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What Could Have Gone Wrong? An Anti-Communist in a Postcolonial Country at the Beginning of the Cold War: Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's Trip to Burma

Abstract

Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, a well-known (in Poland) writer, undertook a trip to Burma (Myanmar) in 1952, which resulted in a diary *A Journey to Burma*, a little-known, now forgotten text, yet a fascinating one. This article, based on Herling-Grudziński's diary, and the Burmese media reports on Herling-Grudziński's trip to Burma in the 1950s, is divided into two parts. In the first, it tries to show the value of Herling's diary as an unknown yet valuable source on newly decolonized Burma. In the second part, it presents the Burmese reactions to the visit of an Eastern European anti-communist coming to socialist Burma to warn against communism, and explains why his trip was not successful.

Keywords: Burma, Myanmar, Herling-Grudziński, Podróż do Burmy, Journey to Burma

Słowa kluczowe: Herling-Grudziński, Podróż do Burmy, Birma, Burma, Mjanma

Introduction

Southeast Asia had always been far away for Poles. Few reached this region, and even fewer wrote about it.¹ Among the notable exceptions to that rule is Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, one of the most famous Polish writers of the twentieth century, who left a diary *A Journey to Burma* (Podróż do Burmy). This book, written in 1952 and now forgotten, "would have been a classic in postcolonial studies"² if it had been better publicized and possibly translated

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¹ Notable exceptions include such figures as Paweł Sapieha, Karol Lanckoroński, Michał Sie-dlecki, Marian Raciborski, Szymon Syński, Julian Fałat, and Władysław Michał Zaleski.

² W. Bolecki, *Posłowie*, [in:] G. Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy. Dziennik*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1999, p. 154.

into English. Yet it remains little known: only Polish scholars of literature are aware of it, and only they have analyzed it in specialized articles³, often without sufficient familiarity with the country,⁴ as none of them had any knowledge of Burma.⁵ That is a pity, as *A Journey to Burma* and the story behind it deserve rediscovery, attention, and reinterpretation.⁶

Herling-Grudziński went to Burma⁷ by sheer chance. By the early 1950s, due to the English translation of his Gulag account *A World Apart*, he had established his position as a recognizable anti-communist writer. This was precisely what some circles in the Burmese political establishment needed. Then, as now, Burma was in a state of civil war⁸ – a dual civil war, to be exact. The first theater of war, more relevant here, was the struggle between the ruling socialist Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL; Burm. *Pasapala*) government and the communist rebellion (the other was the centrifugal/separatist insurgencies of Burma's many ethnic minorities)⁹. While the latter, the ethnic dimension of the civil war, proved to be more long-lasting, as it continues to the present, in the 1950s, the communist threat was more dire, as it concerned the central part of the country ("Burma proper"). The ruling socialist elites needed to fight the communists both physically and intellectually, as communist sympathies were widespread in society. For the latter task, they needed someone like Herling-Grudziński. That is why they invited him to Burma, organizing the visit through the Congress for Cultural Freedom in Paris, which probably covered the costs as well, to give a series of anti-

³ P. Panas, *Podróż do Burmy Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego – perspektywy badawcze. Rekonesans*, "Roczniki Humanistyczne" 2021, no. 69 (1), pp. 69–76; R. Przybylski, *Być i pisać. O prozie Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego*, Wydawnictwo a5, Poznań 1991, p. 43; K. Cwikliński, *Emigracyjne dzienniki podróży – próba rekonesansu*, "Archiwum Emigracji" 2000, no. 3, pp. 12–13; W. Bolecki, *Myśli różne o postkolonializmie*, "Teksty Drugie" 2007, no. 4, p. 13.

⁴ The most notorious example of this tendency is the following article: A. Nasalska, *Śladami Orwella. O 'Podróży do Burmy' Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego*, [in:] *Etos i artyzm. Rzecz o Gustawie Herlingu-Grudzińskim*, eds. S. Wysłouch, R.K. Przybylski, Wydawnictwo a5, Poznań 1991, pp. 186–192.

⁵ The only minor exception to this rule is the following text: J. Hajduk, *Birma, Orwell i Herling-Grudziński*, [in:] *Świadectwo-mit-tajemnica. O Gustawie Herlingu-Grudzińskim*, ed. Z. Kudelski, NCK, Warszawa 2019, as the author – apparently the only scholar among Polish literary researchers writing about Herling to have read works on Burma (other than Herling's diary or Orwell's *Burmese Days*) – attempted to situate Herling's work within the Burmese context.

⁶ M. Lubina, *Słoń a sprawa birmańska. O „Podróży do Burmy” Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2026, s. 9–19.

⁷ Fortunately, the Burma/Myanmar controversy (Burmese: မြန်မာ/ဗမာ) is irrelevant here, since in the 1950s the country was officially known in English as Burma (in Burmese officially *Myanma*, though the colloquial *Bama* was widely used), and Herling himself consistently used the name Burma.

⁸ M. Smith, *Burma. Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, Zed Books, Dhaka–Bangkok–New York–London 1999, pp. 30–460; B. Lintner, *Burma in Revolt. Opium and Insurgency since 1948*, Silkwood Books, Chiang Mai 1999, pp. 19–108.

