

# Introduction

## 1 Looking at Burmese/Myanmar Politics from an Uncommon Perspective

This book focusses on the writings of the first Prime Minister of independent Burma, best known under the name U Nu, the prefix “U” denoting his being a senior and serious Burmese citizen. For the first time, the English version of the only novel written by him and published is herewith publicised in book form.<sup>2</sup> This introduction provides information about Nu’s literary works before he was writing the original Burmese version of the text and informs about the genesis of the English translation. The novel was written while Nu imprisoned at Insein Jail, located north of the then capital Rangoon in 1940/41, as a consequence of his involvement in a political movement striving for independence. The English translation of the novel was serialised in *The Guardian* magazine from June 1954 to January 1955. This translation is rendered in the second part of this book. Some detailed information about Nu’s post-war publications and their contexts are given in the third part.

All in all, this publication adds a number of puzzle pieces to what is already known about Nu and his significance for the development of independent Burma/Myanmar. The only biographical portrait of his life was written in 1963 (Butwell 1963). In the meantime, some new material is available both concerning the period covered by his biographer and after his forced exit from office in March 1962. Some of such new material is presented here – including a number of pictures that might help to make sense of Nu’s life in the context of the history of his country.

Another aim of this study is to open a new perspective on the politics of Burma/Myanmar by focussing on the extra-political qualities and leanings of one of the country’s leading politicians. In a sense, the

<sup>2</sup> For another novel written by him that was never published, see below p. 46, 204.

term “politician” applied to Nu in the modern western understanding of the word might be misleading. He not just frankly called himself an “Amateur in Office” in his autobiography (Nu 1975, p. 135). Already in the foreword to the English version of his novel, he confessed that he had wanted to become a writer and resented the life of a politician, a statement repeated in his autobiography (Nu 1975, pp. 85–86). For sure, he was a political activist early in his life but became a politician just by accident after his younger friend Aung San had been assassinated in July 1947.

What is more, Max Weber's often quoted concept of “politics as a vocation”<sup>3</sup> (Weber 1919) hardly applies to Burmese politicians or to many of their colleagues in other Asian countries. Aung San, the father of Burmese independence, was a Japanese trained soldier. Professional soldiers served as heads of government in uniform or civil clothes from 1962 to 2016 and recently again after 1 February 2021. The only exception was the lawyer Maung Maung<sup>4</sup>, who served as Burma's president for a short period of three weeks at the end of the socialist period in August and September 1988. He was a co-founder of *The Guardian* magazine, had gained a lot of political experience in the public service, and had served as a member of parliament in the socialist period. Yet, Maung Maung had never held a governmental position before he became head of government at the height of a political crisis and ended the Burmese Way to Socialism under a one-party system before the coup of 18 September 1988.

Finally, there is Aung San Suu Kyi, Aung San's daughter and the de facto head of government from 2016 to 2021. She had been a housewife

<sup>3</sup> The German word “Beruf” used by Weber can be translated as “profession” as well. On the other side, the term “vocation” might be translated as “Berufung” in German. The latter term refers to a “calling” as a moral and/or religious motivation to choose a profession.

<sup>4</sup> For the significance of lawyers as “professional politicians”, see Weber 1919, pp. 7; 13-14. In Burma, many pre-war Burmese politicians had been trained as lawyers in Britain. The most prominent of them was Dr. Ba Maw, the first prime minister under the constitution of 1935 and head of state between 1943 and 1945 under Japanese rule. – Weber further mentions the “literati” as one of five “strata” from which politicians might be drawn. He refers to the Chinese mandarins as a counterpart to the European humanists (Weber 1919, p. 12). Nu however cannot be included in this category.

and writer on Burmese issues before she entered the Burmese political scene in August 1988. Interestingly, in her belated acceptance speech of the Nobel Peace Prize she mentioned that she had entertained the idea of becoming a famous writer during a playful talk with her eldest son.<sup>5</sup> One year after entering the political stage at a mass gathering on the foot of the Shwedagon Pagoda, Burma's most revered religious monument, she was put under house arrest, spent 15 years interrupted by periods of restricted freedom in her residence as a political prisoner and became a symbol of democracy against dictatorship during that time. She entered realpolitik after having been released for the second time in late 2010, and called herself to be "just a politician", not like Margaret Thatcher, but not as Mother Theresa either (Mon Mon Myat 2019, p. 7). Her career as a politician who had entered a kind of coalition with the military on the base of the military drafted 2008 constitution however was terminated by the military coup of 1 February 2021 after the second landslide election victory of her party in November 2015.

