in chorus at the top of their shrill, high-pitched voices.”⁵ This style of education instilled in the students a monk-like resolve and, most importantly, imparted to them indispensable cultural knowledge shared between generations of Burmese.

Shortly after Britain’s triumph in the First and Second Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826 and 1852), whereupon the Burmese Kingdom ceded the entirety of Lower Burma to the British, many colonial administrators shared the objective of increasing—in complexity, quality, and quantity—the instruction of non-religious

¹ H. Fielding, *The Soul of a People* (London, UK: Richard Bentley and Son, 1898), 158, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044088758867>.

² Albert D. Moscotti, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Burma, 1917-1937* (n.p.: University Press of Hawaii, 1974), 2.; Fielding, *The Soul*, 159.

³ *Ibid*, 133.

⁴ Fielding, *The Soul*, 159.

⁵ John Nisbit, *Burma under British Rule and before* (Westminster, UK: Archibald Constable, 1901), 1:253.

subject matter in the monastic school curriculum to eventually produce a generation of Burmese who could serve the colony's administrative needs.⁶ The director of education in the French colonial province of Tonkin, M. G. Demoutier, mirrored these sentiments in one of his own reports: "it is with education that we must begin, it is with the child that we must address ourselves first and foremost."⁷ Colonial administrators in the region regarded the older generation as a lost cause but recognized the potential to create a new generation who would admire and serve the colonizing power. Administrators were keenly aware of the enormous challenge they faced. Demoutier theorized that progress in Tonkin would be protracted because "it would be impossible to attack head-on a civilization more than 2,000 years old."⁸ The British administration's plan was slow to catch on. In 1873, only 801 of the approximately 3,438 monastic schools in Lower Burma were approved by the government.⁹ The policy fell flat largely because the Sangha—the Buddhist clergy—refused to cooperate with the British on educational policy because it would fundamentally undermine their piety and diminish the focus on Buddhist instruction. In response, the British created separate government schools that bypassed the monastic schools entirely. The Sangha's refusal to cooperate with the British ironically accelerated the decline of monastic education and, by extension, the influence of Buddhism in society.

Secular government schools represented a drastic departure from monastic education. First and foremost, schools became less accessible to students than in pre-colonial Burma. Whereas monastic schools were free, government schools charged fees. Likewise, with the refusal of most monasteries to integrate into the British education system and the incomplete occupation of Burma, secular schools were concentrated in towns and cities, leaving rural areas behind.¹⁰ The government schools featured a curriculum that taught English, English literature, and physical and social sciences.¹¹ Secular education had little application in pre-colonial Burma, but upon colonization, the English had created the demand for "Western-educated" civil servants. Many students aspired to government appointments which assured them both societal standing and good pay. As such, young, intelligent Burmese men, of whom many would have joined the Sangha, were now recruited into government schools.¹² The decrease in monastic education played a major role in the deterioration of pre-colonial Burmese traditions.

⁶ Juliane Schober, "Colonial Knowledge and Buddhist Education in Burma," in *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*, ed. Ian Harris (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 60.

⁷ Gustave Demoutier, *Les Débuts de l'Enseignement Français au Tonkin*, trans. Jasper Ludington (Hanoi, VN: Imprimerie Typographique F.-H. Schneider, 1887), 1, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=5QwKAAAAMAAJ&pg=GBS>.

⁸ Demoutier, *Les Débuts*, 1.

⁹ Schober, "Colonial Knowledge," 60.

¹⁰ Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1967), 268.

¹¹ Schober, "Colonial Knowledge," 55.

¹² *Ibid.*, 61.