⁹ See also: M. Lubina, *Disunity in Diversity. The Failed Attempts at Power Sharing in Myanmar*, [in:] *Power-sharing in Divided Asian Societies*, ed. A. Jelonek, V&R Unipress, Göttingen 2023, pp. 65–97.

communist lectures.¹⁰ This is how Herling-Grudziński landed in Rangoon in May 1952.

The Polish writer, together with the Czech dissident Vilém Bernard – or rather the other way around, as the Czech was at the time a far more prominent figure in this duo – toured four Burmese cities: Rangoon (Yangon), Mandalay, Bassein (Patheingyi), and Moulmein (Mawlamyine) in a stay of just over two weeks. They traveled by plane, as the land routes were considered unsafe due to the ongoing civil war.¹¹ During their stay, they had a chance to meet Burmese elites, influential Buddhist monks, and ordinary people, and to catch a glimpse of everyday life. Herling-Grudziński described it all in a series of texts intended for a Polish émigré readership in London (they were published in installments in London's Polish émigré journal *Wiadomości* in 1952 and 1953). Much later, these texts formed the book *A Journey to Burma*, published twice, in London in 1983 and in Kraków in 1999,¹² in Polish.

The Book's Content

This short book (only 103 pages in the 1999 edition)¹³ follows Herling's itinerary, starting with a (too) long description of his flight from Europe to Burma via the Middle East and Pakistan. Then it moves to describe Rangoon (Yangon) at length (Burma's former capital is the most-talked-about place in the book, which is unsurprising given the fact that he spent most of his time there), followed by Mandalay and its surroundings and, in a much shorter form, Bassein and Moulmein. It concludes with a farewell description of Rangoon and the return flight home, with stops in Calcutta and Delhi (described in detail; the non-Burmese parts of the diary constitute almost one-quarter of the book's content, suggesting Herling's greater interest in India than in Burma itself). Each chapter, aside from travelogue-like descriptions of nature, landscapes,

¹⁰ G. Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1999, p. 9; နှစ် ငါးဆယ်နှစ်ပြည့်အတွက် ဂြိုဟ် (Two Intellectuals Explain that Communism is Hell), ဟံသာဝတီ (Hanthawaddy), ၄ - ၀၆ - ၁၉၅၂ (4 June 1952), ၆-၇ (pp. 6–7).

¹¹ G. Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy...*, p. 24. This was an instance of overcautiousness on the part of Herling's hosts, who organized his stay. Norman Lewis, who traveled to Burma a year earlier (and subsequently wrote *A Golden Earth. Travels in Burma*, which Herling must have consulted before his own trip, as he repeated many details from it without informing the reader, that they came from Lewis' book), was able to reach, on his own, even remote places, including some beyond the control of the Rangoon government. Moreover, Lewis traveled by land rather than by plane. What is more, the political situation in Burma had improved by 1952 compared with 1951, as by that time the central government had regained more territory. The decisive difference between Lewis and Herling was that the former traveled to Burma independently, whereas the Polish writer was on a semi-official trip.

¹² G. Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy...*, pp. 9–157.

¹³ Ibidem. The 1999 edition also contains Burma-related parts of Herling's *A Journal Written at Night*, as well as other parts of the same diary (e.g., passages about Yugoslavia) that the editor deemed connected to the topic of the book, and a foreword (which contains many factual errors). This extends the total length of the book to 159 pages.

and other sights, is deepened by Herling's observations and comments on various important issues, such as societal relations, including class dynamics, postcolonial realities, the impact of Buddhism, the civil war, international politics, etc. This is the diary's biggest strength, as the Polish writer's observations are in many places – though naturally not always – surprisingly accurate (from the point of view of factual accuracy). Herling-Grudziński knew little about Burma but had an eye for observation. Coupled with his intellectual depth – not for nothing was he considered one of Poland's most important intellectuals in the twentieth century – this makes *A Journey to Burma* a hidden gem.

Let us consider two examples (and there are more in the book) confirming this claim. The first is Herling's take on the psychological sources of the anticolonial movements (especially the role of the colonial clubs)¹⁴. Taken to a former British club – which he erroneously calls the Union Club¹⁵ – Herling observes: “the English built their traditional shrine of racial exclusiveness, which for them was the symbol of the white man's burden, while for the Burmese intelligentsia it was the symbol of contempt and the most painful thorn of colonial rule.”¹⁶ Moving on, to describe the role of colonial clubs (and mentioning Orwell's *Burmese Days*), Herling concludes: “nothing hurts as much as racial contempt, so one may, without exaggeration, say that the institution of exclusive colonial clubs undercut the roots of Empire as deeply as colonial economic exploitation.”¹⁷ However, as the Polish writer continues, “but nothing is equally infectious as contempt. People who once, in protest and due to injured pride, established their own club in Rangoon, the Orient Club, the ministers of Burmese government, journalists, writers and intellectuals – now circumvent it bashfully and frequent only the Union Club. This ectypal snobbism is not without a certain zest: the Europeanized Burmese go to the Union Club, the orthodox Burmese and a couple of people in the likes of On Kin go to the Orient Club, while – in a country ruled by socialists – ordinary people don't go to any club. All people are equal, but some people are more equal than others; all Burmese are brown, but some Burmese are more brown than others. The moon looks at itself in the flat surface of the water as if in proof that nothing will never change and cannot change in this best of worlds.”¹⁸

This stylistically beautiful and intellectually deep fragment, rich in literary allusions (Orwell's *Animal Farm*, Voltaire's *Candide*), is a profound observation, in line with the mainstream postcolonial studies reading of the decoloni-

¹⁴ See M. Lubina, M. Kozłowska, *Unwillingly Orientalist: Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's Travel Diary to Burma as an Example of an Unusual Postcolonial Eastern European Account*, “East European Politics and Societies and Cultures” 2022, vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 789–812.