At the time of finishing the manuscript of this book in August 2022, she was still detained and thus shared the fate of Nu, who had been under detention for four and a half years after the military coup of 1962. In her many speeches, she did not refer to her predecessor as the country's most prominent civil politician.<sup>6</sup> Her mother however had supported Nu during his campaign before the 1960 elections and before.<sup>7</sup>

Aung San Suu Kyi like Nu is a convinced Buddhist and referred to Buddhist teaching as a foundation of the country's politics (Mon Mon Myat 2019, p. 6). Other similarities can be noted: Both political actors

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1991/kyi/26193-aung-san-suu-kyi-nobel-lecture-1991/> (accessed 1.2.2022).

<sup>6</sup> Unlike Nu, Aung San Suu Kyi was prevented of occupying the country's top political position. The constitution of 2008 drafted by the military barred all persons to hold top political positions whose close relatives were foreign citizen (Article 59f of the 2008 constitution; her two sons held British passports). She was therefore barred to be elected president of Myanmar. Her party created the post of a State Counsellor for her that was not provided in the constitution and equivalent to the post of a prime minister. As a consequence, the two presidents who were elected by parliament between 2016 and 2021 did never exerted the power according to the constitution's provisions.

<sup>7</sup> <http://bios.myanmar-institut.org/2019/11/01/daw-khin-kyi-1912-1988/> (accessed 23.6.2022).

were – at least for some time – admired by foreign audiences and seen as persons representing the compatibility of eastern and western political ideals. This book highlighting U Nu's achievements as a writer might therefore be helpful to better understand both the resonances and the dissonances of the relationship of conceptualising "politics" in Burma/Myanmar and the West.

This introduction gives some information on Nu's dream to make writing his profession and the circumstances that drew him into politics. His activism as a member of the radical Thakin movement resulted in his imprisonment, which somehow ironically gave him the chance to continue his literary passion. Both the context that resulted in the writing of the novel as well as the message of the text might help to understand Nu's attitude towards politics. The postscript will show that he lived up to his original passion later again.

Furthermore, the genesis of the novel might be helpful for reconsidering the decisive period of Burma's history between the 1930s, the beginning of the final stage of the independence struggle, and the mid-1950s, when Burma seemed to have been consolidated as an independent state. The setting of *Man, the Wolf of Man* is the struggle for freedom against British rule. The publication history of the book spans the following two periods of the country's development from a British colony to an independent state. Written in a prison controlled by the British colonial power, the book was published shortly before the country achieved some kind of independence in August 1943 under Japanese dominion, and the English translation came out some years after Burma had become a sovereign state.

This introduction documents the early years of the man whose eventful life could be the subject matter of a novel as well. Although he experienced difficult times both personally and politically, he was often rightly called "Mr. Soft" in the foreign press, which refers to the literal meaning of his given name "Nu". The title of his novel points to the harsh sides of the country's political history. Myanmar's present situation indicated that it was not possible to reconcile the country's pleasant and cruel faces.

The following sections provide an overview on Nu's live until the end of World War II focussing on the interplay of his literary and political activities and the publication history of the Burmese and English

version of his novel in 1943 and 1954 respectively. First comes some information about his early literary bends, as narrated in the “author’s preface” to the novel and his life story until 1937 (2). The next three sectors provide information about his literary activities as the co-founder of and contributor to the *Nagani* (Red Dragon) Book Club. It starts with a short history of the club between 1937 and 1941 that had been modelled after the British Left Book Club<sup>8</sup> and published about seventy books on a variety of topics and genres (3). The following two sections deal with the fictional (4) and non-fiction (5) writings of Nu published by the club. Next, the scarce information available about his prison life between 1940 and 1942 is presented during which the Burmese version of his novel was written (6). Finally, the findings on the publication of the novel’s original Burmese version in 1943 and the editing of the English text up to its serialisation in *The Guardian* magazine in 1954/55 are presented together with some notes on three people involved in the publishing history of the English version besides the author: the translator Khin Zaw, his wife Saw Yin, and publisher Maung Maung (7). Some short notes on the reproduction of the novel’s English text in this book end the introduction and led over to the text of the novel as published in *The Guardian* magazine (8).