The British administration's education policy, among others, drastically diminished the Sangha's societal influence. Historian Htin Aung, who was present at Rangoon University during the 1920s and 1930s, describes how "the centuries-old custom of the pupil showing respect to the teacher and the happy teacher-pupil relationship disappeared from Burmese society."¹³ While his critique displays a bit of fantastical remembrance of a time when order was perfect, he is certainly correct in pointing out the shift in Burmese culture where the Sangha no longer garnered the same levels of respect. Additionally, Paul Edmonds, a British traveler who visited Burma in the 1910s, describes how the introduction of chairs and tables in classrooms where previously students had been "content to squat on [their] heels" was "creating a Frankenstein's monster which may someday turn and rend it."¹⁴ These British imports represented much more than the implementation of new technologies; they were the destruction of the societal pillars that connected the generations of Burmese to their ancestors and history. What ensued was an overwhelming sense of societal decline. This "inner rot," as Ba Maw put it, was the seed that would later sprout into the Burmese nationalist movement and the 'Frankenstein's monster' that Edmond forecasted.¹⁵

Part II: Birth of Burmese Nationalism

The Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), modeled after the similarly named Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), was one of the first organizations in Burma to express nationalist opinions. "Politics... began in Burma germinally, one might say," Ba Maw contended, "when Young Men's Buddhist Associations were formed" in 1906.¹⁶ It was founded by students from Rangoon College who wanted to combat the dominance of Western culture.¹⁷ In 1908, U May Oung, the president of the Rangoon YMBA, outlined the inspiration for the YMBA's creation:

on all sides they [sic] saw the ceaseless, ebbless tide of foreign civilization and learning steadily creeping over the land... unless they prepared themselves to meet it, to overcome it, and to apply it to their own needs, their national character, their institutions, their very existence as a distinct nationality would be swept away, submerged, irretrievably lost.¹⁸

U May Oung and the rest of the YMBA were not initially anti-colonial and, more accurately, were responding to what they viewed as the excess of colonialism and

¹³ Maung Htin Aung, *A History*, 269.

¹⁴ Edmonds, *Peacocks and Pagodas*, 8.

¹⁵ Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma*, 21.

¹⁶ Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma*, 7; John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1958), 179; Most sources list 1906 as the founding of the YMBA but some list it as 1908.

¹⁷ Hugh Tinker, *The Union of Burma: A Study of the First Years of Independence* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1957), 1.

¹⁸ Surendra Prasad Singh, *Growth of Nationalism in Burma, 1900-1942* (Calcutta, IN: Firma KLM Private, 1980), 28.

secular education.¹⁹ The YMBA advocated for a middle ground where the best aspects of Western culture and knowledge were grafted onto traditional Burmese culture. Much like the colonial administration, the YMBA realized that the best way to influence culture played out in the educational arena. The YMBA pushed for Buddhism, Burmese literature, history, and language to be studied alongside the regular secular curriculum in government schools.²⁰ The government's refusal to alter its curriculum per the YMBA's suggestions fueled the YMBA's cause and helped transform it into a full-fledged nationalist and political movement.

Having fought alongside the British in World War I and heard the West's call for "self-determination," leaders in Burma demanded the right to do so with their own state. Ba Maw describes how the "[Burmese] dreamed, very democratically. But it all turned out to be little more than a dream."²¹ The British were unwilling to relinquish their valuable empire in a time of financial ruin and, instead, attempted to appease the colony with piecemeal reforms. The incongruity of Britain's refusal to allow Burma self-determination and the Western ideals that they professed, was not lost, especially on the Western-educated Burmese. The question of self-government was ripe when Edmonds traveled to Burma and he described his encounters with young, educated Burmese who held no doubt that they were "capable of Governing the country themselves."²² Disillusioned by British rule, distrust and frustration peaked within the Burmese population.

The anger in Burma boiled over after the passing of the University Act in 1920. The legislation ensured that the positions of the governing body of the university were filled mostly by British professors, academic administrators, and high-ranking civil servants. Only seven of the seventy seats were filled by Burmese.²³ The British authorities justified their decision as such: "it is to be feared that at present a Legislative Council would be moved by a desire to see numbers rather than quality in the pass lists of the University."²⁴ The British worried that if the Burmese legislative council were in charge of Rangoon University, they would be motivated to artificially inflate the number of Burmese that receive degrees and, in turn, government positions. To the students at Rangoon University, it was an attempt to limit the number of college-educated Burmese and an affront to their ability to govern their own institutions.

The students also took issue with the fact that the act redefined the admission requirements. Prospective students were required to "[possess] such further

¹⁹ Schober, "Colonial Knowledge," 63.

²⁰ Ibid, 53.

²¹ Ibid, 17.

²² Edmonds, *Peacocks and Pagodas*, 3.

