

Britain Burma Society London - Summary of Talk Britain Burma Society London - Summary of Talk

In Wednesday 17th December 1997 60-odd members braved snow storms to hear Rob Lemkin's presentation. He had produced a BBC2 TV programme that was shown on 19th July - the 50th anniversary of the assassination of General Aung San. The programme included evidence of possible complicity by British individuals in the assassination, and had provoked heated correspondence to the BBC. Some of the programme's critics took part in the evening's debate.

Rob Lemkin started with an excerpt from a book by Vernon Donnison - who had been Chief Secretary to the Governor of Burma in 1946. The excerpt told how General Aung San, the man who had done most to bring about Burma's independence, was gunned down on 19th July 1947 by two men with automatic weapons. The murder had been instigated by U Saw, who evidently hoped to create confusion that would have enabled him to seize power. Donnison added his own comment at the time when this book was written - 1970 - that U Saw was possibly encouraged by what he called "irresponsible British elements".

Rob Lemkin said that this comment, together with Donnison's view that the death of Aung San was a terrible loss from which Burma might never recover, were the starting-points for his own film.

Rob Lemkin's partner, Bridget Anderson, is part-Burmese, and was familiar both with Donnison's book and another published in the late 1980s by U Maung Maung, making a case that the British government was behind the assassination. In 1992 they did some preliminary work on a Channel 4 TV programme on these "conspiracy" theories - but it did not get off the ground. Then in 1995 he got the BBC to agree to a programme to mark the 50th anniversary of General Aung San's death. At this time he was interested in a simple piece about the career of Aung San. But as they investigated further, the focus moved back to possible intrigue. Some of the film was made in Burma, where they went as tourists, having received advice that they would be unlikely to get Burmese government permission to film officially in Burma. They did manage to interview some of the "Thakins", who remembered General Aung San from the old days - as well as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. She thought her father might have been able to save the country much pain, by preventing the outbreak of many ethnic conflicts; and he would have kept democracy in Burma strong.

Lemkin then played back an early part of the TV programme. This recalled that in 1947, there were many people in the UK who had no love for Aung San. Winston Churchill, who was then Leader of the Opposition, would have tried him for war crimes during the period when he had been Minister for War in a Burmese administration backed by Japan, and his soldiers had killed thousands of Karens who stayed loyal to the British. But in 1947, a Labour government was in power in Britain; they were keen to do business with Aung San, and the future for Burma looked promising. That was when the assassination took place - and the film showed a very elderly Lord Listowel - who had been one of those who negotiated with Aung San for the British government in 1947 - saying that nobody could have taken Aung San's place as the leader and representative of the Burmese people. Aung San's political arch-rival, U Saw, was found to be the perpetrator of the crime. The police went straight to his house, as he was already under surveillance on connection with an earlier theft of arms and ammunition. But Lemkin introduced a new witness who suggested that British interests might have been involved, going beyond U Saw himself and the two very lowly military officers, who were

convicted of the weapons theft - Captain David Vivian and Major Henry Young. This witness was the British policeman who had been responsible for the surveillance of U Saw - one Carlyle Seppings.

Before starting on all the evidence, Lemkin listed the various theories that had been put forward about who was responsible for the assassination. These were: 1. the orthodox belief, that U Saw was virtually on his own. 2. The theory that it was all a British Government plot, as suggested by U Maung Maung, and this view appeared to be supported both by the Burma Communist Party and the present Burmese government. However, Lemkin did not spend much time on this line, which was contradicted by the very obvious enthusiasm of both the Labour government and the Governor for Aung San. 3. was Donnison's contention - that U Saw was supported by "irresponsible British elements" - and this was the one Lemkin tended to sympathise with. 4. U Khin Oung's theory, put forward in the book Who Killed Aung San that General Ne Win was the real one behind the killing. 5. The head of the Burma Socialist Party of the time - U Kyaw Nyein - was named as the secret conspirator this time. However, Lemkin said that theories 4. and 5. would only have worked if U Saw was framed and made a scapegoat - and that would have meant a conspiracy of such monumental proportions that some evidence of it was sure to have turned up; and it had not done so.