## 2 Nu’s Early Life, his Literary and Political Activities until 1937

In the preface to the first instalment of the novel, Nu presents autobiographical notes on the beginning of his literary undertakings, on his way into participating in politics, and on the relationship between both engagements.<sup>9</sup>

Nu describes himself as having been a rather “bad boy” until the age of 18 in his native town located in the Ayeyarwady Delta. At the age of twelve, he had become a drunkard, he tells. A miracle-like event that is encountering the picture of a beautiful young Burmese bride in

<sup>8</sup> The Left Book Club was an enterprise founded by publisher Victor Gollancz and others in 1936 to counter fascist tendencies in Britain by offering a monthly book to members only and by publishing a newsletter as well. For some more details, see Zöllner 2006a, pp. 17–8, 29, 42.

<sup>9</sup> For his own autobiographical notes of the preface to his novel, see below pp. 64–70.

a newspaper converted him. He even kept the clipping as a talisman. From then on, he started to write sonnets in English and playlets in Burmese to impress girls and as a “means to unburdening his pent-up heart”. After having read Shaw’s plays *Candida*<sup>10</sup> and *Julius Caesar*<sup>11</sup> on the advice of a university lecturer, he was “hit by a method” of writing. Nu developed what he calls a “playwrightmania” and came up with the idea of becoming the George Bernhard Shaw of Burma. He even sent plays he had written to England and even to the admired author but did not get any response (Butwell 1963, p. 13).

After moving to Rangoon for higher education in the 1920s, Nu became acquainted with nationalist politics. The atmosphere at Myoma National School, which he attended until 1925, was imbued with the spirit of nationalism since the first student strike in 1920. The same applied to Rangoon University, where he studied for his B.A. until 1929 – his chosen courses were English and Burmese literature and philosophy (Nu 1975, p. 55) – and again from 1934 to 1936. From 1930 to 1934, he lived near his home town working there as a superintendent and teacher – English and history – at a national school and married his wife Mya Yee in 1931. Before he left Rangoon, he experienced the foundation of the *Do-bama Asiayone* (We – or Our – Burma Association). The association was founded by Thakin Ba Thoung in 1930 shortly after Nu’s graduation. Thakin Ba Thoung also introduced the *Do-bama* song to the students of the Thaton Hall<sup>12</sup> in which Nu happened to stay (Nu 1975, pp. 31–33). Nu did not join the association at that time and subsequently had not become Thakin Nu yet. Usually, the prefix *Thakin* – meaning “master” – was a title used to address the colonial rulers parallel to the word *Sahib* used in India for people of higher status. The Burmese Thakins used the title to indicate that they were the legiti-

<sup>10</sup> The play was written in 1894 and published in 1898. It tells the story of the wife of a renowned Christian Socialist British minister and her relationship to a young poet who loved her. Ultimately, she prefers the “weaker of the two”, her husband.

<sup>11</sup> The author refers to the play *Caesar and Cleopatra* from 1898 and compares the expansion of the Roman Empire to contemporary colonialism.

<sup>12</sup> One of two buildings built in 1927 to host students named after the town in southern Burma that had been the centre of a Mon kingdom.

mate rulers of the country and not the British. It was an act of symbolic assumption of political power.

However, Nu became an active member of the All Burma Youth League, which was initiated by Ba Thoung, and thus became involved in politics (Butwell 1963, pp. 14–5). In his new position, he taught students about the importance of the nationalist spirit that had been spread through the country in the student boycott of 1920, in which Nu had participated as a fifth grader, and about the necessity of being well educated to make independent Burma successful.