²³ Cady, A History, 214; *Burma Act IX, 1920 - The University of Rangoon Act* (Government of Burma via "The Burma Code" vol. 4, 1924), accessed May 12, 2022, <https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/burma-act-ix-1920-the-university-of-rangoon-act>.

²⁴ *Proceedings of the Burma Reforms Committee: Record of Evidence*, 3:55, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo.31924079301069>.

qualifications as may be prescribed by the Regulations.”²⁵ This open-ended language allowed the board to implement a required preliminary year before undergraduate education began “in order to,” as one member of the university’s executive committee defended the decision, “enable the students to enter with profit on their proper college career.”²⁶ The university may not have been entirely wrong in its assessment that an extra year of schooling could have ironed out the deficiencies and inconsistencies of the Burmese secondary school system, but to the students, it was another expression of British contempt. And the students were correct in assuming that many members of the British administration held them in contempt. G. E. Harvey, a British civil servant at the time, was incredibly critical of the students, claiming that “two-thirds of them should never have been admitted” and sarcastically described how a “lad from the backwoods” was “leaping the gulf of centuries” when he attended university.²⁷ On December 4th, 1920, after months of deliberation and agitation among the students and YMBA, a strike was called.

Over the forty-three days that it lasted, 509 out of the 856 college students in Rangoon joined the strike.²⁸ The year after, only 431 students remained. The dip in attendance was short-lived as the number of students rose to 637 the year after that.²⁹ Despite their rebellious zeal, the best students in the country were still attracted by the prospect of government positions. The strike failed to reform the University Act, though it was highly influential beyond the confines of campus.

Strikes were held concurrently at schools throughout the country. The government reported that 57 vernacular schools, government-funded schools that provided secular education in Burmese, and 27 of the 39 government schools participated in the strike. In total, 11,967 of the 36,049 students in government and vernacular schools took part.³⁰ U Nu, a future leader of the 1936 University Strike and of Burma, was thirteen at the time of the strike and recalled in his memoir that a “noticeable change was taking place in [him], in speech and deportment” in part because of the “speeches and exhortations made by the strike leaders.”³¹ The strike had a profound impact on both individuals and on the collective atmosphere of Burmese nationalism. Ba Maw remembers the strike as the first time the “rising national spirit was seen in open action” and credited it with changing “the political

²⁵ *Burma Act IX, 1920*.

²⁶ *Proceedings of the Burma*, 3:57.

²⁷ G. E. Harvey, *British Rule in Burma, 1824-1942* (London, UK: Faber and Faber, 1946), 47.

²⁸ Moscotti, *British Policy*, 29.; Aye Kwaw, *The Voice of Young Burma* (Ithaca, NY: South East Asia Program, 1993), 32-33, accessed May 12, 2022,

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=e025xna&AN=1815975&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

²⁹ *Sixth Quinquennial Report on Public Instruction in Burma for the Years 1917-18 to 1921-22* (Rangoon, MM: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1923), 18, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3029693>.

³⁰ Aye Kwaw, *The Voice*, 33.

³¹ U Nu, *Saturday's Son* (London, UK: Yale University Press, 1975), 17.

atmosphere.”³² While the strike certainly represented a moral victory more than anything, some tangible changes came as a result.

For the first time, large portions of the Burmese population had mobilized in support of nationalism, and it provided inspiration and a framework for political unrest in the future. The boycott became the “principal weapon” of Burmese non-cooperation.³³ By 1922, the colonial administration responded with the Anti-Boycott Act. It intended to “protect all persons in the exercise of their lawful rights against those who seek to bring improper pressure to bear on them for the furtherance of political purposes.”³⁴ The legislation makes no effort to hide that it intended to weaken the tactics of Burmese nationalists. The legislation included harsh punishments for participating in, instigating, or even threatening a boycott. The biggest consequence of the University strike, however, was the creation of National Schools.

National Schools were created with the guidance of the YMBA which had already been formulating plans to implement their Buddhist and Burmese-centric curriculum into their own schools.³⁵ In total, the government recorded ninety-two instances of National Schools which made up a minute fraction of the 25,664 total public and private schools registered throughout Burma.³⁶ Even without the data for the total number of students that attended National Schools, it is safe to assume that they did not compete with government schools in total volume either. What they lacked in numbers, however, they exceeded in overall impact.