Next for Lemkin's evidence on the "irresponsible British elements" theory. First, there was Carlyle Seppings's account of how he went to arrest U Saw; U Saw was sitting quite calmly drinking whiskey, and greeted him with the words "What the hell are you doing here?" It seemed strange that U Saw had not made himself scarce after the assassination, unless he thought he was going to get protection from British officials - and in fact, although he never admitted responsibility for the murder, shortly before he was hanged he was said to have told Seppings that he felt he had been let down by Government House - that he had been given indications beforehand that "everything would be all right" for him.

Seppings also stated that he had been prevented from questioning other British personnel on the murder by his superior in the police force, U Tun Hla Aung, who had said "This has got too big for you and me, and if you dig deeper, you're going to tread on some very important corns".

Rob Lemkin then said this evidence seemed to have some support from a secret letter, which had only just been released to the public, from the British ambassador in Rangoon in 1948. The letter quoted a police chief as saying he believed certain British individuals were involved - and named among others Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, who had been replaced as Governor in 1946, and a British Council man called Bingley. Rob Lemkin said the police chief who voiced these suspicions seemed to be none other than U Tun Hla Aung, though his name had been deleted in the letter.

Further identification of the "irresponsible British elements" came from a journalist in Bangkok, who related a conversation with Bo Set Kya, Aung San's former secretary who is now unfortunately dead. Bo Set Kya was quoted as saying that there had been a very powerful group in London, who wanted "revenge" on Aung San. He said most of them had been left over from the previous Conservative government, so they now had no direct way of influencing British policy; so they had to act obliquely.

Lemkin then discussed one group in London that was a possible candidate for that description - a group set up by Sir Reginald Dorman Smith and others early in 1947; it called itself the

Friends of the Burma Hill Peoples, and included Conservative MPs, journalists and others. Why should it have opposed Aung San? Well, the group was very anti-communist. They knew that General Aung San had been a founder member of the Burma Communist Party in 1939. Even though he had later expelled the Communists from the AFPFL in 1946, there was some expectation that the Communist leader Thakin Than Tun would be asked to join General Aung San's first coalition government, in order to avoid civil war. And they were very much set against Communist rule in Burma. Lemkin thought it unlikely that such a group would have actually ordered the killing of Aung San - but he ended with a quote from Carlyle Seppings that U Saw's hypothetical British backers might have supplied him with weapons so that he had military force to allow him to seize power if Aung San became seriously weakened in political infighting.

The meeting then opened up to questions. The first member to speak was John McEnery, a former staff officer in HQ Burma Command. He felt that the programme was riddled with inaccuracies, and in particular U Tun Hla Aung was not the police chief referred to in the secret British letter; he was not promoted to that position until two months after the letter was sent. There was then heated discussion of the evidence on when he was appointed - with the possibility that the Burma Civil List - by which Lemkin stood - was wrong on the date. On John McEnery's suggestion, the BBC had written to the Foreign Office for clarification as to whether U Tun Hla Aung's name was the one that had been deleted from the letter. A reply had not yet been received.

John McEnery also said the programme had omitted mention of Philip Nash - the Governor's private secretary. According to a letter that McEnery had received from Carlyle Seppings in 1993, Nash had been a "regular visitor" to U Saw's house before the assassinations; and U Saw had threatened to ring Nash at the point when Carlyle Seppings came bursting in. The next speaker, Shelby Tucker said the TV programme had placed tremendous reliance on this new witness, Carlyle Seppings - but his version of the story seemed to have changed from what he was saying earlier.

He also said that in Insein jail, the two men who actually did the shooting had said they were employed by U Kyaw Nyein, not U Saw. But Shelby Tucker said his main point was that Carlyle Seppings had come forward many years after the events he described. He claimed to have witnessed so many crucial occurrences - why had he not been called as a witness at the trial? Shelby Tucker thought the onus was on the TV producer to establish Carlyle Seppings as a reliable witness. (Rob Lemkin replied that at least, Seppings had not changed his story since the 1980s)

Tucker also thought - as a former lawyer - that the programme all through failed to make any connection between what people might have liked to do, and what they actually did. The world is full of people backing one side or another - but that does not make them guilty of crimes. The next speaker was Sir Nick Larmour, who was serving in the Civil Service in Rangoon in 1947, and was actually in the Secretariat building when the murder was committed. He said he knew most of the people in the British administration then - but never met Lieutenant Seppings. He said Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith had been a Churchill appointee, and not a good Governor.