After his return to the university as a law student in 1934, Nu quickly got involved in student politics and became head of the students' union. In February 1936, he denounced the high-handed behaviour of university administrators such as the students' obligation to salute their teachers during speeches delivered in the presence of Rangoon's notables. Consequently, he was dismissed (Zaw Soe Min 2009, p. 107). The same happened to Aung San for another reason. A student strike followed immediately after Nu's dismissal, and he was elected as president of the boycotters' council. These events were widely publicised by the national newspapers and caused Nu and Aung San to become prominent countrywide. Thus, both became politically relevant. The student leaders, however, declined any direct support of politicians for their causes in line with Thakins' rejection of the political system established by the British. This system was unmasked in one of Nu's early plays, which was written for a student audience (see below pp. 27–8). The students claimed that they were competent enough to manage their own affairs. Nu only became a Thakin sometime later. He recalls having been persuaded by Aung San to enter politics as a member of the association and become "Thakin Nu", a name he dropped in the early 1950s in favour of "U Nu".

In his autobiography, Nu recalls participating in the movement occasionally for short-term political fights. After that, he would find a quiet place to dream and compose a poem. Aung San's reply to that was, "After independence you can do what you want. Till then you must be a politician" (Nu 1975, pp. 85–6).

Within the movement, Nu closely cooperated with some men younger to him, who later rose to political prominence as well. One of them was Aung San, who was to become the leader of the Burma

Independence Army (BIA) and is revered as the architect of Burma's independence until today. Another one was Than Tun, a devoted communist and later the head of the country's greatest communist party. After having graduated, Nu worked for the *Deedok* (White Owl) magazine for some time, which was founded by Ba Choe, a publisher who promoted both "modern" literary and political ideas.

Before the elections of 1936 held under new regulations for governing Burma as a British province separated from India, U Ba Choe had founded the Fabian Party, which propagated the idea of the British Fabian Society and of which George Bernhard Shaw had been a strong supporter. The Fabian Society promoted an evolutionary and thus pragmatic and non-revolutionary socialism. This became the intellectual base for the politics of the Labour Party.<sup>13</sup> Shaw had been a member of the society and proliferated Fabian ideas through pamphlets as well as books. He never held a political position, however, and can be regarded as Nu's role model during his early years, both in terms of literature and political thinking.

In his preface to the novel, Nu recalls some incidents in which he failed his duties as a canvasser for the Fabian Party and as a member of the Thakin team. He was not suited for the "rough and tumble" life of a politician, who always must meet and talk to people. He often went to quiet places like monasteries. There he could spend his time enjoying the pleasures his imagination provided. He freely confessed that such defection "made his fellow party men furious".

One of Nu's activities in participating in the anti-colonial struggle is documented by a photograph. It gives an idea of the general mindset of the Thakins. On 1 April 1937, a new constitution for Burma had come into force, which was passed by the British parliament in 1935.<sup>14</sup> Through this Government of Burma Act, the earlier province of India became a separate political entity within the British Empire and gained, at least formally, a higher degree of self-administration.

<sup>13</sup> The society was founded in 1884. It was named after Quintus Fabius Maximus, the Roman general, consul, and elected dictator during the Second Punic War. Because of his special tactics for defending Rome against Hannibal's attack, he was termed "Fabius Cunctator", the Delayer Fabius.

<sup>14</sup> For the text see <https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/government-of-burma-act-1935-the-1937-constitution> (accessed 3.3.2021).

Both the separation and the new provisions were debated heatedly in Burma. The following photo shows Nu and some fellow Thakins burning the Union Jack on the day of enforcement of the new regulations. This act further illustrates the uncompromising attitude the freedom fighters had for the British democratic path of governance in line with the Westminster-style political tradition.



Burning the  
Union Jack  
(Source: Maung  
Maung 1959)

### 3 The Nagani Book Club (1937–1941)<sup>15</sup>

In December 1937, the British intelligence noted that a book club named *Naga-ni* (Red Dragon) had been founded. “Its aim is to train leaders to fight against Imperialism and it proposes to issue books in furtherance of this object and to publish a monthly periodical to be called the ‘Nagani News Bulletin.’” Approximately at the same time, three men in their late 20s and early 30s circulated a leaflet in which the aims of the new book publishing enterprise were explained. They signed the leaflet as Than Tun (born 1911), Maung Soe (born 1906), and Maung Nu (born 1907).