Within the relatively small proportions of students they instructed, National Schools had a profound influence on their students’ nationalist and anti-colonial outlook. U Nu attributes his own political awakening to “the books on freedom and independence he had read in the national school... and the study made of the lives of freedom fighters.”³⁷ Aung San, another influential leader in the Burmese nationalist movement, was also a product of the National Schools. In his biography written by his daughter, she describes how Aung San found that the curriculum reinforced his “political awareness” and his “desire to free themselves from it.”³⁸ National Schools did not mold U Nu and Aung San into the ardent nationalist leaders that they would later become, but it certainly laid the foundation, as it did for many other Burmese.

In their report on education for the years 1916-1922, the government states the biggest effects of the boycott were felt in the government schools and even more so in the Christian missionary schools. The report conjectured that the greater decrease

³² Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma*, 17.

³³ Edmonds, *Peacocks and Pagodas*, 130.

³⁴ *Burma Act V, 1922 - The Anti-Boycott Act* (Government of Burma via "The Burma Code" vol. 1, 1922), <https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/burma-act-v-1922-the-anti-boycott-act>.

³⁵ Singh, *Growth of Nationalism*, 31.; Richard Butwell, *U Nu of Burma* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1963), 8.

³⁶ *Sixth Quinquennial*, 1-2 & 78-79.

³⁷ U Nu, *Saturday's Son*, 17.

³⁸ Aung San Suu Kyi, *Aung San of Burma: A Biographical Portrait by His Daughter* (Edinburgh, UK: Kiscadale Publications, 1991), 3.

in students at the missionary schools compared to government schools “perhaps indicates the working of religious as well as political motives behind the boycott.”³⁹ The report acknowledges an important aspect of the strike. The university students did not directly cite the deterioration of Buddhism at the hands of the British as motivation for the strike, yet it certainly underlined their motives much like it underlined the emergence of Burmese nationalism in the first place.

For all its initial vigor, the National School movement was short-lived. They were typically funded by donations and struggled to attain funding because, as Edmond put it, “the Government could hardly be expected to support schools in which the doctrines of non-co-operation would be... disseminated.”⁴⁰ The number of National Schools quickly dropped from its highest measure, ninety-two, to just forty-seven schools by March 1921.⁴¹ Despite the sharp decline in numbers, many National Schools managed to live on and represented a symbolic Burmese victory against British colonialism and, simultaneously, trained the next generation of Burmese nationalists.

Part III: Emerging Leaders

Students at Rangoon University became increasingly militant in the 1930s, as reflected by the emergence of the Thakin Movement. Htin Aung recounted that the Thakins, as its members were known, had all attended National School and were insulted by the “pro-British” nature of the university. It bothered them that “all the senior administrative and academic positions were held by English-men, who... assumed an attitude of superiority over the students.”⁴² In essence, little had changed from 1920, both in the attitude of the British and the complaints of the students. Additionally, the professors “belittled the achievements of the Burmese kings and tried to impress upon the students their view that the Burmese were indeed fortunate to be under British rule.”⁴³ These paternalistic lessons were incongruent with the national pride the Thakins had been taught in National School. In protest, the Thakins adopted tactics of non-cooperation. Htin Aung says the Thakins “expressed their disapproval of the University by coming to classes in their shirt sleeves and walking noisily along the corridor.”⁴⁴ The Thakins did what was within their power to subtly disrupt English dominance on campus.

The Thakins' favorite form of protest was singing the Dobama (“We Burman”) song, a creation of their own.⁴⁵ The song included lyrics such as “all must work for our nation’s cause” and “this is our country, this is our land.”⁴⁶ The Thakins

³⁹ *Sixth Quinquennial*, 5.

⁴⁰ Edmonds, *Peacocks and Pagodas*, 132.

⁴¹ *Sixth Quinquennial*, 79.

⁴² Maung Htin Aung, *A History*, 294.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 294.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 295.