Dr Kapur announced that he was the doctor who had to perform the autopsy on General Aung San - and he went on to ask why Burma did not join the Commonwealth? Someone said that

Aung San had drawn up a Republican constitution - and Sir Nicholas Fenn noted that in those days, the idea of a republic joining the Commonwealth had not been invented.

Tom White, a former British Council man, then stood up to say that Bingley, the British Council man who had been named in the secret letter as a messenger between Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith and U Saw, seemed to be a very shadowy figure - there was no record of him at all in the British Council in Rangoon. Sir Nick Larmour said he was just a nonentity who got too close to U Saw, but took no part in the plot.

John McEnery finished with a comment that, whoever was or was not guilty, it would be ridiculous to blame the Karens, because there was every prospect that Aung San could have made peace with them, had he lived; so they had no interest in killing him.

INDEPENDENT COMMENTARY: RECENT SPECULATIONS ON AUNG SAN'S ASSASSINATION

by H.A. Stonor

[Note from BurmaNet Editor: BurmaNet was pleased to receive this commentary from H. A. Stonor, one of the British officers who were in Burma at the time of General Aung San's assassination. Few British officers from that period are still alive today, so H. A. Stonor's commentary is particularly valuable. Another commentary on how the assassination plot developed was recently posted by "Naing Win / Kyin Ho, M.D." on the burmanet-l newsgroup, so we have also included it below.]

AN INDEPENDENT COMMENTARY ON RECENT SPECULATIONS CONCERNING THE ASSASSINATION OF AUNG SAN

3 October 1997

On 19 July, the BBC transmitted a television documentary, "Who Really Killed Aung San?", which was also the subject of an article by the correspondent Fergal Keane, printed in the Guardian newspaper on the same day and in the South China Morning Post on 22 July. In these reports it was insinuated that the assassination of Aung San and five fellow cabinet members in July 1947 was somehow the work of a secret conspiracy involving not only a jealous Burmese politician, U Saw, but also an amalgam of different British officials, including the former governor Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith and Captain David Vivian as well as a group of British Burma veterans in the United Kingdom, known as the Friends of the Burma Hill Peoples.

With time and distance, it is, of course, easy to play flights of fancy with the fading traces of history. However, as one who not only lived through those terrible events in Rangoon but was also a member of the Friends of the Burma Hill Peoples, the programme made no sense whatsoever and was a gross distortion of many events.

Firstly, while U Saw was executed for his alleged role in the assassinations, it is

true that many contemporaries - both Burmese and British officials alike - always felt further questions needed to be answered over U Saw's actions at the time: whether he had organised the assassinations alone, on behalf of others, or whether, indeed, he was victim of one of the most successful frame-ups in history. Certainly, in the violent climate of those times, there were many armed bands and much confusion in the country. U Saw himself had recently survived an assassination attempt on his own life, while Aung San and his Cabinet had been discussing the mass arrest of political opponents that very day. Furthermore, there was evidence of two rogue British officers, Captain Vivian and Major Young, conspiring for financial gain to supply U Saw with arms.

Most curious of all, however, were the actions of U Saw himself. As a former prime minister, U Saw no doubt retained political ambitions, but his behaviour that day was not that of a man who had any immediate master-plan for power. In fact, U Saw did absolutely nothing but sit in his house until he was arrested. Moreover, although the BBC programme conveniently overlooked this, there was never any question of the British governor, Sir Hubert Rance, appointing U Saw in Aung San's place. If guilty on his own, it appeared to be a heinous crime without motive.

Inevitably, although U Saw was swiftly arrested, speculation remained rife in the following weeks. The Burmese communists, who were also armed and then very powerful, immediately believed that there must have been some British involvement, since they claimed that Aung San, frustrated at the slow pace of the British withdrawal from Burma, was considering rejoining their ranks. Aung San, it should be remembered, was a co-founder of the Communist Party of Burma in 1939. Indeed, I personally witnessed Aung San's brother-in-law, the communist leader Than Tun, march into the British Club in Rangoon after the assassination, where he began smashing glasses and generally berating the British.

Those of us in the British services, however, began to hear other reports, suggesting other possible perpetrators amongst Aung San's political rivals, who had either framed U Saw or used him as their fall-guy. To my knowledge, although such reports were circulating, they were never formally investigated, but amongst names mentioned were socialist activists, whose leader, U Nu, was fortuitously absent from the Secretariat building that day and subsequently became prime minister in Aung San's place. Other rumours pointed at corrupt factions within the fledgling Burmese armed forces (later led by Ne Win), who were privately jealous of Aung San's dominating political power.