<sup>15</sup> The following information is based on documents presented in Zöllner 2006a and 2008a.

## Burma's Rough Road to Independence



The *Nagani* logo

Than Tun and Soe would become the leaders of two Burmese communist parties that fought against Nu's government after the war. Nu had become the first prime minister of Burma in January 1948 after the assassination of his friend Aung San half a year before. The new enterprise promised to open a new chapter in Burma's political history and literature:<sup>16</sup>

*Nagani* is not like the kind of political groups mushrooming nowadays and not a rival acting like they do. It's just a book club; however, not like an ordinary book club. The difference is that *Nagani* not only distributes books, but also ... (Zöllner 2006a, p. 74)

The enumeration of seven "main objectives" followed. These objectives outline a programme of achieving "real independence" by disseminating knowledge that would help the poor to become leaders. To achieve this aim, the "choosing and producing of good books" and other media (a newsletter, films, songs) was planned. Furthermore, the founders announced to organise classes on political topics and discussion groups in order to educate the people. Some of these ideas were taken over from the Left Book Club, the model for the Burmese undertaking.

Nu had conceived to establish such a revolutionary enterprise on a pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya in early 1937, the place where Buddha

<sup>16</sup> For an overview on the development of political writing in Burma, see 10731675.pdf (soas.ac.uk) (accessed 29.8.2021).

experienced enlightenment. He was joined by his younger friend Tun Aye. The reason for undertaking this pilgrimage was connected to a book written by Thein Pe<sup>17</sup>, another young revolutionary who studied in Calcutta. At that time the book *Tet-pangyi* (Modern Monk), which was written in India, addressed the misbehaviour of some monks. Nu had contributed the foreword and therefore was strongly attacked by monks who claimed that the Buddhist order had been insulted by Thein Pe's book. Hence, Nu decided to leave the country for some time. He undertook the journey to India together with Tun Aye, whom he had met during the student strike of February 1936.

According to the memories of Tun Aye, the two travellers met Thein Pe in Calcutta, who introduced them to some of his Indian friends that turned out to be members of a communist cell. Even though the two travellers were acquainted with communist ideas, they did not understand the group's textbooks. Novels such as Maxim Gorki's *Mother* and Mikhail Sholokhov's *Virgin Soil Uplifted*, however, left them fascinated. They eagerly read these books on their pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya and got an idea what "socialism" meant and how it could be propagated. Later during their half year journey, they turned to books published by the Left Book Club in London such as R. Page Arnot's *ABC of Communism*. Excited by their reading, Nu and Tun Aye decided to translate these and similar books into Burmese language and then published them. Thus, Nu and Tun Aye attempted to spread the doctrine of socialism in Burma. The works of the Russian writers however were never published by *Nagani*.

After their return from India, a shop at Scott (today Bogyoke Aung San) Market was rented that was to become the communication centre of the book club. Quickly, it became successful as a book publishing house for "good literature", as the leaflet introducing the book club to the public had proclaimed. This included the spreading of new and revolutionary political ideas. The name of the club was proposed by Fabianist Ba Choe, the club's mentor, because Nu and Tun Aye were born on

<sup>17</sup> The author was known as "Tetpongyi Thein Pe" later. The book has not yet been translated into English. The author stayed in India during the war, helped the British to organise the resistance against the Japanese and became a leader of the communist party after the war. After leaving party politics, he became one of the most renowned Burmese writers.

a Saturday, which was connected to the mythical *nāga* – a dragon-snake – in Burmese astrology. Eight planetary posts can be seen in almost all pagodas, one each for the eight days of the week (Wednesday is divided). The significance of the astrological calculations based on this system is illustrated by the title of Nu's autobiography: *Saturday's Son*.<sup>18</sup>

The colour red (*ni*) was most likely chosen because it connotes both bravery and modern leftist ideas.

Like its British model, the book club was to publish one book every month for its members and the *Nagani News*. Until early 1941, 71 books came out, most of them dealing with politics, history, and economics. Novels and plays were also included, as well as stories about spies like Mata Hari and the first book in Burmese language on sexual education. A great number of books were translations of foreign originals, many were adaptations, and some were originals written by Burmese authors.