⁴⁶ Khin Yi, *The Dobama Movement in Burma (1930–1938)* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 9, accessed May 12, 2022, EBSCOhost,

paraded around campus singing this patriotic song in Burmese in front of the British faculty and, in doing so, walked the line between open and hidden resistance. Their tactics show that student resistance was becoming bolder and more frequent. The Thakins were no less repulsed by the experience of British domination than they were inspired by the “latest English publications on politics, economics, and socialism” that they were constantly exposed to in class.⁴⁷ The secular education that the British were so insistent on introducing to the Burmese was critical in the Thakins’ rejection of British colonialism.

When the initial Thakin leaders left the university and moved into politics, they had unknowingly paved the way for the next round of student leaders to build off their success. One such leader was U Nu. At Rangoon University, he became acquainted with the nationalist movement, political organizations, and other future nationalist leaders. U Nu met Aung San one night in a “dark spot” in sight of the principal’s residence. The whole encounter, as U Nu described it, was “very dramatic and conspiratorial, except that there was no conspiracy and nothing that was ever discussed was secret.”⁴⁸ Their meeting still resembled the resistance of the Thakins: covert and yet somewhat obvious. Aung San, who entered the university in 1933, spent his first years there integrating into the student movement and crafting his oratory skills.⁴⁹ An associate of his recalled how “even in those days, I thought to myself, he was learning the psychology of the masses, preparing himself for leadership.”⁵⁰ Much like U Nu, these years in university proved to be formative to Aung San’s political career later in life.

The students’ increasingly brazen resistance, however, could only remain hidden for so long. By 1934, the university environment was tense and liable to explode with the slightest agitation, a condition that U Nu attributes to the students’ attitude that “everything the white man did was ‘imperialistic’ and suspect.”⁵¹ The student leaders kept pushing the university administration to their limits, narrowly avoiding reprimand on many occasions. Through their inaction, the university had shown their cards: “[I] realized,” U Nu reflected, “that [I] had been able to take an unbending attitude and still win because the British were respecters of law.”⁵² U Nu’s realization marked the student leadership’s shift to militancy, as they now knew they could fight by a different set of rules than the university and British administration.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=e025xna&AN=1815998&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁴⁷ Maung Htin Aung, *A History*, 245.

⁴⁸ U Nu, *Saturday's Son*, 71.

⁴⁹ Maung Maung, ed., *Aung San of Burma* (The Hague, NL: Yale University South East Asia Studies, 1962), 22.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 7-8.

⁵¹ U Nu, *Saturday's Son*, 72.

⁵² *Ibid*, 74.

In 1935, U Nu, Aung San, and a slew of other nationalist students swept the elections of the Students' Union.⁵³ In these positions, the new executive board launched an assault on the university administration and British colonial rule. U Nu gave a series of explosive speeches that resulted in his expulsion. Similarly, Aung San published a satirical poem titled "Hell Hound at Large" in the Students' Union magazine:

Escaped from Awizi a devil in the form of a black dog.

Had been, during its brief span on earth a base
object or universal odium and execration, sentenced to eternal

damnation for churlishness, treachery, ruffinianism [sic], pettifogging, etc...⁵⁴

The article was directed at a specific, Burmese member of Rangoon University's governing body. The students took offense to his collaboration with the British and his efforts to undermine the students' crusade. When Aung San refused to reveal the name of the author, he was expelled, upon which the Students' Union, short two of its most influential members, called for a boycott.

The student leadership was ill-prepared for a strike. The unexpectedness of U Nu and Aung San's expulsion meant that little logistical preparation had been made. Nonetheless, the strike moved forward. The decision to strike for many of the students was equally spontaneous. "I had plunged into the decision (to strike)," explained Dr. Tha Hla, a student at the time, "because I could no longer put up with the high-handed attitude of Principal D. J. Sloss. I think I concluded by saying that national self-respect and personal prospects did not go together, or some such thing."⁵⁵ For approximately 800 out of the 1,393 total students, the prospect of a government job and social mobility was no longer enticing enough to put up with the university administration.⁵⁶

In short succession, a general student strike broke out across the country and the strike leaders posted their demands.⁵⁷ Some of the demands were as follows: (IV) the university's governing body must accept representation from the Students' Union, (VI) the principal should lose the power of expulsion, and (XII) all students who pass their final secondary school examinations should receive admission to the university.⁵⁸ These demands indicate that the students desired to fix many of the same issues that sparked the strike in 1920: British dominance of the university's governing body, the unchecked reach of the administration, and the limiting of Burmese students in higher education. The strike raged on for four months before it was called off and instruction continued.⁵⁹

⁵³ Tinker, *The Union*, 6.