The BBC programme, however, did not look at these issues, but instead tried to link together a very disparate group of British officials and Burmese individuals in an alleged conspiracy where the only real connections are a succession of red herrings or, at best, coincidences. Much was made by Feargal Keane and the programme-makers of the alleged discovery of secret British documents, but not only were they not quoted but the programme did not even demonstrate how all the different characters were supposed to be linked by these supposed new documents. Indeed, in some cases, the individuals never even met nor were they known to each other.

Much, for example, was made of the connection between U Saw and the British Council representative, John Bingley, but the BBC programme provided no evidence of complicity in the actual crime other than the suggestion that Bingley, who was acting as an individual, made a nod and a wink remark to U Saw at a tea party. U Saw's actions in prison certainly show that he looked to Bingley for help and the communications between the two men appeared odd, but again this does not prove Bingley's involvement or, more importantly, go on to link to any greater conspiracy.

Another example is the role of the two corrupt British officers, Captain Vivian and Major Young, who had stolen guns for profit, and these were later found conveniently dumped in the lake by U Saw's house and were reportedly used in the assassination plot. In another curious twist, in 1949, when serving a jail term in Insein prison for his crimes, Captain Vivian was released in fighting after troops from the Karen National Union took control of the town during the civil war that broke out after independence. The programme then follows this trail and concentrates on the embarrassment of a later British government, which was hardly surprising, at repatriating a convicted gun-runner, Vivian, back to the United Kingdom from a war-zone. However, again, this does not link--nor was it shown to link--into any secret British conspiracy.

And this is where the programme made even more dangerous errors, when, in the attempt to find an instigator, it tried to somehow link the Karen question with the assassination of Aung San. The group it accused was the Friends of the Burma Hill Peoples. As a member of this group, all I can say is that such an accusation is manifestly untrue.

Firstly, the Friends of the Burma Hill Peoples did not really develop into action until 1948, a year after Aung San's death. Secondly, the Friends began life as a talking shop of British veterans who, quite rightly in the view of Burma's subsequent history, were concerned at the deep ethnic tensions within the country and the fate of Burma's ethnic minority peoples, who had been extremely loyal to the Allied Forces in the fight against fascism in the Second World War.

Thirdly, diverse opinions were expressed within the group, which included such very different people as H.N.C. Stevenson, the ex-director of the Frontier Areas Administration, Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, the former Burma governor, Raymond Blackburn, the socialist M.P., and Frank Owen, the editor of the Daily Mail. Indeed, when a number of us considered it appropriate to become more actively involved in support of the Karen cause (which, incidentally, was the subject of a very accurate television documentary, "Forgotten Allies", in April 1997 by the BBC's historical Timewatch series), members such as Stevenson made their disagreements clear and withdrew.

Finally, the programme was quite wrong to state that the ex-Burma governor, Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, was the key figure behind the Friends of the Burma Hill Peoples. Although Dorman-Smith attended at least one meeting out of interest (where he said nothing), the main activist was, in fact, Col.

Cromarty-Tulloch, a veteran of Force 136.

Of course, since Dorman-Smith was well-known to U Saw, it no doubt suited the programme makers to play up this angle in the attempt to try and prove a secret British plot, but it has no foundation in historical fact. Nevertheless, the late Dorman-Smith is the main target for many of the innuendoes and conspiracy theories that are trailed throughout the programme.

However, not only is there no suggestion of how this plot was organised by Dorman-Smith (or how it was supposed to work), but the programme conveniently overlooked Dorman-Smith's words and actions at the time, when he was a man very much in tune with the sufferings and feelings of Burma. In 1950, for example, following the assassination of the Karen leader Saw Ba U Gyi, Dorman-Smith movingly wrote to The Times newspaper in London, "The major tragedy is that Burma is losing her best potential leaders at far too rapid a rate. Aung San, U Saw, Saw Ba U Gyi, U Tin Tut, all have gone." This was the contemporary view of Dorman-Smith, but the programme-makers selectively disregard it, even though his analysis has great meaning today.