¹⁵ The Union Club never existed in Rangoon; the place to which Herling was taken was probably the Boat Club, or less likely, the Pegu Club, as the topography described in the diary suggests so.

¹⁶ Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż...*, p. 51.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 52.

¹⁸ Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż...*, p. 52.

zation process as fueled by racist wounds.¹⁹ It shows, too, quite universal patterns of elite paternalization of the lower classes, their hypocrisy and ways of social hierarchy and status signaling. It is also a fitting description of Burma's "status-oriented society"²⁰ and its postcolonial, culturally Anglicized elites.²¹ In short, it is an excellent source.

Another example concerns the Burmese civil war.²² Shortly after landing in Rangoon, Herling-Grudziński asks his host (U Ohn Khin, in the diary translated as U On Kin) about the plan of their trip: the host replies that they will travel by air, as half the country was torn by insurgency. "Perhaps never before was information like that spoken with such cheerful indifference and calm," notes Herling-Grudziński, only to add that "this carefree tone of talking about civil war proved to be a unifying feature of all those gathered."²³ Taken to a diplomatic reception, the Polish writer quotes one interlocutor who explains the apparent successes of the communist insurgency as ultimately unimportant:

"Indeed, the communists are blowing up the bridges, they are cutting the pipelines and railways, they are shooting at the boats in the Irrawaddy River, they made it impossible to transport timber to mills; they cause serious damages to the governmental forces. But so what? Communism by no means can be reconciled with Buddhism and Burma is deeply Buddhist. One may repair the damaged bridges, pipelines and railways, but will the communists ever repair the damage they inflict on themselves by this senseless disorganization of national life? One may rebuild the villages, but will the communists ever rebuild the popularity they previously possessed among Burmese peasantry? After all, the inhabitants of every village recaptured from communist hands are the best anti-communist agitators. Why? Because they watched with their own eyes how their wives and daughters were raped, they helplessly witnessed each acre of land being striping bare in order to fund the insurgency war contribution, twice higher than state tax." Given these circumstances, the central government's victory over the communist rebellion is "a question of patience and time."²⁴

This observation is significant on many levels. First of all, to this day, the Burmese people indeed talk about their civil war – the world's longest-running

¹⁹ K.M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance. A Survey of the Vasco Da Gama Epoch of Asian History 1498–1945*, Allen & Unwin, London 1953, pp. 230–248; A. Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Earthscan Publications, London 2003, pp. 163–184; Maung Htin Aung, *George Orwell and Burma*, [in:] *The World of George Orwell*, ed. M. Gross, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1971, pp. 26–27; Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps. A Personal History of Burma*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2007, p. 191.

²⁰ Maung Maung Gyi, *Burmese Political Values. The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarianism*, Praeger, New York 1983, p. 42.

²¹ J. Winfield, *Buddhism and the State in Burma: English-language discourses from 1823 to 1962*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Melbourne 2017, pp. 193, 197, 208–209.

²² M. Lubina, *Colonialism Meets Empathy and Insightfulness: Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's Travel Diary to Burma*, [in:] *Escaping Kakanía: Eastern European travels in colonial Southeast Asia*, ed. J. Mrázek, Central European Press, Vienna–Budapest 2024, pp. 311–327.

²³ Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy...*, p. 24.

²⁴ Ibidem, pp. 24–25.

conflict – with calm, detachment, if not nonchalance. Second, the Polish writer indicated the exact reasons for the Communist Party of Burma's (CPB) defeat in the civil war. The mainstream interpretation of the civil war in Burma Studies is that the state army won the war because it was able to win over the local strongmen (or *bo*, in Burmese); the *bos* – the real lords of the countryside – identified the communists as “first predators” who endangered their families, homes, and paddies on a scale incomparable to that of the government forces.²⁵ A classic text in Burma Studies says: “these local militia groups were fighting for very local concerns – safety of home, property, paddy, family, and black market niche – and in number of areas, the government was much less of a threat than the earlier-arriving insurgent groups, who demanded taxes, food and shelter from villages and townspeople. Local interests probably had identified the first predators, which were in many locales the insurgent groups, as enemies.”²⁶ That is why the *bos* threw in their lot with the government, which helped the latter gain the upper hand against the communists. Thus, what Herling wrote was not only accurate; it represents one of the earliest sources available for studies on the dynamics and trajectory of the civil war in Burma. As such, it is, again, a valuable source.