The book production was costly and up to 5,000 copies of many of the books were printed. Moreover, more than 100,000 copies of a pamphlet about the Burmese-Indian riots in 1938, written by Thein Pe, were printed. The two main originators and others donated money out of their own or their families' pockets. Such idealism and cooperation combined with a smart publication policy helped the club to establish itself as a leading publishing enterprise. A song advertising the book club became a hit and is well known until today. A prominent composer was approached and taught about the aims of *Nagani*. After the first performance of the song at a special ceremony, it became highly popular. Later, a film star publicly sung it and a famous female actress danced to the tune. Here is the first stanza and the chorus of the song:<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> In his autobiography, Nu devotes a long prologue to the traditional belief that Saturday born first sons will "stir up woe like fire". (Nu 1975, p. 3). He further mentions that the name given to him, "Nu", might balance the bad omen because it means "soft" or "gentle".

<sup>19</sup> The translation was made by Tin Htay. – For a popular modern presentation, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYMOHa8n6hk> (accessed 10.3.2021).

To be free from poverty and paucity, we will guide and lead.

Indeed, our nation's land is enriched with a variety of gems, gold, and silver.

Poverty-stricken people will be able to do charity, such as building monasteries, also erecting pagodas.

Similar to the times of Bo Bo Aung<sup>20</sup> and Shin Ajjagona<sup>21</sup> now, our predestined ostentatious time has arrived.

Chorus

We will be healthy (and) wealthy, protected and defended from all the dangers and perils. Poverty-stricken people will soon be rich and no more be left behind.

With the power and the potency of our *Nagani* Book Club, poverty stricken people will not be withered or wasted. They are bound to enjoy special results.

We are going to establish a new age, peaceful and prosperous,

With the competency and capability of *Nagani* Book Club, we are going to raise our National Pride, Glory and Honour.

Like the history of the genesis of the book club and the choice of the name, the song combines traditional motifs of Burmese culture with modern ideas and is thus a hybrid<sup>22</sup>. This served to assist the poor in a modern and systematic way. Translating the wisdom of the contemporary world into Burmese language and adopting them to Burmese culture could be expected to revolutionise the mindset of the people.

However, the enthusiasm of the organisers and supporters could not overcome the laws of business. A failed attempt to obtain a loan and to increase donations occurred late in 1938. That led to serious discussions as to whether or not to transform the club into a financially strong company that sold shares. Nu supported this idea, but Tun Aye opposed it because such a scheme was irreconcilable with his under-

<sup>20</sup> Bo Bo Aung was a mystic and weikza (magician) of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, who was very popular in the 1930s. He was believed to help poor people behave well with his special powers (see <http://weizzarlan.blogspot.com/2009/07/bo-bo-aung-weizzar-with-white-robe.html>; accessed 10.3.2021).

<sup>21</sup> Shin Ajjagona was a famous monk and alchemist from the Bagan era, who used to help poor people.

<sup>22</sup> For the original version sung by Khin Maung Yin, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lFa7jkipUsA>; for a modern version, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYMOHa8n6hk> (both accessed 18.7.2022).

standing of socialism. When Nagani Publishing House, Ltd. finally was founded at the beginning of 1939 with a capital of 50,000 Rupees, which was divided into 500 shares each worth 100 Rupees, Tun Aye decided to leave and to set up his own enterprise that aimed to uplift the revolutionary spirit of the people without relying on the capitalist way of doing business. To avoid a confrontation with Nu, his senior Tun Aye set up the Myanmar Publishing House, which started publishing in June 1939. Some authors, including Nu, contributed to both publishing companies. They were regarded sister enterprises due to their common origin and aims. Tun Aye was called "Nagani Tun Aye" later.

Most likely, Nu did not engage very much in the day-to-day business of the book club. The club had an executive committee. Its chairman was Myoma Saya Hein, a senior educationalist and principal of the country's most prestigious national school that had been attended by Nu. He also contributed a number of books dealing with the Irish revolution. Nu and Than Tun were responsible for selecting the literature to be published. Tun Aye had been the secretary and was managing the business from the beginning. After he had left, his position was taken over by Tun Shwe, who had been trained as a teacher and used to work for the *Deedok* magazine.