Fifty years later, the tragedy of Burma lives on and, even worse, by quite incorrectly trying to link innocent Karens and the long-departed colonial government in the assassinations, the programme has a very distorting resonance in the present tense. In Burma today, the sufferings of the Karen people are immense, and the struggle for justice and democracy for all the peoples of Burma still continues.

Very sadly, then, the programme--and its many speculations--have recently been picked up by Burmese government officials for their own propaganda purposes in denouncing both the British and Karen nationalists, so it is vital that the historical record is put straight now before any further damage is done. There are, indeed, questions to be asked and many lessons to be learned from the tragic events at Burma's independence, but these must be based on reality and not with the leisure of conspiracy theories and speculation.

H.A. Stonor, ex-Welch Regiment and Friends of the Burma Hill Peoples

INDEPENDENT COMMENTARY: WHO REALLY KILLED GENERAL
AUNG SAN (slightly abridged)
October 4, 1997
by Naing Win / Kyin Ho, M.D.

September 26, 1997
Who Really Killed General Aung San And His Cabinet Members?

One of the prescribed textbooks in our 7th grade, "Little Birds Behind Bars" by Lu Du U Hla contains the story about the assassination of Gen. Aung San with the attempt on the life of U Saw.

Since then I was thinking all along why, as a people, the Burmese masses could not prevent the death of our hero Gen. Aung San, and this has been felt as a deep frustration by Burmese people especially on Martyr's Days (19th. July)

The story unfolded and opened my eyes wide with disbelief in the beginning, but upon closer scrutiny I found it to be true- that was when I became close friends with Yebaw Mya Hlaing! I shall relate for all humankind to know:

I was treating Yebaw Mya Hlaing as his family physician since 1988, and as a trusted friend he told me about his involvement in the selfish traitors General Ne Win and Aung Gyi's subversive plot. The cunning plan was to kill Aung San by a deceitful approach- since U Saw was Aung San's adversary, try and attempt on U Saw's life, just to injure but not to kill him, and he (U Saw) will definitely retaliate by assassinating Aung San.

At this juncture, the two trusted deputies (Yangon Ba Swe & Ye Baw Mya Hlaing) of Ne Win and Aung Gyi came into the picture - Ba Swe was an expert sharpshooter and he (Mya Hlaing) followed orders precisely. Then, one day they followed U Saw's car wearing the uniforms of Aung San's personal troops and shot to injure U Saw. That was the beginning of their successful plot.

Of course Gen. Aung San and his cabinet members were killed by U Saw's gunmen, but to make that happen was due to Ne Win & Aung Gyi's traitors underhand plot. NE WIN WITH THE HELP OF AUNG GYI AND HIS DEPUTIES MURDERED HIS OWN MENTOR GENERAL AUNG SAN.

I could not publish the booklet on this story before Mya Hlaing's death ; he would surely have been tortured and killed by Ne Win's stooges, the SLORC.

CONCLUSION :

1. Ne Win plotted the assassination of Gen. Aung San who was his rival. Ne Win knew the ability of U Saw, and what he would do if provoked, and planned his traitorous plot and succeeded. [I am absolutely flabbergasted up to the present day about Ne Win's cunning plot to assassinate Gen. Aung San.]

2. Ne Win ordered Yangon Ba Swe & Mya Hlaing to "make sure not to kill but only to injure U Saw. ?Expert shooter Ba Swe's bullet only grazed the left temple of U Saw (He went to India for treatment.) Whenever U Saw felt the pain over his face or scar his tantrums boiled and wanted to take revenge against Gen.Aung San, who knew nothing about the plot orchestrated by the cunning Ne Win.

3. It was later found out that the gun used to kill U Saw belonged to Ne Win.

4. U Mya Hlaing dare not to tell to anyone in Burma, as he would surely be tortured and killed by Ne Win's stooges, particularly by the secret police chief Khin Nyunt.

5. Yangon Ba Swe and Mya Hlaing later regretted immensely about this plot resulting in Gen. Aung San's death; they eventually refuse to take Ne Win's offering of good jobs.

Naing Win / Kyin Ho, M.D.

YouTube links to Parts 1 to 5 inclusive for the entire BBC TV Programme

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N003jRV75kc&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EP-3-wTBj8&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39jnsh0LyNg&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvLBHhIkeA0&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3huRoNnq2A&feature=related>