While the communists lost the civil war in Burma, it does not mean that the war itself ended. Its other dimension, the ethnic one, has never stopped. It continues to the present. And the reasons for that can also be found in Herling's book. Taken to the countryside near Sagaing (not far from Mandalay), the Polish writer notes how difficult it is to tell the difference between civilians and insurgents. This leads him to the conclusion: “banditry in this form – regardless of whether covered behind the screen of ‘political ideology’ or whether it will act on its own – will never end in Burma as long as the government won't strengthen all garrisons in cities and towns so that the people won't be afraid to denunciate.” He concludes that it is a state of “neither war nor peace.”²⁷

This interpretation is not only in line with what the classic Burma Studies texts tell us about the civil war in the country in the 1950s (e.g., “most local MPs or party bosses, like many insurgent leaders, were little better than petty chieftains”²⁸; “insurgency as a way of life”²⁹), but more importantly, Herling correctly predicted that it would never end. Indeed, it never did. The civil war's intensity waxed and waned depending on the period and geographic location, but the conflict has never ended. That is why if *A Journey to Burma* had been translated into English or Burmese, its description of the civil war might have become a classic in Burma Studies. Now it is completely unknown

²⁵ R.H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar*, National University of Singapore Press, Singapore 2009, p. 169; M. Callahan, *Making Enemies. War and State Building in Burma*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2003, pp. 140–141.

²⁶ M. Callahan, *Making Enemies...*, pp. 140–141.

²⁷ G. Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy...*, pp. 78–79.

²⁸ M. Smith, *Burma. Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, Zed Books, Dhaka–Bangkok–New York–London 1999, p. 124.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 88–102.

to such an extent that even some political scientists working on Myanmar repeat Herling's phrase "neither war nor peace" in their own texts, without knowing that someone had said it long before them, and consequently without mentioning him.³⁰

This is not the end of the story. Herling's perceptive remarks about Buddhism parallel the later and widely recognized research of Melford Spiro, yet they were written much earlier. Herling was also among the first to draw a comparison between 1950s Burma and Yugoslavia. Taken together with his penetrating observations on the Burmese postcolonial elites and his extraordinary portrait of Prime Minister U Nu, these insights make *A Journey to Burma* a valuable source – if not a hidden gem – in Burma Studies. Yet the work remains virtually unknown, largely because it was written only in Polish and has never been translated into English or Burmese. One could continue at length listing Herling's many accurate and perceptive insights, but this is not the principal aim of the present article.

Did the Burmese Care?

Alongside the Czechoslovak dissident Vilém Bernard, Herling-Grudziński visited Burma in 1952 to deliver a series of anti-communist lectures. What matters here, however, is that the intellectual climate of Burma was then decisively left-oriented. From its entry into Burma in the 1930s until late 1988, socialist and other left-oriented ideas dominated Burmese political thought for several reasons, the major one being the traumatic colonial experience. This produced an intellectual reality in late colonial and postcolonial Burma in which virtually any idea was acceptable as long as it was a left-wing one.³¹ And then in 1952, two Eastern Europeans came to the socialist-leaning Burmese elites to explain to them that Marxism and communism are fundamentally flawed. What was the result of this interaction? How did the Burmese react to these lectures? Did they even care?

Research into 1950s Burmese-language articles about Herling-Grudziński reveals the following facts. Herling's trip³² and lectures were indeed noticed,

³⁰ T. Kramer, 'Neither War nor Peace': Failed Ceasefires and Dispossession in Myanmar's Ethnic Borderlands, "The Journal of Peasant Studies" 2021, vol. 48, pp. 476–496; T. Kramer, *Neither War nor Peace: The Future of the Cease-fire Agreements in Burma*, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam 2009, pp. 4–30.

³¹ See M. Lubina, *The Moral Democracy. The Political Thought of Aung San Suu Kyi*, Scholar, Warsaw 2018, pp. 112–121.

³² A note on naming. In the Burmese-language sources, their authors struggled to render Herling-Grudziński's name. They all gave up on *Grudziński*, a nearly impossible surname for them to reproduce, and consequently the second part of his surname does not appear even once in the available Burmese-language press coverage of his trip. Herling was somehow easier, though still difficult, as it contains the letter "r," which is alien to Burmese and used only in loanwords. For this reason, they referred to him as ဟလင် (Halin), preceded by "Mr." "Mr. Halin" thus solved their problem. Only "Bama Khit" used the writer's given name, Gustaw, which appeared in Burmese as ဂူစတဝ် (Gusata).

but only marginally. Four major Burmese-language newspapers – “Myanma Alin” (The New Light of Myanmar), “Hanthawaddy,” “Mandaing,” and “Bama Khit” (Burma Times) – as well as “The Nation,” one of the English-language newspapers, offered coverage. However, with the exception of “The Nation” (an English-language newspaper with limited reach), which published three articles, and “Bama Khit” (the newspaper that organized Herling’s stay; its editor-in-chief, U Ohn Khin, hosted Herling-Grudziński in his own house and toured the country with him)³³, that coverage was sparse. “Myanma Alin,” the most important Burmese newspaper, mentioned Herling three times, though twice it merely briefly informed readers about his upcoming lectures, each time placing the notice in the middle of the paper rather than on the front page. “Hanthawaddy” and “Mandaing” each published a single article, in both cases placed inconspicuously in the middle or toward the end of these newspapers. Only “Bama Khit” carried extensive coverage, publishing thirteen articles – sometimes even two-pagers – including cover photographs of Herling-Grudziński (one from his Gulag period) and a detailed interview with him. Given that this newspaper itself organized his trip, however, such extensive coverage is hardly surprising. Despite the limited media attention, what these newspapers wrote about Herling and Bernard is nevertheless quite valuable, as it reveals what they discussed during their lectures (Herling himself writes little about his lectures in his diary, limiting himself to occasional remarks and not mentioning their exact content), as well as the Burmese reactions.