⁵⁴ Awizi is the lowest circle of hell in Buddhist cosmology; Hans-Bernd Zollner, *Material on Thein Pe, Students' Boycott* (Two Volumes) (University of Passau Press, 2006), 100, <https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/myanmar-literature-project-05-working-paper-no-104-material-on-thein-pe-students-boycott-two-volumes>.

⁵⁵ Maung Maung, *Burma and General Ne Win* (Bombay, IN: Asia Publishing House, 1969), 46.

⁵⁶ Aye Kwaw, *The Voice*, 70.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁸ Zollner, *Material on Thein*, 101-102.

⁵⁹ U Nu, *Saturday's Son*, 80.

Once again, the strikers achieved a few of their material goals. U Nu and Aung San were readmitted, Sloss was replaced by a Burmese professor, and the University Act was finally amended in 1939 to reflect some of the students' wishes.⁶⁰ The students' complaints may have been in the context of Rangoon University, but they reflected the public's deep-rooted issues with British colonial rule more generally. As such, the minor concessions given by the university were wholly incapable of resolving the real issue at hand.

Part IV: Conclusion

This paper has argued that the Burmese student movement was a direct response to the suppression and replacement of traditional monastic education with secular education as designed by the British colonial government. The student movement then became a driving force in the Burmese nationalist movement by providing both leaders and a clear focus. Specifically, after the strike, most leaders left the university and entered the realm of politics. Both Aung San and U Nu joined the Thakins around 1938 and quickly rose to prominence in the party.⁶¹ Bo Let Ya, a colleague and friend of Aung San, praised his ability to "analyze calmly and formulate clear and effective plans for the [Thakins]" and attributed this success partially to his time in the Students' Union.⁶² The political skills and connections Aung San and U Nu had cultivated at university translated directly to political life. In fact, an extraordinary number of influential players in the revolutionary movement and Burmese politics post-independence were members and associates of the Students' Union.⁶³ Ba Maw, who watched the evolution of these leaders, commented that "the political maturity many student leaders gained in [the university] was of immense value in organizing our wartime struggle and in carrying it through."⁶⁴ The former student leaders created and joined different factions and parties that all vied for ideological control of the independence movement.

The most influential of these parties was the Thakin movement. Since its founding, Ba Maw noted that the Thakins had a distinctive quality: "when they spoke for themselves they found themselves speaking also for the masses."⁶⁵ The Thakin movement had built up their reputation and popularity throughout the 1930s so that, with Britain's vulnerable position evident at the outbreak of World War II, they were poised to lead the fight for independence. With Aung San serving as their General Secretary, they were the first to present Britain with an ultimatum demanding

⁶⁰ Zollner, *Material on Thein*, 116.; *Burma Act IX*, 1920.

⁶¹ Butwell, *U Nu of Burma*, 29.

⁶² Maung Maung, *Aung San of Burma*, 9 & 11.

⁶³ Tinker, *The Union*, 6.

⁶⁴ Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma*, 58.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 56.

independence in 1939.⁶⁶ Unsurprisingly, the British did not accept their terms, but the Thakins ultimately managed to attain power in 1948 after a protracted struggle.

Sadly, the scope of this paper does not allow for a complete exploration of the role of student leaders in the struggle for independence. And certainly, many studies already trace these connections. One point of future study could be the examination of the failure of the Thakin movement and its student leaders to guide the country after independence. Ba Maw asserts that “[the Thakin’s] peculiar virtue in breaking up the old society” never allowed them “to construct anything to take the place of what they had helped to destroy.”⁶⁷ In doing so, they plunged the country into continued political turmoil and instability, from which it has yet to truly recover.

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⁶⁶ Cady, *A History*, 415-416.

⁶⁷ Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma*, 57.

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