A police document shows that Tun Shwe and the book club were closely observed by the authorities and suspected to be the secretary of the Communist Party of Burma as well. The party had been co-founded in 1939 by Than Tun, Soe, Aung San, and some others. Nu was not involved. The police document on Tun Shwe was written in early 1942 when the book club had terminated publishing and its secretary, like many other Thakin activists, among them Nu, had been arrested under the Defence of Burma Act. The report closes with the assessment:

Tun Shwe was an inscrutable young man. It was assumed that Thakin Nu and Thakin Than Tun foiled him when he tried to join the Nagani Books Association and Publishing House. While working with the NBA as an editor, he was submerged under the influence of Nu, Than Tun and Aung San who utilized the books association with their extremist and communist beliefs. Though it was not possible for him to become a great leader, he was shrewd and original (resourceful). It is surprising that he possessed qualities and disposition needed to be a secret propagandist. In accordance with the saying, "The pen is mightier than the sword," he could be classified as a species of Goebbels. (Zöllner 2008a, p. 29)

Quite obviously, the *Nagani* Book Club was closely related to the *Do-bama Asiayone*, the most radical organisation striving for Burma's independence under Aung San's leadership. Nu's idea was to use literature as a footing for the achievement of Burma's independence. "Good books" written in the native language were means to educate the people on how to run an independent country that did not adopt the British model. By translating and transforming foreign literature and "Burmanising" it linguistically, a cultural revolution was the objective. Accordingly, the aim was to revolutionise the minds of the Burmese people by integrating the international wisdom of the day deemed suitable for Burma and by adopting this wisdom to Burma's conditions. A number of pictures illustrating *Nagani* book covers visualise the expectations connected to the implementation of the books' messages.



Left: title page of Nu's translation of a book on Russia's revolution titled *Way Out for the Poor*; right: back page of a biography of Lenin. The heading reads, "We will build a new era. We Nagani."

In contrast, Aung San later used the sword rather than the pen by leading a Japanese trained Burmese army to liberate Burma from British rule. In contrast to his younger friend, Nu was concentrating on "soft" means to achieve the Burmese revolution.

The first book on which the *Nagani* logo appeared came out in early 1938. It introduced the readers to Chinese politician Sun Yat-Sen's ideas on nationalism. Before that, three books were released that dealt with contemporary Burmese affairs from different perspectives. The first is a book about the most famous political writer and poet of the time, Thakin Kodaw Hmaing. The book was written by Thein Pe, who after the war became one of Burma's most renowned writers. Throughout his life, he spread political ideas inspired by the communist doctrine. The second publication contains six plays of Nu dealing with current affairs. The third is a history of the nationalist movements in Burma written by Ba Khaing, a member of the Fabian Party. All these books were published under the name of "Tun Aye Publishing". These first publications clearly show that the new book club was located at the interface of Burmese literature and the country's politics. One may say that the three publications were programmatic. As early as in the 1930s, Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, born 1878, was regarded the leading Burmese literary figure. He was a novelist and playwright who criticised the British through his artistic commentaries on the state of affairs in the country. Thakin Kodaw Hmaing also supported Burmese nationalism by merging traditional values and at that time contemporary ideas. He became a member of the Thakin organisation very early and the patron of the younger and more radical wing after its split in 1938. The publication of Nu's plays and Ba Khaing's first history of post-royal Burma written by a Burmese both dealt with the current situation, thereby accentuating the literary (Thein Pe) and political (Ba Khaing) side of Thakin Kodaw Hmaing's writing.

One may say that the logo symbolising Thakin Kodaw Hmaing's accomplishments represents the all-encompassing aims of the book club. It could also be said that it represents the basic elements of the *Do-bama* wing<sup>23</sup> to which the senior poet and his younger followers belonged: literature, Buddhist nationalism, symbolised by the peacock<sup>24</sup>, peace, and socialism.

<sup>23</sup> The association split in 1938 into a smaller nationalist and members of the younger generation with an international outlook. After the war, politicians from the former wing tried to revive the association as a political party.

<sup>24</sup> The peacock represents the sun and was a symbol of the Burmese king who traced their ancestry back to the "sun race" of the Buddha.