In the Burmese press, the lectures in Rangoon, Mandalay, and Moulmein were covered, as well as two press conferences held by Bernard and Herling (on the first and the last day of their stay). Among these events, their first lecture, held in the prestigious setting of Rangoon City Hall, received the most coverage, which is unsurprising given its location in the capital’s downtown, at the heart of the country’s political life. Unsurprisingly, “Bama Khit” offered the most extensive coverage, publishing two pieces on the event: one on the front page on 17 May and another, a very lengthy article divided into several parts

³³ Herling-Grudziński himself wrote that “Bama Khit” was “the biggest Burmese newspaper” (G. Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy...*, p. 9), a claim later repeated by scholars of literature without fact-checking (e.g., R. Przybylski, *Być i pisać...*, p. 43; J. Hajduk, *Birma, Orwell i Herling-Grudziński*, pp. 203–206). However, this was not entirely true. While “Bama Khit” had the biggest circulation, it was considered a tabloid, not a serious newspaper. The most important Burmese-language newspapers were: “Myanma Alin,” the governmental newspaper, followed by other outlets larger than “Bama Khit,” such as “Hanthawaddy.” This case reveals a deeper problem with analyses of Herling’s diary: not infrequently he made dubious claims, sometimes entirely incorrect (e.g., when writing that “nobody takes seriously the brochure of Ba Swe, the main ideologue of Burmese socialism, who calls for mixing the ideas of a bearded German-Jewish patriarch with an Asian sage born a few thousand years ago, mysteriously smiling and gazing at his navel,” G. Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy...*, p. 96), whereas Ba Swe’s work was in fact taken quite seriously and represented one of the most important ideological statements of postcolonial Burma (see also M. Walton, *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017, pp. 113–118). These claims were later repeated uncritically by literary scholars unfamiliar with Burma, who took Herling’s statements at face value.

and published daily between 23 May and 29 May 1952. The first text, entitled *They Put out the Fire Flames of Worldly Nirvana* already shows the tabloid nature of “Bama Khit.”³⁴ Linguistically and intellectually sophisticated, and prone to metaphors and irony,³⁵ the title – like the text itself – is challenging to read. Essentially, it informs the reader about the hell-like conditions in Soviet prisons and labor camps (which Herling likely described during the lecture) and – rather suddenly – switches to another topic, discussing Tito’s Yugoslavia and its independence from the Soviet Union (which Bernard probably mentioned on another occasion).³⁶

The second “Bama Khit” article about the Rangoon City Hall lecture is much more detailed. Titled *Openly about Communist Hell*, its first parts (published in the newspaper’s editions of 23, 24, and 25 May) describe Herling’s lecture, whereas the remaining sections summarize Bernard’s talk about the economic aspects of Soviet life and the fate of Czechoslovakia.³⁷ The Polish writer spoke about his experiences in prison and in the Gulag; the role of the *urks*; the political indoctrination of prisoners; the so-called model prisons; and Western sympathizers of the Soviet regime (“useful idiots,” though not using this exact term), including a reference to a specific Western individual who had propagated Soviet propaganda, though not mentioning their name. In doing so, such Western sympathizers “are just like children, they see a part only and they think that this is how the whole country looks like.”³⁸

Even more interesting is the coverage of the Rangoon City Hall lecture in another newspaper, “Mandaing.” In an article titled *They openly talked about Russia’s hell*, the author starts with an embarrassing mistake: informing his readers that “Hitler invaded Poland in 1951.”³⁹ But later the author improves by writing (probably citing Herling) that after the German invasion from the west, “Polish resistance was broken due to the fact that Russian army, without declaring war, attacked from behind”; by doing so “The Russian red army stabbed Poland in the back with a knife.”⁴⁰ This is a notably accurate reading

³⁴ လောကနိဗ္ဗာန်ဆီမှ မီးတောက်များ ကို ဖြတ်ချ ကြ လေ ပြီ (*They Put out the Fire Flames of Worldly Nirvana*), ဗမာ့ခေတ် (“Bama Khit”), ၁၉၅၂ မေ ၁၇ (May 17, 1952), p. 1.

³⁵ The title itself represents both a dual metaphor and an irony: “worldly nirvana,” or the Buddhist equivalent of paradise on earth, is by nature positive but is used here ironically; “fire flames” are meant to symbolize [communist] hell.

³⁶ Ibidem. In its coverage of Bernard and Herling’s press conference, “The Nation” reported that this Tito-related issue had been raised as a question and that Bernard replied as follows: *Neutrality No Solution, Says Czech Visitor*, “The Nation,” May 17, 1952, p. 1. The author of the “Bama Khit” article must have combined the content of the lecture with that of the press conference.

³⁷ ကွန်မြူနစ် လောက ငရဲခင်းကို ဖော်ပြပြီ (Openly About Communist Hell on Earth), ဗမာ့ခေတ် ၁၉၅၂ မေလ ၂၃ (May 23, 1952, p. 2) as well as the subsequent “Bama Khit” editions from May 24–28.

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ ရုရှားပြေးပြတို၏ အပြော (Words of those who Escaped from Russia), မဏ္ဍိုင် (Mandaing), ၂၂-၀၅-၁၉၅၂ (May 22, 1952), ၂ (p. 2).

⁴⁰ Ibidem.

of the beginning of World War II, which must have been influenced by what Herling-Grudziński told the audience. The second part of the article deals with the Sovietization of the newly conquered eastern Poland, the falsification of the referendum to annex these territories to the USSR, and the mass character of repression and secret reporting to the Soviet authorities.⁴¹

The most interesting coverage, however, of the Rangoon City Hall lecture must be that of “Myanma Alin.” The biggest Burmese newspaper, a governmental mouthpiece known for its otherwise dull coverage, this time wrote something not reported elsewhere. After informing the readers about the size of the audience (approximately four hundred people), the journalist wrote: “They (Bernard and Herling) read their written lectures, so the listeners lost motivation to listen to them, but then U Ohn Khin chose such wording that the audience started listening with interest.”⁴² This is a remarkable comment, given the general Burmese cultural dislike of open criticism. Its meaning can be translated as: how boring they were, but luckily U Ohn Khin held the audience’s attention! This is not all. The authors wrote that U Ohn Khin translated Herling’s words as follows: “Those who come to Russia and praise it after a short stay are just like the eight blind Brahmins guessing what an elephant looks like.”⁴³ This is an unlikely choice of words, to put it mildly, in the mouth of a Polish writer with a very limited knowledge of Buddhism in South or Southeast Asia. It was more likely used by U Ohn Khin, which raises further questions about his role, one that must have been much more important than that of a translator.

Moving on to non-Rangoon coverage, Bernard and Herling’s time in Mandalay is the second-most discussed topic, which is again unsurprising given the status of Mandalay as Burma’s second most important city. Here the issue of U Ohn Khin’s agency repeats itself in a new setting, informed by a different source. According to “Bama Khit’s” correspondent, Bernard and Herling delivered a lecture at Mogaung monastery in Mandalay, which was “almost the same as the one in Yangon”⁴⁴ (a clear but indirect criticism; it may also suggest that it was similarly unengaging). It covered the USSR’s prisons, poverty, restrictions on freedom of speech, Soviet propaganda, and the deception of naive foreigners. Among additional points, “Soviet expansionism” was mentioned, “the subjugation of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania,”

⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴² ရှုပြည်နှင့် ချက်ပြည် ၌ ကိုယ်တွေ့ များ ဟောပြောပွဲ (*Lectures (based) on their own experience about Russia and Czechia*), မြန်မာ့အလင်း (Myanma Alin) ၁၉၅၂ မေ ၁၆ရ (May 1952, no. 163). The parable depicts a group of blind Brahmins who have never encountered an elephant and who attempt to understand what it is by touching it: each Brahmin touches a different part of the elephant (and only that part, e.g., the tusk) and then describes the animal on the basis of this partial knowledge. The story exists in several versions. In the Buddhist one, the protagonists are Brahmins, as the story functions as an indirect critique of them.

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ ဟေ့မင်းကရုမယးပါသားလား (Are You the Son of a Russian Mother?) ဗမာ့ခေတ် ၁၉၅၂ မေလ ၂၉ ရက်, ၆ (“Bama Khit,” May 29, 1952), p. 6.

described vividly as “soaking their blood” (*thwe souk*)⁴⁵. Again, it is unknown if Herling and Bernard used this powerful expression (idiomatic in Burmese), but given the fact that later on the correspondent praised U Ohn Khin’s translation (“he used clear, sharp, witty words that stay in memory”⁴⁶), one may suspect who the actual author of this phrase was.

“You Animal!”

It was also “Bama Khit” that offered the most striking coverage with another of its reports about Bernard and Herling’s Mandalay lecture. In an article titled, in tabloid style, *Are you Son of a Russian Mother? Monks Scolded Someone During a Lecture*,⁴⁷ the newspaper informs about an incident during their Mogaung lecture (Herling himself also mentioned it in his diary).⁴⁸ As the “Bama Khit” journalist writes: “During the Q&A some arrogant people, not knowing anything about communism and behaving as they were dogs guarding a Russian house, asked absurd questions,” such as:

“Dear U Ohn Khin, you have invited these white faces so that they can say such things about communism because the Americans asked you to do so, didn’t you?”

“You are a paid assistant of Russia and Red China!”

– U Ohn Khin fired back

“Someone shouted and there was movement,” informs the journalist. Finally, a major monk rose from his seat and shouted:

“You animal! You son of a Russian and Red Chinese mother!”

This silenced the audience. After a while, the scolded person came forward and apologized. That resolved the issue.⁴⁹

Before deconstructing this story, a comment on language is necessary. The original question about the Americans was formally acceptable (the author used the honorific “khinbya,” which can be here translated as “sir”), but in reality, it was an offensive question, and the reaction showed that everyone there understood it precisely this way. “Paid assistant” carried the connotation of “stooge” or “lackey,” whereas the final insult by a monk (“you son of a Russian mother”) is akin to “you son of a b—” without beating around the bush. It clearly indicates treason (the scolded person is said to be a son of a Russian, rather than a Burmese, mother). All in all, this is coverage that could have landed on the front page of tabloids like “The Sun” or “Bild” in Europe; in Burma, with its tradition of restraint, especially in written texts, such an article must have been quite shocking, as must have been the described event.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ G. Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy...*, p. 76. Compared with the “Bama Khit’s” correspondent, his account is stylistically superior and intellectually more elegant, yet it lacks specific linguistic details, which is unsurprising given that the incident took place in Burmese.

⁴⁹ ဟေ့မင်းကရုဇမယးပါသားလား (Are You the Son of a Russian Mother?)..., p. 6.

More importantly, the quoted story is remarkable on several levels. First of all, it shows how Bernard and Herling's lectures evoked emotions: direct criticism, offensive questions, and even insults, including those from a senior monk (monks in Burma/Myanmar are expected – and generally are – to exercise self-restraint in both speech and actions). Such behavior is uncommon in public events and even more so in the written word. What happened there must have been some sort of scandal. Second, it indicates that despite a selected audience (it is likely that Bernard and Herling's lectures were attended by those who generally agreed with their agenda, or at least did not disagree), there appeared dissident voices. Last but not least, the American issue raised here (in an offensive way) is telling and must be described in detail.

Who Finances You?

After Mandalay, Bernard and Herling went to Bassein (which was not covered in the press; probably due to the city's peripheral status) and Moulmein (which was covered by "Bama Khit" though without details about their lectures) and then returned to Rangoon. A day before their departure, they had their second and final press conference, which was again covered in the media. "Hanthawaddy" reported it in a rather interesting way (quoting Herling's self-promotion of success: "all our lectures were a success [...] People came in mass numbers in order to learn about Russia and her allies"), only to throw in a notable detail at the end: "some people think that such people [like Herling and Bernard] who come to Burma and give lectures are American spies. Herling was asked whether they are American spies, but he eloquently and thoroughly replied that no, they are not."⁵⁰

This restrained manner of covering this conference probably does not capture the atmosphere there. Luckily, other outlets also wrote about it. "Bama Khit" offered more extensive coverage: "There were two kinds of questions: from people really interested (in the topic), and calumnious, offensive questions from communist sympathizers."⁵¹ Naturally, the latter asked questions about spies. "Communists all around the world ask this kind of question," writes the correspondent, but Herling and Bernard "replied to these accusations" and the listeners "were satisfied."⁵² Was that indeed the case? The question leads to another report.

The most informative account from this conference comes from the English-language newspaper "The Nation," which repeats the same story and facts, yet in a much more detailed and organized manner. According to it, "In answer to a question, he (Herling) said they had met many people who were obviously

⁵⁰ နှစ် ငရဲခင်းပြဆရာဦး ပြောချက် (*Two Intellectuals Explain that Communism is Hell*), တံသာဝတီ (Hanthawaddy), ၄ - ၀၆ - ၁၉၅၂ (June 4, 1952), ၆-၇ (pp. 6-7).

⁵¹ ရုရှအတွဲးသိများ -ပြန်တော့မည် (Russia's Experts Leave [Burma]), ဗမာ့ခေတ်, ၃ - ၆ - ၁၉၅၂, ၇ ("Bama Khit," June 3, 1952, p. 7).

⁵² Ibidem.

pro-Communist or fellow travellers. During lectures these persons had asked most 'primitive' questions instead of challenging their statements with facts. Such questions were being voiced all over the world by the Communists."⁵³ This suggests that the rather optimistic accounts by "Hanthawaddy" and "Bama Khit" about the Eastern Europeans' ability to convince the audience of their views on communism might have been overstated.

More importantly, "The Nation" quotes Herling's reply to accusations of being a tool of the Americans: "Herling stated that they were frequently asked if their visit to Burma was paid for by the Americans and also if the Institution they belonged to was financially backed by the Americans. He wanted them to know that the organization included many members who were not well-disposed towards the American Government."⁵⁴ This quote is remarkable on at least two levels. First, it shows that the inquiries about the role of the US were not a primitive search for spies, but rather represented reasonable doubts raised by people in a neutral country that wanted to stay away from the Cold War. Second, Herling does not give an answer to the question about US financial backing (the presence of members who were anti-American in the Congress for Cultural Freedom in Paris does not preclude the possibility that the Institute itself was supported by Washington, DC). Whether Herling did not know the facts or did not want to admit it is less important here; the key information is that, as it turned out later, the Congress for Cultural Freedom in Paris was financed by the CIA. So, the Burmese had legitimate reasons for doubt.

Conclusion: Neutrality (Not) an Option

Differences in the way Burmese media reported Bernard and Herling's trip in Burmese- and English-language newspapers can also be seen in another important aspect. "Bama Khit," in its coverage of the second (and final) press conference, quoted Bernard and Herling as thanking the government for hosting them while at the same time indirectly criticizing the ruling AFPFL establishment: "Although we tried hard to meet the socialist leaders of Myanmar, we did not succeed. Tomorrow, we depart from Yangon to fly to Calcutta and then to Delhi. There we will meet and discuss with the socialist leaders of India."⁵⁵ If this were all, it might indicate that Bernard and Herling had mastered the Burmese way of criticizing indirectly. However, one may doubt this after reading coverage of the same press conference in "The Nation." Here Bernard and Herling were much blunter:

"Newsmen who asked whether the visitors had met Burmese Socialist leaders were surprised to be told that in spite of many efforts, the meeting did not take place. The visitors expressed regret saying that as Socialists themselves they had been eager to meet leaders of the Burmese party, but the opportunity

⁵³ *European Socialists Conclude Burma Visit*, "The Nation," June 4, 1952, p. 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ ရုရှအတွင်းသိများ - ပြန်တော့မည် (Russia's Experts Leave [Burma])..., p. 7.

had been denied, and no explanation offered. They assured the Press however that the general impression of their visit had not been affected by this disappointment, although it would no doubt have assisted their orientation of the situation, since the Socialists are the party in power in Burma.”⁵⁶

Indeed, a day before their departure, Bernard and Herling secured their only high-profile meeting: a brief encounter with Prime Minister U Nu, a personal friend of their host U Ohn Khin. Although Herling wrote in his diary that it was an unplanned meeting – a chance encounter at the World Peace pagoda⁵⁷ – one may suspect otherwise (in Southeast Asia it is quite uncommon to meet senior politicians by pure chance in the public sphere). Speculating, one might assume that U Ohn Khin, seeking to make up for their disappointment and using his personal connections, organized a last-minute meeting for them with the prime minister. But that was it. Apart from Prime Minister U Nu, Bernard and Herling met several high-profile Buddhist monks, but these were naturally not socialists. Other members of the ruling party declined to meet, which Herling himself admitted in his diary. The Polish writer described how they flew from Moulmein to Rangoon with a minister of national reconstruction who “read about our lectures but does not indicate a willingness to engage in a longer conversation. He is a socialist and socialists in Burma – as he told U Ohn Khin, taking him aside – follow the policy of ‘progressive neutrality.’”⁵⁸

This was the decisive point of divergence. Neutrality was the defining idea of this period in Burma. Just after regaining independence in 1948, Burma faced the danger of the Cold War potentially spilling over into its territory, a danger best captured by U Nu’s famous catchphrase: “Burma is a tender gourd among the cactus.”⁵⁹ This situation led to the understanding that “siding with either the United States or the Soviet Union would raise greater threats to state security than abstaining from involvement”⁶⁰; this recognition of the perils of taking sides later evolved into the neutral foreign policy of balancing great powers.⁶¹ Burma adopted this approach and remained committed to it throughout the Cold War and effectively continued it afterward. The net result – a state fiercely and successfully protecting its neutrality – was rather uncommon among the countries of the Third World during the Cold War. Burma, one of the leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement, represented – for the time being – a success story of neutral foreign policy (overshadowed, however, by its domestic economic and developmental failures, especially after 1962).

And what did Bernard and Herling have to say about neutralism? Something quite different. “The Nation,” in a front-page article titled *Neutrality No Solution*,

⁵⁶ *European Socialists Conclude Burma Visit...*, p. 1.

⁵⁷ G. Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy...*, p. 98.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 95.

⁵⁹ U Nu, *From Peace to Stability*, Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, Rangoon 1951, p. 102.

⁶⁰ R. Taylor, *Bilateral Relations: Then and Now. Sanctions to Success*, “Myanmar Times” Special Report, November 19, 2012, pp. 2–4.

⁶¹ R. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar...*, p. 265.

quoted Bernard as saying in the lead: "For small countries caught in the struggle between the two power blocs, neutrality offered no solution."⁶² Later the Czech dissident elaborated: "Asked if he gave the proposed 'Third Force' of Indian, Burmese, Indonesian and Japanese Socialists a chance, Dr. Bernard stated that if by the 'Third Force' a 'neutral force' is meant, it is not likely to succeed."⁶³

If one looks for the reasons for Bernard and Herling's failure to win the hearts and minds of the Burmese elites, the answer is clear. To put it simply, Burma was very different from Poland or Czechoslovakia. Socialist ideas – including communism – were understood as instruments of freedom, as a means of restoring precolonial greatness, whereas a neutral foreign policy was believed to be the best way to preserve the newly regained independence. In such circumstances, two Eastern Europeans (widely assumed to have been sent by the Americans) could not – and did not – achieve much.

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⁶² *European Socialists Conclude Burma Visit...*, p. 1.

⁶³ *Neutrality No Solution, Says Czech Visitor...*, p. 1.

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